Introduction

In the 1930s and 1940s, hundreds of Chinese American youth found refuge on a small plot of land in San Francisco's Chinatown. Officially designated the "Chinese Playground" by the city of San Francisco, this public playground was a place where young people made lasting friendships and formed basketball teams that excelled in competitions. Girls' and boys' teams from the Chinese Playground developed their own style of playing, a style that emphasized speed and made stature almost irrelevant. Quick and agile, they were able to score against their generally much taller and much wealthier white opponents and to dominate their divisions in the citywide league. Mike Lee, a member of a Chinese Playground basketball team in the late 1940s, recalls the last moments of the citywide recreational league championship game:

> There were only a few seconds left in the game. We were behind by a point but we had the ball. Our coach, Paul Whang, called a time out. He said, "Ten seconds is a lot

> time. We could skin a cow in that amount of time." (*He smiles.*) We went back on the court. My stomach was in my throat. My teammates got me the ball. I tossed it up. The buzzer rang with the ball in the air. We all stood there watching the ball. Including the refs! (*He laughs.*) When the ball sank in the basket, we jumped and hugged each other. We couldn't believe it. We won. (*He laughs.*) Paul ran out on the court and hugged us. After the game, we went to Paul's house and his wife made a big spaghetti dinner to celebrate. I'll never forget that. (*He smiles.*)[1]

Some fifty years after the victory, Lee's face still lights up as he describes the win. The victory was particularly sweet against the context of his family background. Like many other youth in San Francisco's Chinatown, Mike Lee came from a household struggling to survive. Five Lees squeezed into a single room and somehow managed without a kitchen or bathroom. Wearing donated clothing, the kids resorted to putting folded cardboard in the bottoms of their shoes to cover the holes and get as much wear out of them as possible. For Mike Lee, and presumably for some of his teammates, basketball offered an escape from the daily grind of poverty in an urban ghetto and a place to experience joy and small triumphs. The championship gave recognition to youngsters who were mostly invisible as working-class Chinese Americans in the 1940s.[2]

This book recovers stories like Mike Lee's and those of others who spent countless hours at the Chinese Playground. My purpose is to understand how people with meager resources have used basketball for empowerment. On one level, I am documenting a hidden cultural history. On another, I use the Chinese American experience to examine the varying political functions of sports. I consider the ways in which these youth learned strategies through basketball to deal with the rigid racial, socioeconomic,

and gender hierarchies of the 1930s and 1940s. The stories speak to the way individuals carve out space for themselves within the context of poverty, patriarchy, and racial segregation. For the Chinese Americans who made up the Chinese Playground teams, basketball was part of the long-standing and widespread network of organized sports in Asian American communities that had thrived since Chinese began coming to the United States.[3] For more than 150 years, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who lived in the mainland United States and in Hawaii had created their own sports teams in rural and urban settings.[4] Until very recently this extensive legacy was known primarily through stories circulated among family and community networks; academics and the mainstream public are only beginning to engage with this history. Scholars of Asian American studies, such as Joel Franks, Samuel Regalado, and Henry Yu, have broken ground with their work on Chinese American sports, Japanese American sports in the internment camps, and Tiger Woods, respectively, each examining social constructions of race in sports.[5] These studies demonstrate that sports have been a significant institution in Asian American history and provide an important lens with which we may examine how Asian Americans have both endured and responded to racial inequalities.

Combining a cultural history with a discussion of racial and gender formation, this book examines the various political functions of basketball in San Francisco's Chinatown from 1930 to 1950. Each chapter features a particular story—a playground, a professional barnstorming men's basketball team, a championship amateur women's team, and brother-and-sister sports icons. And, each story sheds light on the multiple and contradictory uses of sport. For example, mainstream communities viewed basketball as a way to assimilate second-generation Chinese Americans into the American "melting pot," while many second-generation Chinese Americans simultaneously used basketball to build community and assert ethnic pride.

This book attempts to speak to a broad audience. Some readers will be more interested in the stories and the history than in their theoretical implications, but I hope that the political nature of sports and the inventiveness of people facing oppression come to light. The following pages discuss the historical context of Chinese Americans in the 1930s and 1940s and the theoretical framework for the book, before outlining the book's methodology and structure.

