

# H-Net Reviews

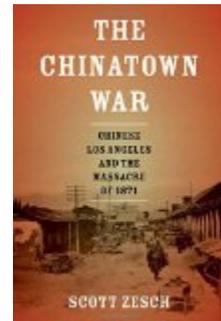
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott Zesch. *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. xii + 283 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975876-0.

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Scott Zesch's *The Chinatown War* is an important study about the October 24, 1871, killing of eighteen Chinese men and boys, an event that gave Los Angeles its first international notoriety. In relaying this history, Zesch weaves together the stories and storytelling of this tragic event. Historians have long grappled with nineteenth-century Chinese California but have done so in ways that have privileged a top down and/or institutional approach, relying on the scant historical record: legislation, court records, and public documents. Immigration historians, influenced by Robert Park's Chicago School of Sociology, have used assimilation as the model from which to measure a success driven narrative of the Chinese experience. Other historians have focused on the possibility or impossibility of the Chinese to ever be considered "American" by dominant nineteenth-century society. More recent histories have included a global consideration of immigration in addition to local networks of support. In this continuum, very little has been written on the Chinese Massacre, and it has been presented as an extension of an Anglo-centered story. The Chinese undoubtedly were victims of a xenophobic and anti-Christian society that exploited their labor and them as political foes when it suited. And the public violence exacted against the Chinese served as immediate and long-term lessons to Chinese immigrants' place in Los Angeles hierarchy.

Zesch, an independent scholar, drops any attempts at integrating these tidy narratives into a larger historiography. He provides the messy and often contradictory details that make history compelling and perhaps more accessible to our own chaotic lives. Concerned with how

cultures clash in different historical contexts, Zesch has authored several significant histories including fictional accounts as well as the acclaimed history of his great-great-uncle in *The Captured: A True Story of Abduction by Indians on the Texas Frontier* (2004). *The Chinatown War* is a direct and intimate look into one of the most horrific instances of mob violence in Los Angeles history with a focus on the human agents; the complicated series of events during the riots; and the role of Los Angeles' law enforcement before, during, and after the massacre. Not only does Zesch aptly put this event into its proper contexts, but he also demonstrates the diverse responses by Los Angelenos to the Chinese. Whenever possible, Zesch uses the testimony and writings of the Chinese to share their hitherto unshared point of view. This book is a recovery project that gathers new information on the years leading up to the 1871 event and subsequent court cases.

*The Chinatown War* is organized into two sections. Part 1 explores the foundations of Chinese life in Los Angeles, documenting the reasons individuals came to California; the lawlessness in the area, the societies and institutions that the Chinese formed to navigate and prosper in such a hostile environment; and the much-publicized differences between the Chinese and the rest of the population. Part 2 builds on the foundations established in part 1 to show how these factors shaped the events leading up to the Chinese Massacre. Zesch breaks new ground in sharing not only the details of the night, but also the events leading up to October 24 that were three years in the making; the massacre was one in a series of hate crimes against the Chinese. As the book's title con-

veys, that day was brutal in a war on the Chinese and not an isolated event. Sources include court records, newspaper accounts, and memoirs from Anglo-American “pioneers” from the mid- to late nineteenth century. Zesch shows that much of the vitriolic rhetoric against the Chinese in local newspapers was reprinted from publications in San Francisco and northern California, home to the nativist Workingmen’s Party.

Missing from Zesch’s investigation is an in-depth analysis of the sources. The author undoubtedly provides a critical lens to all of the content and discusses the impermanence of the Chinese from historical memory. However, a more thorough examination of the motivations behind the local presses and memoirs would substantiate this telling of the Chinese experience in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

This book is rich with reproduced source material. Included are advertisements, photographs, drawings, and maps from local archives, such as the Huntington Library and the Seaver Center for Western History Research. Zesch’s informative captions provide a visual materiality to the detailed history. For example, included is a nondescript black-and-white photograph from the Seaver Center with the following caption: “This 1869 photograph shows Commercial Street from its T-intersection with

Main Street, looking east toward Herman Heinsch’s two-storied saddle and harness shop (which was replaced by the present-day Federal Building). Three Chinese were hanged from a wagon parked on the south (right) side of the street” (Image Inset 16). *The Chinatown War* situates its subjects geographically whenever possible, and provides information on the site of an event in relationship to its current location.

While the entire book is captivating, chapter 4, “Daughters of the Sun and Moon,” on the wretched lives of Chinese women is especially illuminating. It provides an unflinching look at Los Angeles’ seen and public Chinese women and extrapolates on the lives of hidden married Chinese women. Zesch demonstrates how the conditions for human trafficking and treatment of Chinese women left some of them continually brutalized and dying alone, destitute in back alleys.

*The Chinatown War* is an ideal candidate for educators teaching courses on Los Angeles and the history of the West, as well as general surveys on the nineteenth century, sociology, and American studies. While the book uses Los Angeles as its example, the lessons drawn from this case study are applicable to a nation that continues to struggle with immigration, controlled networks of information, and its history.

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