

# H-Net Reviews

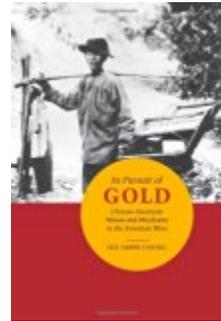
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sue Fawn Chung. *In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. xxxii + 258 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03628-6.

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Inspired by her focus on the Chinese miners and merchants of eastern Oregon and northeastern Nevada, and by the many instances of positive interaction between ethnically diverse members of these small mining communities, Sue Fawn Chung challenges the prevailing scholarship related to the history of the American West in the nineteenth century. Set within a context of prejudice and discrimination, stoked by the anti-Chinese movement of the 1870s, *In Pursuit of Gold* sheds new light on this history through case studies of the communities of John Day, Oregon; Tuscarora, Nevada; and Island Mountain, Nevada. Unique in comparison to the mining camps of California, Chinese immigrants in these three communities constituted a majority of residents during the formative years of these towns. Moreover, Nevada allowed Chinese immigrants to own mining claims, businesses, and other properties.

Chung found few written records to document the experiences of her Chinese miners and merchants. To compensate, she combines historical resources and methods with archaeological and sociological approaches in order to synthesize immigration records, business records, census manuscripts, archeological site reports, museum artifact collections, newspaper articles, memoirs, oral histories, laws, and summaries of legal judgments. The author establishes a context for her work by using the United States Bureau of Census manuscripts from 1860 to 1930 to profile changes in population and the influence of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) provide a “voice” for protagonists in this study. Archeological reports and collections of artifacts enhance the few written

records available. As a museum curator, I found particularly intriguing the resources of the remarkable Kam Wah Chung and Company Museum in John Day.

In the foreword, Roger Daniels summarizes the contribution to the literature that *In Pursuit of Gold* makes: Chung “provides a new dimension to the traditional picture of the Chinese in the exclusion era and makes meaningful comparisons between the experience of the folks that she writes about and the more general experience of other Chinese Americans” (p. ix). Revealed in the subtitle, gold miners and merchants take center stage in this study of the Chinese American experience, supported by a cast of Chinese physicians, cooks, canal builders, railroad workers, labor contractors, and recruiters, with some wives and prostitutes. Chung’s protagonists include Kam Wah Chung, Ing Hay, and Lung On in John Day; Ah Kee Lake in Tuscarora; and China Lem in Island Mountain. Taking aim at the “Chinese sojourner hypothesis,” in vogue since sociologist Paul Sui introduced the idea in 1952, Chung brings these characters to life by revealing their personal histories and associations.

Ethnic relations and intercultural communications developed differently in these isolated rural locales, because Chinese miners and merchants represented a majority in the region, thereby establishing an economic niche that served a loyal Chinese clientele, and the larger populations of European Americans and Native Americans living nearby. Chung shows that community leaders, both Chinese and American, were not hostile toward each other. They created a harmonious atmosphere unique during a time of anti-Chinese sentiment. Truth be

told, the difficulty of reaching these locales by wagon and foot created interdependence among the town residents. Relative isolation kept these towns from getting caught up in the whirlwind of anti-Chinese rhetoric that characterized the larger mining camps of the American West. Paying taxes and other fees and contributing to the funds of local and state governments, Chinese miners and merchants supported and encouraged freighting and commerce to and from the mining towns, thereby connecting their communities to a network of transoceanic trade routes. Unlike the sojourners who returned to China, these men were not driven out of their homes and businesses. They lived for decades in their respective communities.

Chung identifies how the Chinese valued the freedoms of association provided by the United States Constitution by emphasizing the roles of family and district associations, secret societies, labor unions, and fraternal organizations. She describes how the *huaquia* (overseas Chinese) sought aid and comfort living abroad from district associations, especially Sanyi (Sam Yup) and Siyi (Sze Yup) from the Chee Kong Tong, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA). Chinatowns provided the services of physicians and good food, in addition to prostitutes, gaming, opium, and alcohol, consumed by workers during their off hours, and for extended periods during Chinese New Year celebrations and other festivals, hosted by Chinatown associations for the enjoyment of the entire community.

*In Pursuit of Gold* connects the shrinking size of these mining locales with boom and bust cycles of mining in the American West. The transplantation of placer mining with new quartz and hydraulic mining technolo-

gies shows that technological change influenced cultural change. Chung explains how economics affected the society and culture that formed after 1869, when layoffs from the Central Pacific Rail Road created a small army of young Chinese railroad workers available in the Great Basin. The Central Pacific also opened a large number of new placer gold sites, causing workers to gravitate naturally toward mining occupations.

Chung misses the mark by not delving deeper into the cultural influences of Chinese Americans in the history of mining and merchandising. She avoids detailing the significant contributions of Chinese engineers who brought the knowledge and know-how needed to build the irrigation systems that fueled both industry and agriculture in these startup towns. Instead, Chung concludes by suggesting further research in the comparative mining frontiers in British Columbia, Australia, and South Africa.

Readers interested in a fresh approach to an old paradigm will enjoy surpassing the boundaries established by fifty years of evermore specific and inward looking ethnic studies. Chung's work on the miners and merchants in eastern Oregon and northeastern Nevada is refreshing for it marks the swinging of the scholarly pendulum away from concerns that have divided the populace of the American West into subgroups of hyphenated Americans. *In Pursuit of Gold* swings that pendulum toward the virtues of studying the shared American experiences that molded Chinese American identities and the identities of European Americans and Native Americans, living together in the isolated, but close-knit communities of the American West in the nineteenth century.

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