Historical Context

In the 1930s and 1940s, restrictions of physical space reflected and reinforced the inferior status of Chinese Americans. Stringent institutional and cultural rules dictated and normalized ideas of where Chinese and Chinese Americans belonged and did not belong in America. Restrictive covenants and real estate practices limited most Chinese Americans to residences within the borders of San Francisco's Chinatown.[6] With 159 persons per acre, San Francisco's Chinatown quickly became the most densely populated area of the city.[7] In 1948, close to twenty thousand Chinese were packed into twenty San Francisco city blocks.[8] Chinatown residents struggled with these forms of spatial discrimination; families of seven to twelve people commonly lived in compact two-bedroom flats.[9] Various social welfare reports documented how these "absolutely unsanitary, unhealthful and inadequate quarters" exacerbated public health concerns such as the spread of tuberculosis and other communicable and deadly diseases.[10]

Such spatial restrictions mirrored and strengthened the social segregation experienced in other areas of life. Overt racial discrimination and violence ruled the day for Chinese Americans and other people of color.[11] Specifically, Chinese and other Asian Pacific Americans confronted ethnic- and race-based laws of discrimination that barred them from entering and leaving the country

(Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924), owning land (Alien Land Law of 1913), and marrying whomever they wished.[12] While the United States grappled with the Great Depression, Chinese Americans faced segregation that relegated them to low-wage factory and service occupations, with 24 percent of all gainful workers in laundry work, 24 percent in domestic service, and 14 percent in the restaurant labor sector in 1930.[13]

In the 1930s and 1940s, popular culture portrayed "Chineseness" in various ways. Movies, radio programs, magazines, comic books, and novels depicted Chinese Americans as static caricatures in dehumanizing ways.[14] Mainstream America (which avidly went to the movies) cast them in a variety of stereotyped roles, including the inscrutably evil villain (for example, in the Fu Manchu series beginning in 1911 and lasting until 1958) and the hypersexual yet sinister "oriental dragon lady" (such as the femme fatale in the popular 1931 Hollywood movie *Daughter of the Dragon)*.[15] Magazines, newspapers, and school textbooks also fostered the notion of Chinese as alien and unassimilable. Surveying prevalent stereotypes of Chinese from the 1910s through the 1940s, sociologist Rose Hum Lee found that elementary school textbooks described Chinese people as savoring the taste of rats and snakes and as lacking souls because they were not Christian.[16] Popular culture depicted Chinese language, religion, and values as foreign and oppositional to mainstream American society.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, the portrayal of Chineseness changed from primarily the threatening foreign invader to include more sympathetic characters. Examples include the listless but benevolent peasant in the popular Hollywood 1937 movie, *The Good Earth* and the asexual, nonthreatening detective Charlie Chan.[17] Although the Chinese exclusion laws were in effect from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, various events in the 1930s and 1940s changed mainstream America's perception of the Chinese from the yellow horde to the good ally. For example, the 1931 invasion

of Manchuria and Japan, the ensuing Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and the World War II alliance of China and the United States made Chineseness more palatable to the American public. In addition, Chinese Americans mobilized to make the public aware of Japanese atrocities and to send aid to China.[18] Mainstream media portrayals shifted from representations of various undifferentiated Asians to ethnic-specific representations of Chinese hyper-Americanness and loyalty. [19] For example, the roles given to Anna May Wong, one of the most visible Chinese American actresses of the time, changed from the generic evil Asian temptress to the loyal Chinese with an identifiable ethnic identity.[20]

In daily life, discrimination kept Chinese Americans separate from mainstream America.[21] For example, during these years Chinese Americans had limited access to public facilities ranging from swimming pools and movie theaters to music clubs.[22] Adherence to these rules of racial separation became embedded in daily life in Chinatown. Thomas J. "Tommy" Kim, a former Chinese Playground staff member, explains: "You *know* there's discrimination. In other words, you know where you don't go. You know there is a dividing line. We realize that. We know how far we can go as far as mingling with others. Because I knew that no way in those times, you are yellow, you are brown. You know your place."[23]

Such segregation governed sports as well. In racially segregated basketball leagues, Chinese American basketball players rarely encountered players of other races and thus reinforced the idea of appropriately separate spaces for different races. Most Chinese Americans played on Chinese-only basketball teams such as the Nam Kus and the Boy Scout Troop Three team and in segregated tournaments such as the Wah Ying League and the Chi-Hi Basketball League.[24] Because Chinese Americans lived and worked in conditions largely shaped by their subordinate social status, they seized every opportunity to break out of those conditions. Young Chinatown athletes with few options for mitigating or resisting their marginalization realized that on the basketball

court they could be assertive—even aggressive—visible, and celebrated.[25]

I selected *Outside the Paint* as the book's title in recognition of the ways that these Chinatown athletes used sports as a means of crossing borders set by segregation and rigid social codes. On the basketball court the paint is the area from the free throw line to the closest baseline in front of the basket at each end of the court. "Outside the paint" describes the distinctive way in which Chinatown youth played basketball. Their momentum to score points occurred "outside the paint" because of defensive pressure that caused turnovers. Their games also involved intricate passing, teamwork, quickness, fast breaks, and rapid passes on the perimeter of the basket—in contrast to other teams that slowed the pace by dribbling the ball unhurriedly down the court or playing a zone defense.

