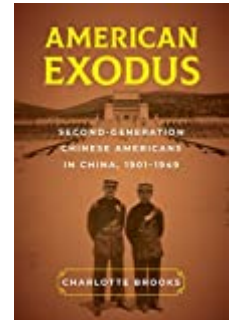


**Charlotte Brooks.** *American Exodus: Second-Generation Chinese Americans in China, 1901-1949.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. xviii + 309 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-30267-9.



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Between 1901 and World War II, almost half of the Chinese American citizens born in the United States left the country and moved to China. In her excellent new book, *American Exodus*, Baruch College history professor Charlotte Brooks examines the transnational lives these Chinese American emigrants led in China. Drawing on archival records, periodicals, and document compilations from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States, Brooks argues that Chinese American citizen immigrants, “although fully welcome in neither China nor America,” still influenced Sino-American relations, China’s society and economy, and the US government’s approach to citizenship and immigration (p. 5).

Brooks meticulously documents the racism that drove thousands of Chinese American citizens to move to Asia in search of better lives. Some 1,300 Chinese American citizens left the country for Asia each year during the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century out of a population that stood at around 90,000 in 1900 (p. 3). The exodus accelerated during the 1920s, as “US politics be-

came ever more xenophobic and anti-immigrant” (p. 38). Native-born Chinese American citizens faced bigoted legislators, hostile police, and unsympathetic neighbors. White Americans largely refused to hire people of Chinese ancestry, regardless of their citizenship or education level, for any work other than menial labor. Native-born Chinese Americans attended college at rates comparable to native-born white Americans, but they faced downward mobility after graduating. In 1910, Brooks notes, around 1,200 were attending college or high school in the United States, but official statistics showed just a handful of ethnic Chinese employed in professions requiring a college degree, such as law or engineering (p. 44).

The search for greater economic opportunities and social mobility led thousands of Chinese American citizen merchants and students to relocate to Hong Kong and Guangdong. In Hong Kong, unlike the United States, Chinese Americans with some education or savings could work in a wide variety of professions. Wealthier families could also send their American children to prestigious

private schools, giving them the opportunity to join the colony's non-white elite. Meanwhile, many China-born parents who stayed in the United States enrolled their children in school on the mainland, with hundreds being sent to study in their ancestral villages. Parents hoped this immersion in Chinese culture would help make children—especially daughters—more marriageable.

Between the Boxer Rebellion and the mid-1920s, a larger number of highly skilled and college-educated Chinese Americans moved to China in order to contribute to China's modernization. These modernizers, Brooks argues, tended to be less radical than their Chinese-born counterparts. Whereas the Chinese Americans who sought to contribute to China's modernization focused on introducing new technologies, organizational methods, and educational pedagogies, native-born modernizers pursued more extensive changes by attacking traditional culture and attempting to redefine what it meant to be Chinese. Many of the immigrants served the tottering Qing Empire during its final decade, rising to positions of influence that would have been unimaginable in the United States—even for white Americans of a comparable age. Samuel S. Young, for example, became president of the Tangshan Engineering and Mining College in 1910, just five years after earning his bachelor's degree at the University of California Berkeley. The 1911 revolution opened even more favorable circumstances for Chinese American technocrats, many of whom took up positions of considerable influence across the fragmented republic.

This golden age ended in the mid-1920s, when Chinese American citizens found themselves caught between the distrustful, anti-imperialist Guomindang (GMD) regime and a US government unwilling to treat them as full citizens. The GMD took a radical turn after aligning with the Soviet Union, which unnerved the merchant class-aligned Chinese American community in Guangdong. The GMD also launched initiatives challeng-

ing Chinese Americans' legal status as US citizens. Most Chinese Americans in the South turned against the GMD for good after the August 1924 Merchant Corps Incident, when GMD premier Sun Yat-sen's forces crushed an uprising by the Guangzhou Merchant Volunteer Corps, killing hundreds and laying the blame on the city's overseas Chinese community. Physical danger was a constant over the next few years, as the party encouraged local activists to attack foreign-backed institutions throughout Guangdong, compelling most Chinese Americans to flee to Hong Kong or return to the United States. US consular authorities, for their part, excluded Chinese Americans in China from protection under the extraterritorial system, beginning with the refusal in 1925 to defend Chu Shea Wai, a New York-born American citizen imprisoned for alleged involvement in the assassination of GMD party leader Liao Zhongkai.

But despite the GMD government's suspicions about their loyalty, Chinese Americans continued to immigrate to China in large numbers during the Nanjing Decade. China did not suffer a deep economic downturn until 1934, nearly five years after the Depression began in the United States. So many Chinese American citizens continued to relocate there in search of decent jobs. The Nanjing government, as Brooks illustrates, offered these recent immigrants few opportunities to serve the country, tacitly restricting them to work in the private sphere. As a result, few Chinese Americans came to associate the GMD with China, despite the party's insistence that Chiang Kai-shek's regime was the sole legitimate focus of Chinese patriotism.

The war against Japan convinced many Chinese Americans to try to return to the United States, but racist State Department policies, costly travel, and Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and Southeast Asia left many stranded. Those who returned to the United States fared far better than nearly all who remained in occupied China, Brooks shows. But as before the war, US consular authorities prioritized the needs of white Ameri-

cans when helping with the evacuation of US citizens. Among those who stayed, some perished in the famines that gripped overseas districts in the Pearl River Delta between 1942 and 1944. Others attempted to survive under Japanese occupation in the former treaty ports. A handful actively resisted the occupation, while the majority had to struggle to decide just how much they would accommodate Japanese demands. Boston-born lawyer Russell Chen became the highest-ranking Chinese American collaborator, serving as foreign relations committee chairman in the Japanese Reformed Government. Another Chinese American collaborator, Herbert Moy, became the star broadcaster for the Shanghai-based Nazi radio station, XGRS. Moy's brother Ernest, on the other hand, was one of many Chinese Americans who sought work in Free China. He did better than most, serving Chiang's government as a senior official in the GMD's War Area Service Corps, which provided food and housing for the US Army in China.

By 1945, new political and economic opportunities had opened to Chinese Americans in the United States, and most of those who had remained in China during the Second World War chose to return to America by the late 1940s. Brooks argues that most Chinese American refugees who spent the war in GMD-controlled areas grew completely disillusioned with Chiang's regime and tried to leave for the United States as soon as possible. Only those with positions in GMD agencies, like Ernest Moy, chose to remain, but most of this group left for good during the Civil War. Collaboration hampered the lives and careers of those who worked with the Germans and Japanese, and most middle-age professionals never achieved the same degree of success in America as they had in China, but many younger people with good English skills went on to successful careers as the US job market opened to Chinese Americans during the postwar years.

With Brooks's careful attention to larger trends and individual experiences, *American Exo-*

*odus* is an engrossing read. Most impressive are the details about the liminal spaces—American-run organizations, Hong Kong, Shanghai's foreign concessions, and the Pearl River Delta—where Chinese Americans could define their identity for themselves. These are histories, Brooks explains, that have largely disappeared from the record because they subverted Cold War-era nationalist narratives. By telling these stories, *American Exodus* makes insightful contributions to our understanding of migration, US-China relations, and modern Chinese and American history.

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