

Article

# Problematizing the Chinese Experience in America

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**Abstract:** The essay addresses the question “What is Genealogy?” through a consideration of the value of traditional genealogical narratives of families for the Chinese state and society, and the implications of their absence for those caught up in the 19th century diaspora to America. Using genealogy as a method of critical inquiry, however, enables scholars to begin studying the significance of this phenomenon in the lives of Chinese immigrants and the centrality of family in safeguarding their legacy. It does this through an examination of the lives of two Chinese community leaders in Denver’s Chinatown. It concludes with a call for a horizontal genealogical study of community leaders in order to have a better understanding of who they were and the role they played in Chinese America.

**Keywords:** genealogy; problematization; family; Chinese Americans

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The usual understanding of genealogy is the study of family descent to show a descendant’s pedigree and status in society. Genealogical studies are easily recognizable because they are often illustrated with an ancestral chart, the so-called family tree. As a Chinese historian I appreciate how important genealogies were to the traditional Chinese state and society since genealogies focused on the family, which was recognized as the foundational unit of both. Genealogies were suffused with cultural meaning since it was a conceit of Chinese civilization that its political, philosophical, and social institutions were extensions of the family system. These structures were seen as expressions of familial relationships where connections were vertical and hierarchical, requiring the fulfillment of mutual responsibilities. Obligations flowed from young to old, and from kinship groups to the emperor, resulting in a harmonious society, which has been Chinese culture’s ultimate if elusive goal.

All families who could maintained genealogies to perpetuate the memory of their forebears. Also, “ancestor worship” was regularly practiced as a matter of filial piety, a cardinal value in Confucian China. Through their families, Chinese knew their place in society and their position in a long line of remembered ancestors. They derived strength from knowing their family’s past and this encouraged them to work toward a foreseeable future. Through their families, an individual’s self-identity and self-worth was confirmed, which is never a small matter. Maintaining a genealogy was even more important for the reigning dynasty, which was responsible for writing the history of the preceding dynasty as well as meticulously documenting its own. Such a work was in effect a genealogy of the extended family that was supposedly the Chinese empire.

This has continued to the present. Now the government of the People’s Republic of China has undertaken the ambitious Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project (1996) to develop a genealogy of dynasties comparable to that of the Egyptian pharaohs [1]. It is the largest such state-sponsored endeavor since the 18th century when the Qianlong emperor sponsored the *Siku quanshu* (Imperial Collection of Four), the world’s largest manual encyclopedia. The Project seeks to trace the origins of the Chinese people back to the legendary Yellow Emperor. It conveniently dovetails with the state’s promotion of the “Chinese Dream” to restore the country’s past glory. While the Project is nationalistic in nature, it is like traditional Chinese family genealogies in seeking to enhance a collective identity and collective effort.

For Chinese historians today, genealogical studies are pertinent for what they reveal about Chinese society during a particular period or place, especially from the perspective of its elite members. Scholarship tends to focus on the transformations of elite families (clans, lineages), who, as part of a time-honored tradition, document their accomplishments for posterity. Just having a genealogy indicated a family's higher social status and respectability, which for many was reason enough to go to the expense of compiling one. Such genealogies along with local gazetteers and extant public records enable social historians and cultural anthropologists to reconstruct family trees as well as the historical context for the lives of those individuals identified. In the process, these scholars tell us a great deal about an array of issues significant to a dynasty including national politics as well as the goings-on in local society.

A personal favorite is Johanna M. Meskill's *A Chinese Pioneer Family: The Lins of Wu-Feng, Taiwan, 1729–1895*, which traces the Lin family's emigration from Fujian Province and reconstructs their lives on Taiwan until the Japanese annexed the island following the First Sino-Japanese War [2]. It is a lively account of the lives of the Lin family's most accomplished men on what was then the lawless Chinese frontier, where there was a culture of violence and conflicts over land rights. The Lins went from being so-called local strongmen (*tu-hao*) to respectable members of Qing society. The changes the Lins experienced resonate with the history of some white immigrants who, after migrating to the American frontier, became respectable members of American society.

