

CHINESE AND AMERICAN CONTACT AND CULTURE

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From Lantern Girl to Bruce Lee: Leisure, Sport and the Chinese-American Community of Oakland and San Francisco, World War I to 1965

As early as 1869, a proposal was made to establish a Chinese Y.M.C.A. in San Francisco. On July 10, 1911, local church leaders met at the city's Oriental Hotel and founded the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association of San Francisco. Thomas W. Chinn has chronicled the activities of this and numerous other clubs organized by and/or for the Chinese population of the Greater San Francisco Bay, but much more work needs to be done to provide a well-rounded picture of the Chinese-American experience in sport, recreation, and leisure pursuits. In *Bridging the Pacific: San Francisco Chinatown and Its People*, Chinn states: "The founding of the [Chinese] Y.W.C.A. by a small group of Chinese women in 1916 was regarded as an act of daring in Chinatown at the time." Judy Yung's 1995 book *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* makes passing references to the contributions of the organization; but no in depth study of its sporting programs and activities exists. The same is true for groups such as Oakland's Chinese Young Women's Society (C.Y.W.S.) which engaged in a variety of activities, and during World War II held open houses, both for Chinese-American soldiers who were not welcome at the U.S.O. and a host of other groups.

The Chinese Y.W.C.A., which helped its members learn English and skills needed to secure gainful employment, performed a vital role in easing newly arrived young Chinese women's transition into the resident Chinese-American-and also the larger-society. By the 1940s and 1950s organizations like the Young Buddhist Association and the Chinese Community Center were sponsoring extensive basketball leagues for girls. (Well organized competitions in basketball and other sports were provided for boys and young men considerably earlier.) Events such as the annual Bowling Classic and especially the annual Marathon Race brought the sporting activities of the Chinese community to the attention of the wider population. At the same time, "lantern girls" (who were part of the drum and bell corps of St. Mary's Chinese School) brought together what one former participant characterized as "Chinese and Western Motifs."

This paper, which focuses especially but not exclusively upon the female experience, examines a variety of sports, recreational and leisure pursuits. Its sources of evidence include: interviews with organizers and participants; periodicals such as the *Chinese Digest* and *Chinese Press* that were published by and for the Chinese community; the general circulation press; minutes of the Chinese Y.W.C.A.; programs, pamphlets and ephemera from local libraries and archives; and the personal experiences of the author, who refereed many Y.B.A. basketball games during the 1950s.