The players themselves would not have described the Chinatown style of playing basketball as a collective response to poverty, patriarchy, and racial discrimination. However, they were keenly aware that their game temporarily disrupted dominant beliefs about the inferiority of Chinese American men and women. For example, the first annual National Oriental Basketball Tournament (NOBT) in 1947 was a unique pan-ethnic gathering of Asian American male basketball players from all over the United States.[26] The Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino teams that participated in the tournament came from California, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, British Columbia, Utah, and Illinois.[27] Drawing crowds as large as two thousand, the NOBT provided a public gathering space for large numbers of Asian Americans after World War II, which was significant given the recent wartime Japanese American internment. Moreover, the NOBT offered Asian American male basketball players the unusual opportunity to compete against a deep pool of opponents at a high level. Calling the NOBT the "little World Series of basketball" and the athletes "hoop warriors" who demonstrated "sparkling cage play," the

mainstream took it as a serious sporting event.[28] At the NOBT, Asian American players were recognized and celebrated.

Theoretical Framework

From young girls playing street hockey in the suburbs of Pennsylvania to kids kicking a soccer ball on the beach in Bali, sports are a global phenomenon. Furthermore, they serve as the basis of a transnational business economy that deals in everything from the production of athletic shoes and video games simulating professional basketball players to international sports competitions and Internet magazines about World Cup soccer. This omnipresence is sometimes mistaken for freedom from politics or a symbol of democracy and meritocracy, especially by people in the United States.[29] The mainstream culture in the United States regards sports as the great social leveler and as a means for transmitting quintessentially "American" values like teamwork, competition, and discipline.[30]

Sports sociology scholars, such as Susan Birrell, Pierre Bourdieu, and Richard Gruneau, dispel such popular myths by arguing that athletics reinforce social hierarchies, discrimination, and prejudice.[31] One trend in the literature emerged in the 1970s and looked at racial and gender inequities in sports institutions. This area of scholarship has studied sporting structures, practices, and policies in relation to discrimination.[32] For example, in 2005, George B. Cunningham and Michael Sagas examined the number of racial minorities in intercollegiate coaching positions.[33] Analyzing 191 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I men's basketball programs, they found that white head coaches were more likely to have white assistant coaches on staff.

A second area of scholarship looked at inequities in sports but instead emphasized the ideological function of sports. This approach explores the use of media images to strengthen popular

beliefs that support discrimination and prejudice.[34] Utilizing Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory, this research tends to be qualitative and to center on content analysis of discourse or visual images in television, newspaper articles, and magazine advertisements.[35] For example, C. L. Cole and Amy Hribrar analyze how Nike's "just do it" ad campaign reduced feminist empowerment to wearing a product with a Nike logo, thereby narrowing feminism to an individual act of consumerism.[36] This association of a product with gender equality shifts the goal of feminism. Rather than dismantling institutional inequalities like equal pay for equal work, its object is to promote an individual's choice to play sports and purchase a Nike product. These two research approaches to sports discard the somewhat simplistic assimilationist interpretation of the links between sports and power. Instead, they analyze how sports reinforce discrimination and prejudice. For example, Mary G. McDonald examines how dominant norms are supported in media representations such as touting whiteness and heterosexuality in Women's National Basketball Association's advertisements.[37]

A third area of scholarship discusses how sports are contested political terrain.[38] This strand of sport sociology analyzes the multiple and sometimes contradictory uses of sports. Influenced by this third area of scholarship, I attempt to highlight how sports are used to strengthen and, at the same time, challenge inequalities.[39] Although sports perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination, they can help facilitate and give rise to new identity formations and possibly political change.[40] For that reason, an examination of basketball and cultural practices as part of a continuum of empowerment can be enlightening.[41] In the racial climate of the 1930s and 1940s, members of all marginalized racial groups faced overt institutional discrimination and segregation.[42] Yet, people are not merely submissive victims overrun by discrimination.[43] The Chinese American athletes in this book proved

to be astonishingly resourceful in developing vibrant cultures and communities through basketball.