For Chinese American historians, traditional genealogies have limited utility, mainly because they are mostly non-existent among those who emigrated from China. In *A History Reclaimed*, Him Mark Lai, doyen of Chinese American Studies, lists only three genealogies, all of them compiled in the 20th century, for example [3]. A prerequisite for a genealogy, of course, is to have a family, any family, let alone the Chinese ideal of an extended family with several generations living under one roof. For the early Chinese pioneers in the American West, this was simply not an option since they were unable to bring their wives to America because of its strict immigration laws [4]. Chinese wanting to establish hybrid families in the American West found it nearly impossible to do so because of equally strict miscegenation laws that prevented intermarriage. Consequently, many were forced to live without a family in America and ended up living in the bachelor society that was the 19th century Chinese American community. Life in a bachelor society precluded the possibility of producing descendants which was essential to their identity as Chinese men. In their own eyes as well as the eyes of others, they were failures who had shamed their parents through their inability to continue the family line. Except for the fading memories of their families back in China, they had little to make sense of their lives in America.

Another reason for the absence of genealogies is that Chinese Americans, especially the early immigrants, who were fortunate enough to have families, still lacked the resources, both intellectual and material, to compile family records. Average Chinese American families had neither the education nor the luxury to compile genealogies, creating a lacuna in our knowledge of them. However, even if an immigrant managed to become a leader in the Chinese American community and was acknowledged by the white mainstream society as such, the chances are that he would not leave behind a genealogical record to document his success and that of his descendants. Why was it that members of the Chinese American elite failed to meet the social obligations of their Chinese counterparts to keep a family genealogy and what were the implications of this failure? If their "lost histories" are to be recovered, then new genealogical methods need to be developed to accomplish this.

Until such time as these family histories are reclaimed, genealogy as a critical mode of inquiry can at least open the subject by raising questions about the absence of traditional genealogical records and the implications of that for shaping the historical narrative about Chinese Americans and their families, now and in the future. As Michel Foucault has observed, this approach has the advantage of articulating problems, especially those that are centered around identity which have been hidden from view thus far. By looking at the historical roots of these problems and how they have evolved to become a salient issue in the present may lead to ways of addressing them in the future. As Colin Koopman

has observed, "Genealogy at its best involves a practice of critique in the form of the historical problematization of the present" [5].

One such problem is the fate of the Chinese—and usually this meant Chinese men—when they were caught up in the 19th century diaspora, facing deracination and separation from their family. This became particularly problematic when workers immigrated to the American West, on the other side of the world from China, rather than nearby Southeast Asia, the traditional destination of Chinese going overseas to make a living. In comparatively underdeveloped Southeast Asia, Chinese immigrants had certain cultural advantages that allowed them to find a niche in the local economy, usually as members of the commercial class, or middlemen between the indigenous population and European (and American in the case of the Philippines) colonizers. This was clearly not the case in the American West.

In the American West, Chinese immigrants did not have the same cultural advantages since the American frontier had others (immigrants from Europe or the eastern United States) who could fill the role they performed in Southeast Asia. Instead, Chinese suffered from a racial disadvantage, finding themselves at the bottom of the pecking order to be exploited by those above them. In race-conscious America, they were treated less as members of a superior culture than as a people of color from a stagnant civilization whose heyday had long passed. Though some rose to prominence in the Chinese American community, they never became fully accepted members of mainstream society, which considered them forever foreigners by virtue of their race. As a result, they had histories different from their white counterparts.

The aspect of the Chinese migratory experience, which they shared with other races and ethnicities, regardless of whether they went to Southeast Asia or the American West, is that the family remained at the center of the Chinese diaspora. Indeed, this mass migration can only be understood in terms of the need for workers to support their families. However, therein lies a paradox because in order to provide for their families, Chinese workers had to be separated from them and suffered all of the consequences of separation. The emotional and psychological effects of separation were partly mitigated by the belief that they were doing it for their family's sake and the hope that they would be reunited at some future date. That knowledge and hope helped to sustain them through years of hard labor in an alien milieu, enabling them to put up with the rigors of a hostile American West, where the expression "Not a Chinaman's Chance" was coined.

In America, their goals were only partially fulfilled. Through remittances, the Chinese in America during the 19th and early 20th centuries were able to maintain their families back in China but found it difficult to be reunited with them because of discriminatory immigration laws. They were forced to become transnationals who migrated back and forth from China in order to have a semblance of family life, which was integral to their personal and ethnic identity. This was never a satisfactory arrangement since the men were unable to perform their familial duties to their parents when absent and had to rely on their wives to do this. They were, in a sense, anonymous individuals set adrift in a land where they were unwelcomed even if their labor was needed to build the infrastructure that made the country a viable place to live. Adding insult to injury, they were also vulnerable to being stigmatized in American culture, reduced to "coolies" who were exploited in the frontier economy or vilified as villains in literature and on the silver screen [6].

