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Birdies, Basketballs, and the Bolero: Re-creating Chinese Cultural Identity Through Sport and Recreation in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1895 to World War II

This paper examines how the sporting, recreational, and social pursuits of the residents of San Francisco's Chinatown contributed both to the preservation of traditional aspects of Chinese cultural identity and the creation of new identities in the first half of the twentieth century. Historians of sport have recently begun to focus attention on the ways in which physical activity has been used by various cultures as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting group identity and cultural messages. Among the latest contributions to this literature are the anthology *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, edited by Eisen and Wiggins (1994); *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, edited by MacClancy; and a number of scholarly articles. This work situates physical activity within the context of cultural value systems and community behavior, particularly in communities isolated from the larger culture. To date, these studies have not examined the history of the Chinese American experience in sport and physical activity.

From the late 1890s to the late 1940s a variety of Chinese voluntary organizations provided recreational and civic outlets for a community that was isolated from the broader society and experienced extensive racial discrimination. The objectives of one of the first, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA)—formed in 1895 as the Native Sons of the Golden State—reflected the multiple needs of its constituency, as its charter indicated: the CACA hoped “to form a more perfect body, to inculcate the principles of charity, justice.. . [and] to insure the legal right of its members and to secure equal economical and political opportunities for its members.” The CACA's early achievements included building a Chinese recreation center and the Chinese playground.

The Chinatown Badminton Club (1937) began with a few members whose sporting tastes also included tennis and ping pong. To maintain the interest of its growing membership, the club entered the Northern Californian Badminton Association and the

American Badminton Association. In the 1950s and 1960s the Club expanded its playing facilities and broadened its activities to include a variety of social events, especially ballroom dancing, which proved to be very popular. By the 1970s, the Chinatown Badminton Association had abandoned badminton for the dance floor and the members were increasingly disturbed by the younger generation's challenge to traditional styles of play and values such as respect for authority. Even today, the members recall those days when the generations clashed over cultural values.

The primary source materials for this study include the *Chinese Times*, the official publication of the CACA from 1924 to 1988, and a variety of in-house materials of the CACA and CBC, including pamphlets, programs, and brief histories compiled by the participants. In addition, a number of Chinese language and English language newspapers published by and for the Chinese community were used. Among the most important for this study are the *Chinese Digest* and smaller publications which include the *Tri Termly Toots* and the *Scout Wig Wag*.