My aim in this book is to explore how people living under segregation develop a sense of belonging. My goal is neither to romanticize basketball as overcoming barriers to equality nor to wallow in the basketball players' victimization. Chinese American women and men in the 1930s and 1940s faced racial segregation, patriarchy, and poverty but found ways to create spaces of empowerment. And they did so in unexpected places, such as basketball courts.[44] The Chinese American players in this book were segregated through sports at the same time as they used it to engage with society. In broader terms, these Chinatown basketball players show how solidarity emerges and how sports gain political importance among marginalized peoples. Second, they tell us something about how multiple aspects of identity play a role in empowerment. The players used basketball to assert themselves not only as Chinese Americans but also as working-class men and women.

Methodology

Excavating this history of Chinatown basketball in San Francisco was both challenging and thrilling. Oral histories were central to the project because of the paucity of documentation of the lives of working-class Chinese American women and men born in early part of the twentieth century. To contextualize the interviews, I also examined newspaper articles from the *San Francisco Examiner,* the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin,* the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Monitor,* the *Chinese Digest* and the *Chinese Press*. In addition, I looked at government reports, existing oral history collections, and personal documents.[45] Over the past decade, I have interviewed approximately thirty-four former players, coaches, and opponents, using the snowball method of referral and personal contacts.[46] Thirteen of the interviewees were women and twenty-

one were men; they ranged in age from sixty to ninety at the time of the interviews; and all respondents were born in the United States and identified English as their primary language.[47] Three central questions framed the interviews: (1) Why did men and women play basketball? (2) What meanings did the mainstream and Chinese communities in America attach to their athletic participation? and (3) How did the players view their basketball playing? The interviews were transcribed word-for-word and included phrasings. For quotations used from the transcripts, I deployed Dennis Tedlock's method of "scoring the text," and I attempt to honor the voices of the narrators as much as possible by including their personal phrasings.[48] Influenced by feminist oral historians Sherna Berger Gluck, Alice Yang, and Daphne Patai, I regard the stories as the anchor of the text; yet, my authority and perspective are present in all stages of the book, whether interviewing the athletes, selecting quotations, or framing the stories.

In the end, I selected five stories on which to focus. By no means is this project a random sampling, nor is it intended to be representative of all sports in San Francisco's Chinatown during this period. Although a wide variety of basketball teams and players in the 1930s and 1940s existed, I selected these five stories because they revealed how second-generation Chinese Americans created a sense of community. The existing literature on second-generation Chinese of the early 1900s emphasizes mostly middle-class, college-educated informants. My research involves people with varied occupations and levels of educational achievement. This is important because it highlights the different socioeconomic positions within Chinatown. In addition, I chose basketball because it reveals—more than any other sport—analytical nuances about socioeconomic class. Urban youth often become engrossed with basketball because it requires a relatively small amount of resources, space, and training compared to sports such as tennis, baseball, and golf.[49] In 1937, Hsien-Ju Shih conducted a survey of Chinese and white public high school students in

San Francisco in order to look at the social and vocational adjustment of second-generation Chinese. Chinese boys and girls in the study overwhelmingly selected basketball as their favorite social activity.[50]

In America, the 1920s ushered in a "golden era of sports."[51] By the late 1930s and early 1940s, organized sports were an established social institution in American society.[52] During this time, amateur, semiprofessional, and professional basketball flourished across the country among all races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds.[53] For example, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), was founded in 1888 to provide a national infrastructure for sports in the United States. Since 1926, the AAU sponsored a national women's basketball tournament that drew school, club, and business teams from around the country and attracted thousands of spectators.[54] In addition, the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union began in 1925 with twenty-five membership schools; by 1950, seven hundred schools were members. One of the marquee events, the girls' state basketball tournament, drew as many as twenty thousand spectators.[55] Moreover, basketball players competed in collegiate competitions such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), industrial leagues, and recreational leagues.[56]

The Chinese American male and female basketball players in this book shared the general enthusiasm for basketball that took hold in the United States during this time. Many Chinese American basketball teams beyond the ones in this book thrived in San Francisco's Chinatown. In the 1930s and 1940s, a constellation of institutions created a vibrant basketball scene in San Francisco's Chinatown, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) headed by Chingwah Lee and Henry Shue Tom and the Chinatown Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) led by Caroline Chew. Chinese language schools and Chinese student clubs also supported basketball such as the Hip Wo Academy and the Inter-School Chinese Basketball League. In addi-

tion, Chinese associations and faith-based organizations encouraged basketball in Chinatown such as the Cathay Club, the Presbyterian Church of Chinatown, the First Chinese Baptist Mission, and the Chinese Congregational Church. These Chinatown basketball teams played in racially segregated leagues against Chinese American teams from San Francisco and other California cities. Some Chinatown teams competed against non-Chinese teams in city competitions, such as the city-sponsored recreational leagues and the Pacific Association tournament.[57] Several standout Chinatown players, such as Fred Gok and Erline Lowe, broke racial barriers and played on their integrated school basketball teams.[58]