## 1. Chinese Community Leaders

About the only ones who left traces of their existence in America were Chinese community leaders. They may have constituted the elite of the Chinese American community but were not members of the so-called gentry class, who typically constituted the "aristocracy" in a meritocratic Chinese society. They lacked the credentials of imperial scholar degrees and the concomitant literacy that placed them at the top of the local social structure. Ironically, their claim to leadership was usually based on their commercial success in the emerging capitalist economy of the American West, while in China their counterparts, meaning the merchants, were relegated to the bottom of China's class structure as part of

the society's normative ideology [7]. As Chinese American merchants they were shopkeepers, traders, moneylenders and others whose elite status was defined by their wealth, in marked contrast with their impoverished compatriots, who lacked both money and status. No amount of money, however, ever made them the racial equals of white Americans.

Members of the Chinese American elite occasionally appeared in the local newspapers where they were usually cast in an unfavorable light or portrayed as exotics for the entertainment of the readership. Sometimes they were retrieved from the historical record to provide a thin veneer of legitimacy to an otherwise fictional character, usually as a villainous one. A case in point is Fee Lee Wong, a local businessman who owned a shop in Deadwood, South Dakota [8]. He is supposedly the basis for the miscreant called Wu in *Deadwood*, the popular Western television series that was on the cable network HBO from 2004 to 2006. Wu is the "boss" of Deadwood's Chinese community during 1870s. He, of course, owns a Chinese hand laundry but his real occupation is trafficking in opium and prostitution. He is also more than willing to engage in violence to control both vices in lawless Deadwood. Claims to authenticity notwithstanding, the fictional Wu bears no resemblance to the historical Wong.

An evaluation of the lives of two elite members of Denver's Chinese community reveals how inauthentic such portrayals are. A comparison of the personal histories of Chin Lin Sou and Chin Poo shows the centrality of the family in how Chinese could be remembered and forgotten in America. Both men became naturalized American citizens. Both decided to make their homes in Colorado even though they had earned enough money to return to China, where they could have lived in relative comfort, the supposed aim of Chinese "sojourners". Both were notable leaders of Denver's Chinatown and might have achieved more had they not been restricted to an ethnic ghetto. Within the limits of Colorado's Chinese communities, they experienced different destinies because of their familial circumstances.

On the one hand, Chin Lin Sou (Chen Linxin) is remembered fondly as the "Mayor of Chinatown" and served as the Chinese community's spokesperson [9]. By all accounts, he was a very capable leader. He was able to bring his wife to America. They had six children, all of whom were born and raised in America, making them the first Chinese Americans to grow up in the Centennial State. There are now six generations of Chins who trace their lineage back to Chin Lin Sou, who is revered as a Colorado pioneer [10]. Like the descendants of those who came over on the Mayflower, the Chins maintain their family's genealogical record and take pride in their status as a pioneering family [11]. They preserve Chin Lin Sou's story and understandably derive much satisfaction from doing so.

By contrast, Chin Poo (Chen Liangpu), who was equally famous, is now all but forgotten [12]. Once described as "the millionaire leader of Chinese in Denver, and for forty-two years a noted character of the West," [13] Chin Poo was so well regarded that he was recommended for the position of Chinese Consul for Denver should it ever be created (it never was). It might be expected that Chin Poo would be memorialized for his storied life as a local entrepreneur, community leader, and political pundit, yet he has fallen into obscurity. It is highly doubtful that he will be tied to any genealogy. When he is remembered, if at all, it is as the "Boss of Chinatown" who allegedly ran a criminal organization in Chinatown. In this role, he presumably exploited Chinese residents through protection rackets or as a labor contractor, hiring them out as "coolie" laborers. Chin Poo always rejected the label. He felt that he had been stigmatized because he was one of the few Chinese who spoke English and was often called upon to translate for his countrymen, so it became convenient for the local press to identify him as the "boss" of Chinatown, with all of its negative connotations. However, Chin Lin Sou also spoke English and translated for his countrymen, yet is remembered quite differently. Arguably, the crucial difference was not occupation so much as progeny.

