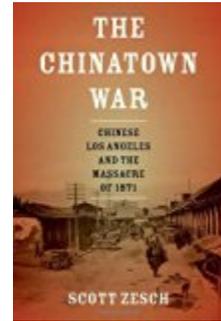


Scott Zesch. *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. xii + 283 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975876-0.

Reviewed by Karen Raines (University of California, Riverside)

Published on H-California (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Eileen V. Wallis



Forgetting and Remembering Atrocity

October 24, 1871, is not a date that to most immediately brings to mind a corresponding historical event. Scott Zesch's *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* strives to change this. Situating his work within the study of the American West, which has moved from the frontier model à la Frederick Jackson Turner into a more nuanced set of thematic frameworks, including race relations, borderlands, immigration, gender, labor, and the environment, Zesch provides an engrossing popular history that deftly brings to light an ostensibly "forgotten" xenophobic and racist slaughter of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. While some popular histories oversimplify or talk down to their audience, Zesch's work is a prime example of a scholarly endeavor that will appeal to a myriad of curious readers.

Part 1 examines the social, economic, and legal landscape that permitted and even fomented violence against and among Chinese immigrants. Here, Zesch primarily seeks to dispute many long-held assumptions regarding Chinese immigrants, including a prevalent one that insisted that they were "docile, passive victims of bullies and unscrupulous bosses" (p. 19). Indeed, Zesch reveals that many Chinese immigrants proactively adopted Western dress, learned English, and sought to engage the larger community. However, the familiar "us versus them" trope still emerged. In fact, some manifestations of Chinese culture were considered so bizarre to non-Chinese residents that a culture gap emerged that led to misunderstandings, exploitation, and violence. To add

to the growing antipathy toward Chinese immigrants, many local newspapers perpetuated anti-Chinese sentiment, setting the stage for what Zesch describes as one of the "worst hate crimes the nation had experienced" (p. 208).

While "hate crime" as a term did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century, its use here is appropriate and effective. This was a hate crime. Moreover, Zesch masterfully discusses this violent incident without aggrandizing or minimizing the event. Certainly, scholars who research and write about violent acts, massacres, and atrocities should be, like Zesch, cautious that they do not unwittingly reinforce subjective hierarchies of pain that can draw focus away from the events' underlying causes and continuing consequences.

In part 2, Zesch explores the massacre itself and its immediate and long-term aftermath. Chapter 6, the book's most taut and gripping chapter, examines the shootout between Chinese rivals that left one Anglo police officer and seventeen Chinese immigrants dead. This well-written chapter explores how ingrained racism toward and dehumanization of Chinese immigrants coupled with mob mentality to produce horrific acts of violence that were instigated by local ruffians and well-respected citizens alike. Although a small handful of white residents attempted to intervene and a few even risked their lives to assist those in jeopardy, many more participated, encouraged, watched, or simply ignored the

chaotic murders of their neighbors.

Questions of who was to blame for the massacre emerged almost immediately after the incident. However, instead of assigning individual blame for the massacre, Zesch argues that “we should consider the ways in which the town’s prominent people helped create an atmosphere in which the mob could carry out its crimes” (p. 173). In other words, by not standing up to anti-Chinese sentiment in the years leading up to the massacre, newspapers, their reporters, and many community members were “undoubtedly guilty of sins of omission or at least lapses of courage” (p. 173). No doubt, Zesch is provoking readers to consider their own lives and instances of social injustice that they may tolerate consciously or otherwise.

In point of fact, after the massacre, many local newspapers continued propagating the same racism and cultural mockery that contributed to the massacre in the first place. Despite the initial public outcry, the massacre was a fleeting moment of horror that lacked any sustaining reflection or critical assessment. Zesch’s discussions of adverse media influence should resonate with many today who live in a state of twenty-four-hour news, sensationalism, and sometimes irresponsible reporting designed to feed ratings.

Zesch is reluctant to offer a reason for why this particular massacre occurred and why it was so readily forgotten. “Affixing a tidy, facile economic or political explanation to an outbreak of irrational racial violence,” Zesch contends, “would give the erroneous impression that it was understandable or, even worse, inevitable” (p. 218). Nevertheless, other scholars—including Marita Sturken (in *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* ([2007])), and James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (in their edited collection *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* [2009])—have explored difficult or uncomfortable history within the context of contingency and without glorification. I think it was possi-

ble for Zesch to do so here without devolving into false paradigms of victimization or powerlessness.

Zesch, nevertheless, prompts difficult questions that some may be reluctant to address and others may find difficult to answer. Why did a Chinese life mean less than a white life? Why was there public outcry only after the event and existing only within a limited timeframe afterward? Why were (and are) we so ready to forget and reluctant to remember? These are not comfortable questions and they have festered for almost a century-and-a-half.

I am left to wonder how a changing landscape—in this case Los Angeles—influenced individual and group behavior. The town’s rapid growth, the ever-changing built environment, and the increasingly multicultural population no doubt played a role. In *Senses of Place* (1996), scholars Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso have explored the power of place and space, which could have flushed out such a discussion in Zesch’s important work. While Zesch’s book does not do for Chinese and Chinese Americans what Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (1998) did for African Americans in the American West, it is a significant contribution that should spur on new questions.

The Chinatown War is an engaging read that will appeal as much to the inquiring public as to trained scholars. I can imagine this tome being a good read on an airplane; an assigned text in an undergraduate class; and as required reading in an introductory graduate course that highlights research skills, excavating sources, and making astute inferences when faced with lost or difficult to reconstruct evidence. In the end, Zesch’s book can be an avenue for “restoring our blemished humanity” and protesting present-day manifestations of the same racial hatred, cultural animosity, adverse media influence, and willful historical amnesia surrounding horrific acts of violence (p. 220).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-california>

Citation: Karen Raines. Review of Zesch, Scott, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39353>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.