

Chicagoland Chinese: Transnational Migration and Community,

1870s-1940s

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Since the mid-19th century, Chicago has been a cosmopolitan city and national hub for thousands of immigrants from around the world seeking fortunes in the new land. For the Chinese who first arrived on the West Coast, Chicago became a refuge to escape the rampant anti-Chinese sentiments in the west.

In the mid-1870s, Moy Dong Chow arrived in Chicago, and his two brothers, Moy Dong Hoy (Sam Moy) and Moy Dong Yee followed soon afterwards. By 1880, there were a hundred Chinese in the city. By the end of 1890, there were more than 500 Chinese lived on South Clark Street. The earliest Chinatown in Chicago was born on Clark Street between Van Buren and Harrison. It was in this multiethnic urban “jungle” that Chinese built their enclave. Historical records reveal a few distinctive patterns of marriages among the early Chinese families in Chicago. I have classified them into the following categories: 1) the transnational split marriage—Taishanese “widow” and American concubine; 2) traditional marriage; 3) American urban adaptation: love union, interracial marriage, and widow’s remarriage.

Using archival manuscripts, censuses, news reports, and interviews, this study investigates how transnational migration has shaped the early Chinese community in Chicago.