Unlike Chin Lin Sou, Chin Poo failed to establish a family, though not from want of trying. Without descendants to safeguard his reputation, Chin Poo, like other Chinese community leaders who could not be normalized as family men, was more likely to be portrayed as a stereotype, the sinister and sometimes comic Asian villain who spoke pidgin English. They were incarnations of the "Yellow

Peril" image that was popularized when Chinese began arriving in America in substantial numbers to express the racial anxieties of white society [14]. They were characterized as embodying "Oriental" cruelty and cunning. In his own time, Chin Poo was made into an example of a popular cliché created for mass consumption, and as such, was probably better known than Chin Lin Sou, the admired historical character. Chin Poo and the image he represented have had a greater effect on white society and its perception and treatment of Chinese across America than Chin Lin Sou, whose influence was localized, limited to Denver and the Centennial State.

The fact of the matter is both Chins were Chinese community leaders whose fates were contingent on historical circumstances. A traditional genealogical study can trace the life of Chin Lin Sou and his family. Not so with Chin Poo, whose beginning and end are uncertain. Even though he was an influential man, the paucity of surviving information makes it difficult to reconstruct his personal history and to evaluate the role he played in the local community. Moreover, any investigation of his life needs to overcome the sensationalism of yellow journalism practiced by local newspapers, which are the primary sources of information about him.

## 2. "White Chinaman"

Mainly through the efforts of his descendants, it is possible to discuss Chin Lin Sou's life with a degree of confidence. He was a Chinese pioneer who participated in the "westward expansion", though he came at it from the other direction, moving from the east across the Pacific to the West Coast and then into the Interior West. Chin was born in 1836 in Southern China, like most of those who participated in the Chinese diaspora. He immigrated to America as a young man at about the time of the California Gold Rush (1848–1855), though it was not for the purpose of prospecting for gold but rather to work on the railroad. He supervised the Chinese laborers constructing the Central Pacific Railroad, the more arduous half of the famous Transcontinental Railroad that unified the nation economically and culturally. After finishing his work on the railroad, he and other Chinese found themselves in the Interior American West, looking for a way to make a living. Chin was one of the first to immigrate to Colorado, where he made his mark in the state's history.

It may have been his language ability more than anything else that made Chin a natural leader of the Denver Chinese community, though having a commanding physical presence probably helped as well. He stood over six feet tall with blue-gray eyes, characteristics which suggest that his family had originally been from northern China. In 1877, the *Central City Weekly Register* remarked that he spoke "English fluently as anyone and [was] a man of great executive ability and intelligence". In the eyes of the white community, he compared favorably with other Chinese. In 1919, a nostalgic article on frontiersmen in *Denver Farm and Field* described Chin as "more progressive than most of his sleepy race" and "as strong as a crowbar and as brave as a lion when it came to tackling the affairs of life". These compliments say as much about white people's attitude toward the Chinese at the time as they do about Chin Lin Sou.

Chin made his home in Denver's Chinatown and was considered its first mayor, that is, the spokesman for the local Chinese community. However, he was called on to speak for the Chinese in other parts of the state as well. On 21 May 1874, when Chinese were blamed for accidentally setting Central City afire while performing "a heathen worship or celebration of rites," as reported in the *Daily Central City Register*, Chin felt compelled to go to the newspaper office to defend his countrymen, who believed that the accident was caused by a defective flue. Because of the high regard in which Chin was held, the *Register* concluded, "We are bound to accept [Chin's] story as much more truthful than any which have been previously been reported". Through his timely intervention, he probably spared the Chinese from becoming scapegoats, which seemed to be their fate whenever a mishap occurred nearby. Because of his reputation as an honest man, he was even asked to serve as Central City marshal, a position he turned down, saying that the Chinese already gave him enough problems to deal with, as the Central City incident had shown. Another unspoken reason may have been that being Chinese would have made his job as marshal doubly difficult.

Chin worked throughout the state, usually supervising Chinese placer miners. In addition to working as a labor contractor, he was an entrepreneur who owned and leased land, mainly abandoned mines that whites no longer considered profitable. Perhaps in acknowledgment of this, the *Farm and Field* article referred to him as “full of the unconquerable ambition to succeed where the Yankee spirit had laid down”. It should be noted that whenever he undertook a business venture, Chin thought it prudent to do so in partnership with a white friend. For example, he owned stores in Nevadaville and Smith’s Hill in association with Edward L. Thayer. Admired though he was, Chin was never able to advance beyond the Chinese community. In spite of his acknowledged intelligence and long years of experience, it is telling that he never managed white employees or occupied a leadership position outside of the Chinese community.

