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Book review: Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, and their Community and Stories of their Lives by Jianli Zhao

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away. I guessed she wanted a more philosophical or patriotic answer" (p. 258).

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STRANGERS IN THE CITY: The Atlanta Chinese, their Community and Stories of their Lives. By *Jianli Zhao*. London and New York: Routledge (an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group). 2002. xv, 254 pp. (Tables.) US\$85.00, cloth. ISBN 0-815-33803-1.

Chinese immigration to the United States has resulted in several well-known "Chinatowns," and explanations for their ongoing existence and vitality are by now familiar. In this study, Jianli Zhao undertakes the more difficult task of explaining what would draw tens of thousands of Chinese to the capital of Georgia, a state that lies more or less in the putatively racist, xenophobic Bible Belt. The book is roughly split into lengthy transcriptions of oral history interviews with current "Atlanta Chinese," and a historical and contemporary background that efficiently situates Chinese immigration to Atlanta within broader movements to other Southern locales. On the whole, Zhao's study offers a necessary corrective to starkly black-and-white conceptions of the region's race relations, though most readers are likely to find the results rather mixed.

As Zhao explains well, with appropriate support from key historians (including James W. Loewen, Lucy M. Cohen and Robert Seto Quan), Chinese men first entered the southern United States in appreciable numbers after having proven their mettle and dependability as a workforce on the first transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869. The end of slavery had induced a labour shortage, so white planters imported Chinese workers who soon bristled under unreasonable conditions and broken promises. Most moved elsewhere, and the majority of those who stayed found a middle place often left unoccupied by whites or blacks, selling groceries and goods to the latter. Zhao deftly segues from this broader story into specific details of early Chinese movement to Georgia, which primarily took the form of late-1800s work projects in two small coastal cities, Augusta and Savannah. Those few who ventured to Atlanta were the forerunners of those now termed "the old immigrants" by the contemporary Atlanta Chinese (p. 40).

Zhao also offers a thorough, localized explanation of how difficult it is to obtain a more accurate count of Chinese immigrants than the clearly understated U.S. census figures. The vast majority of the 30,000 or more ethnic Chinese now living in Atlanta commonly refer to themselves as the "new immigrants" because they came in the unexpected waves brought on by the Immigration Act of 1965 (which ended race-based quotas). Zhao explains that Atlanta attracted them with its reputation as a burgeoning

business environment, its low cost of living and temperate climate, and the 1973 establishment of a Taiwanese consulate. Because so many of these newer Chinese have been more educated, and thus prone to higher degrees of assimilation, and because so few “old immigrants” preceded them, a residential Chinatown never took root. A communal presence does exist, however, in the forms of numerous community organizations and churches, and Asian (primarily Chinese) shopping districts. Distinctive details arise from Zhao’s account: for instance, 80 percent of the Chinese in Atlanta are from Taiwan, while 80 percent of the owners of the city’s 500-plus “Chinese” restaurants are Korean Chinese.

This book will disappoint those seeking a theoretically sophisticated approach to the Chinese American experience, in Atlanta or elsewhere. Its latter chapters contain extended transcriptions of oral history interviews, stories that Zhao posits too often as illustrative of Chinese American experience in general, rather than of “Atlanta Chinese” experience in particular. Some of the transcriptions are gripping, personalizing accounts, but much of this material stands undigested, and what little commentary or analysis there is often points out the obvious. While Zhao is right in asserting that the largely ignored voices of the Atlanta Chinese deserve recognition, they also deserve cogent, insightful discussion. Regrettable as well, this text sorely needs further editing and proofreading, as innumerable errors will seriously undermine its credibility for some readers.

Still, undergraduates and others unfamiliar with the Chinese American immigrant experience will find a clear introduction to many of its features, and real, widely various people do emerge from the transcribed interviews. The case is fully made that the Chinese American experience in Atlanta is a discrete range of experiences deserving of scholarly and popular interest.

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