

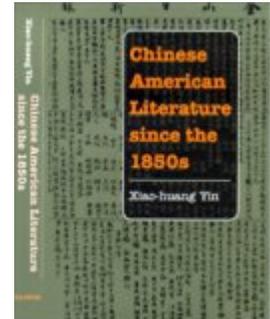
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Xiao-huang Yin. *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 261 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02524-2.

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Few scholars have included both English and Chinese sources in their study on Chinese America. In an effort to differentiate Chinese Americans (speaking English only) from Chinese immigrants (speaking both English and Chinese), Asian American scholars tend to render the bulk of Chinese language writings as sources by, of, and for immigrants. What has been left out, unfortunately, is an extremely important and valuable body of primary sources for the study of the Chinese American experience.

Xiao-huang Yin's *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* sets itself apart from that trend by skillfully integrating writings in Chinese language with those in English. Trained in interdisciplinary studies of race and ethnicity, the author is able to approach Chinese American literature in the broad context of American social and cultural history. Because the author understands well writings in both English and Chinese, and is familiar with American as well Chinese cultures, he moves freely from one language source to the other. The result is a carefully researched and well-balanced study of Chinese America from a transnational and translanguing perspective.

*Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* in fact does more than simply include immigrant experience into Chinese American studies. Through the book we learn that some Chinese American authors have published their works in both English and Chinese. Comparing the English version with that of the Chinese by the same authors, the book demonstrates that language plays a significant role in shaping the tone and contents of the writings by Chinese Americans. These authors sometimes write differently when they switch from Chinese into English. Even when a previously published work is

translated from one language into the other, the author would change the original story lines. The discrepancies found in the same work published in English and in Chinese, as Yin points out, should be viewed not only in light of the influence of publishers and target audience, but also in a broader sociohistorical context. For example, while the best-seller writer Lin Yutang modified his views when he wrote in English in order to satisfy the taste of mainstream readers, the prolific novelist Yu Lihua published most of her work in Chinese because she did not want to trade her integrity for popularity. Although Yu had an early success writing fiction in English, she soon learned that mainstream publishers, who were only interested in exotic stories about China, had little interest in her writing about Chinese American life.

Most importantly, by studying difference between works published in English and in Chinese, *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* argues convincingly that writings in Chinese reveal subtle identity information that is not always seen in those of English. Here, Yin examines a Chinese American author's position as a member of his/her own ethnic community and as a member of a minority group in American society. In doing so, he casts a fresh, multidimensional light on the Chinese American experience. The fact that bilingual Chinese American authors sometimes employ different strategies or techniques in their writings indicates they are fully aware what it means to be members of a marginal racial group in American society.

*Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* also exposes the complexity and diversity of Chinese American writings. According to the author, there has never been a single, monolithic voice of Chinese American writers.

The phenomenon reflects the realities of Chinese American life. While Sui Sin Far, a Eurasian writer who grew up in predominantly white communities in England and America, stood out to defend Chinese Americans passionately in her writings, authors such as Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, and Virginia Chin-Lan Lee wrote with “a sense of alienation” about the Chinese American community in which they had lived. Whereas some Chinese American literary works seem to have confirmed racial stereotypes, there has been a continuous effort by authors such as Lee Yan Phou and Frank Chin, who write with a clear racial consciousness to “correct distortions” of China and the images of Chinese Americans. The multifaceted lines of Yin’s analysis illuminate the circumstances involving the writings and publications as well as intentions of the authors. Such an analysis is of great

importance if we view Chinese American literature as an outcome of the Chinese American experience.

In short, *Chinese American literature since 1850s* is more of a study of cultural and social history than the title suggests. The book is not confined to the discussions of artistic styles or literary creativity. It treats the literature as a product of social and historical events that have affected Chinese American life since the mid-nineteenth century. The literature under Yin’s analysis includes fiction and non-fiction, poems, autobiographies, newspaper essays, political statements, letters and other forms of writings. The fact that the author includes so many forms of writings makes the book especially rich in primary sources and should be well appreciated by students who are interested in the Chinese and Asian American experiences.

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