After a protracted illness, Chin Lin Sou died on 10 August 1894. Both the Chinese community and mainstream Denver society mourned his passing. E. L. Harris, one of his business associates, said he was a man of “fine personality, strictly honest in business, and respected by all who knew him”. Yet it is evident that Chin Lin Sou would be forever remembered first and foremost as a Chinaman rather than as a Coloradan. Intending a compliment, the *Rocky Mountain News* obituary referred to him as the “White Chinaman” who had many white friends, implying that his successful life was due to his embodying white attributes which made up for his Chinese deficiencies.

### 3. “Boss” of Chinatown

Unlike Chin Lin Sou, nothing about Chin Poo is known for certain. Apparently, Chin Poo was already in the American West around 1860 and in Colorado by 1880, making him and Chin Lin Sou contemporaries. In all likelihood, they knew each other since Denver’s Chinatown was a small community. There is, however, no evidence of a relationship, personal or political.

Chin Poo made his living through a variety of means, starting as a “washee man”, that is, a Chinese laundryman, and working his way up to being a prosperous businessman who owned a restaurant and a fancy goods store. He also owned rental property in Denver’s Chinatown and 160 acres of land in Arapahoe County. As a result of his commercial success, Chin Poo interacted with the Denver establishment and cultivated its leaders through social gatherings such as smokers and Chinese New Year banquets. He was called upon to comment on Chinese foreign policy and the life of his countrymen in America. He was involved with municipal institutions, especially the courts, where he interceded on behalf of local Chinese residents. In the latter instance, it was often to serve as their interpreter; to post bail for Chinese when they were arrested, usually for gambling; or to assist them in some immigration-related proceeding, which became all too frequent with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He also went to court as a plaintiff to defend his own interests.

Though he was a prominent businessman and notable community leader, Chin Poo was most remembered in the white press for owning gambling parlors and his feud with John Taylor, a fellow Chinese. The local press described them as two crime lords vying for control of Chinatown and its vice establishments, specifically gambling parlors. The enmity between them made for sensational stories, replete with references to sex and violence. It was said that the hostility between them was so serious that Mayor Wolfe Londoner (1889–1891) intervened and threatened them with forced eviction if they did not voluntarily leave the old Chinatown to relocate elsewhere. It was believed that peace would be achieved only if these rivals were separated physically and given a piece of territory that each could claim as his own. So in 1891, Chin established a separate Chinatown on Denver’s west side, while Taylor’s was on the east side.

Actually, Chin Poo’s move to the west side was arranged by his associate O. H. Fang in order to improve the Chinese community’s living circumstances as well as its local reputation. From the reports of the *Rocky Mountain News*, Chin Poo’s new territory was remarkably clean while John Taylor presided over an area condemned as the “filthiest spot in Denver”, which is saying something given Denver’s national reputation at the time as a squalid cow town.

The conflict between them finally ended when in spring 1901 the *Denver Post* reported that John Taylor had disappeared from Denver only to reappear as a prosperous merchant in Boston, leaving Chin Poo the sole “boss” of Chinatown’s criminal establishments. If so, it was all for naught.

While enjoying material success, Chin Poo failed to attain the one thing that Chinese valued most—a family. Like most Chinese immigrants to America, he came as a bachelor but late in life he had the wherewithal to marry Chin Wong Fay (aka Wong Tiy), who was described as “fairy-footed” and the “prettiest creature ever brought to Denver”. It was said that the Chins lived happily in Denver for a few months until Wong Tiy committed adultery with Yee Ling in spring 1889.

Evidently, Yee Ling, a local lothario whom the press referred to as the “Mongolian Masher”, frequented Chin Poo’s home and there seduced his young wife. Wong later claimed that because Chin had driven her out of their home for infidelity, she took her jewelry and fled with Yee to Tombstone, Arizona. Chin accused Yee of stealing from him with the assistance of his wife and swore out a warrant for their arrest. In the subsequent trial in Denver, Wong Tiy accused Chin Poo of extreme cruelty and said she took only what was rightfully hers. Since the testimonies were mainly a matter of “he said, she said”, it proved difficult to know who was telling the truth. The jury found it difficult to decide since it took 15 ballots before they acquitted Yee Ling of larceny.

