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Using Visual Evidence to “Write” A History of Chinatown Recreations

This project is a video documentary that examines the connections between the transmission and acquisition of cultural identity and participation in physical activity illustrated by the activities of the Chinatown Badminton Club (CBC), a ballroom dance club in San Francisco. Both historical and ethnographic research techniques were included to position the subjects in their broader socio-historical context. Several important methodological concerns arose during its production and in retrospective analysis.

Since the CBC was founded in 1937, I wanted to investigate its historical antecedents, as well as other sporting and recreational organizations and institutions that emerged in Chinatown during the 1930s and later. Archival and Chinatown institutional sources (e.g., Chinese YWCA, Chinatown YMCA) provided a rich body of written evidence from which to document the rise of physical recreations in this neighborhood.

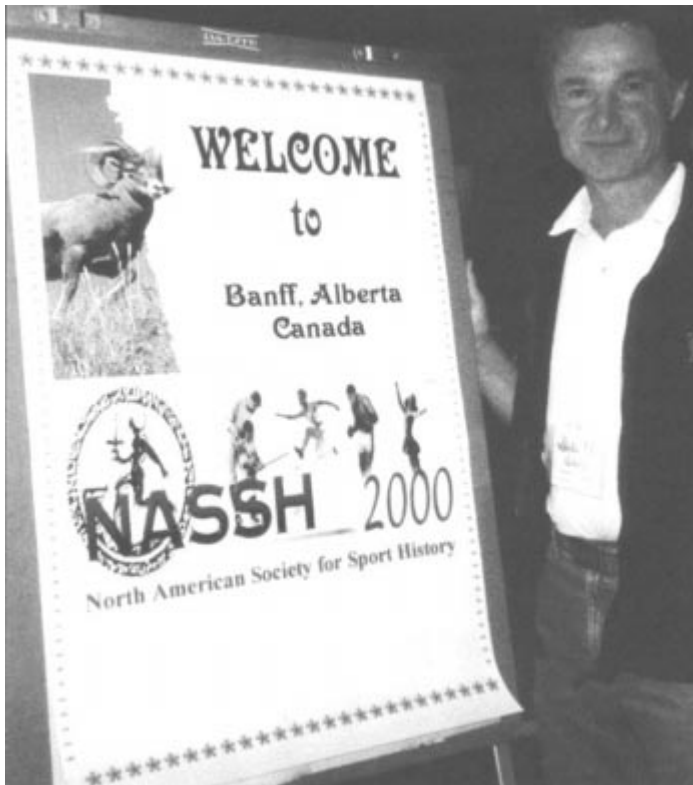
This “historicist” approach meant that I examined the present day organization (membership includes both Chinese American and Chinese immigrants), as a linear descendant of those early sporting activities, and assumed that the members shared an understanding of what these practices meant within the Chinatown neighborhood. Instead I discovered that while long-time Chinatown residents, now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, do hold a shared view of the Club’s historical legacy this is not true for those members who are younger or who are recent immigrants.

Each member brings to this organization their subjective cultural experience, a view of what it means to be of Chinese heritage in the world, and what it means to participate in this “Chinese” club. Club members who immigrated from a homogenous society (Hong Kong, for example) hold different notions of Chinese identity that those who labeled themselves Chinese American. In addition, the members who grew up in San Francisco’s

Chinatown experienced its particular racial climate and discriminatory practices. Indeed, the notion of Chinese American experience is itself a misconception.

Interestingly, despite discrimination in the broader society, the Club has had an open membership policy since its earliest days. Founding member Lily Poon noted that because “They all came in, the Chinese, Japanese, we even had an English man”, the Club changed its name from Chinese Badminton Club to Chinatown Badminton Club in 1950. Again, the notion of a homogeneous Chinatown experience belies the evidence.

Finally, this project raises the important questions about the representation of cultures and their shared practices, the production of cultural knowledge, and the historical examination of cultural groups. Its unique incorporation of both ethnographic data culled from observation and information interviews with traditional archival, written evidence raises additional issues associated with the interpretation of data, the influence of authorial subjectivity, and the benefits and disadvantages of the visual medium.



Host Gary Koroluk welcomes NASSH.