After losing his case against Yee Ling and losing his wife to him, Chin Poo began to lose his businesses as well, for unknown reasons. Chin Poo ended his days as an impoverished old man peddling soap and rice on the streets of Chinatown. A sentimental interpretation of his life’s end would see him a man with a broken heart who lost his will to live. However, any fair interpretation would have to acknowledge that by most measures, he had lived an extraordinary life and should be remembered as such.

Unlike most others who came to Colorado seeking their fortune, Chin Poo actually achieved wealth and success, only to lose it at the end of his life. Given his life story, Chin Poo belongs to the ranks of such well-known Coloradans as Horace “Silver King” Tabor, who is memorialized in the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. However, without genealogical information, Chin Poo is likely to be remembered less as an honored historical figure like Chin Lin Sou but more as a historical metaphor for the Chinese villain who is a stock character in American literature and cinema.

Chin Lin Sou and Chin Poo were both prominent leaders of Denver’s Chinese community but posterity recalls them in markedly different ways. Chin Lin Sou is remembered as the “good” Chinese and Chin Poo as the “bad” Chinese, contrasting examples that reflect the dominant society’s categorization of its racial minorities. Part of the difference in how they are remembered lies in the fact that Chin Lin Sou had a family and produced sons and daughters who continued his bloodline to the present. His descendants have made it their responsibility to safeguard his legacy. By preserving a record of his genealogy, they have ensured that he and, by extension, they are remembered as respectable members of American society. It has resulted in Chin Lin Sou being honored as an early Colorado pioneer with a stained-glass window in the old Supreme Court Room in the State Capitol. Ironically, in the window, which was installed in 1977, he is depicted wearing a red Chinese gown rather than the western-style suit he was wearing in the photograph on which the portraiture is based. Presumably, this was done to make him more exotic, but in doing so it has reduced him to a public representation of “John Chinaman”. Even in the late 20th century, there were limits to what could be said about the state’s Chinese residents.

Meanwhile, Chin Poo has lapsed into obscurity. As a historical personage he is virtually unknown. His anonymity as well as Denver Chinatown’s anonymity is an indication of his individual and the community’s collective powerlessness vis-à-vis mainstream society. Both he and the community he was part of were vulnerable to misrepresentation. Indeed, Chin Poo has become part of the enduring metaphor for the evil Chinese. He and other Chinese community leaders have been stereotyped and demonized as fearsome Chinese crime lords in literature and cinema. As such, they are an abstraction, a transcendent subject that goes by many fictional names to be manipulated by the media.

#### 4. Concluding Comments

While it may be an overstatement to say Chin Poo and other community leaders need to be rescued from the dustbin of history where they are forgotten if future Chinese Americans are ever to attain equality in the United States, surely a step toward their empowerment is authentic knowledge of their history and culture. This begins with those at the local level, and a concomitant critique of how they have been represented in the historical narratives that have dominated American society.

This is unquestionably a daunting task given the dearth of genealogical data, both qualitative and quantitative, a situation that is apt to get worse with the passage of time as existing Chinese records continue to disappear. Ideally, there would be detailed genealogical studies of individual Chinese leaders, reconstructing their family histories, and revealing much about their kinship relations. Presumably such genealogies exist but are archived in ancestral halls in the villages whence the Chinese immigrants came or are in their clan associations in American Chinatowns. If enough of genealogies were found, then perhaps it would be possible for social historians with the requisite Chinese language skills to research them to do a prosopographic study of Chinese community leaders for a specific time and place.

An alternative would be to collect what information there is on local Chinese leaders, beginning with those in the 19th century American West, to write a collective biography. This would require researching local gazetteers and county records in China and Chinese-language newspapers in America. Since the historical context is known as well as their south China origins and peasant backgrounds, researchers can focus on their rise to leadership through an analysis of their interactions with members within their ethnic community and with members of the dominant society. This is essentially a horizontal genealogical study that would result in a more complex and nuanced understanding of who they were and the role they played in Chinese American history and American history. Such a genealogical study would save them from historical obscurity where they currently languish and might even save them from being misperceived in popular culture.

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