Many fiercely competitive women's and men's basketball teams existed in Chinese American communities across the United States, in Canada, and in China.[59] The *Chinese Digest* reported on Californian Chinese American basketball teams in Watsonville, Salinas, Berkeley, Oakland, Stockton, Monterey, Palo Alto, Bakersfield, Locke, Sacramento, and Vallejo.[60] Basketball also thrived in Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, Vancouver and Victoria, Canada, among other locations.[61] While Chinese in the United States and Canada were playing basketball, Chinese men and women in China were also competing in the sport.[62] For example, men played basketball at the first National Games in 1922, and women basketball players participated in the National Games starting in 1930.[63]

I chose San Francisco because it was the home of one of the most established communities of American-born Chinese during this period. Between 1930 and 1940, Chinese in San Francisco made up over one fifth of the total U.S. population of Chinese, with 16,303 Chinese in the city in 1930 and 17,782 in 1940.[64] The 1930s also saw a change in the status of Chinese Americans inside and outside Chinatown. By 1940, American-born Chinese outnumbered Chinese immigrants for the first time.[65] American-born Chinese grappled with racial barriers in housing, employment, and

social life in the United States, as well as with concerns over the Sino-Japanese War, especially those with families in China.[66] Researchers have often discussed the assimilation of the second, or American-born, generation during this period; some scholarship emphasizes identifying the stages of Americanization, while other research examines whether sports served as evidence of this inevitable social process. Scholarly depictions at the time framed American-born Chinese as rootless and dispossessed. According to social scientists in the 1930s and 1940s such as Elliot Mears and Edward Strong, the "second-generation problem" consumed American-born Chinese. Their immigrant parents were said to be "clinging to Old World culture. They had Americanized identities, and faced racial prejudice.[67] My research shifts the perspective, looking beyond vertical relations between generations to include horizontal relations within a generation. Furthermore, this book joins a burgeoning field of scholarly literature that focuses on the 1930s and 1940s; instead of lumping these decades together within the Exclusion era (the 1800s to the 1940s), these works explore the varied racial, class, and gender constructions about and within Chinatown during the 1930s and 1940s.[68]

Map of the Book

Each chapter of this book focuses on one of five stories and explores a different aspect of how subordinated people use basketball as a medium to engage with society. In order to show the multiple and contradictory uses of sports, each chapter describes the team or player and then discusses how basketball was used to reinforce inequalities. Each chapter then closes with an analysis of how the players built community and asserted themselves through basketball. The first chapter sets the scene with the founding of the Chinese Playground, which the San Francisco Playground Commission viewed as a means for integrating Chinese Ameri-

can youth into dominant American culture. Exploring how empowerment was created through a sense of place, it shows how Chinatown youth crafted a style of playing basketball that asserted their pride as predominately working-class Chinese American girls and boys. Chapter Two moves from playing basketball to considering the popular representation of Chinese American male athletes. Centering on a men's professional team, the Hong Wah Kues, I examine how people create solidarity through media representations of Chinese American masculinity and community support of ethnic male sports icons. Chapter Three emphasizes the physical act of playing basketball, particularly by working-class Chinese American females. In the early 1930s, the Mei Wahs, an amateur women's team, played under restrictive girls' rules designed to steer young women into dominant norms of white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity. However, these mostly working-class Chinese American women developed an aggressive style of play that created a sense of solidarity. Chapters Four and Five discuss the Wongs, Woo and his sister Helen (later Helen Wong Lum), who dominated the basketball scene in the late 1940s. These Chinese American siblings were noteworthy because they received much media coverage inside and outside Chinatown. Woo Wong, the first Chinese American man to play at the famed Madison Square Garden in the late 1940s, shows how the ethnic male sports icon served as an important vehicle to create ethnic visibility in mainstream communities. The chapter on Helen Wong Lum explores how female athletes used sports to gain economic mobility even as newspaper coverage of their athletic exploits trivialized them. Although basketball can provide lifelong enjoyment to anyone, segregated communities attach specific meanings to the sport. Playing basketball in the 1930s and 1940s was a way to experience solidarity, temporarily unfettered by poverty, gender discrimination, and racial segregation. These are the stories of their "hoop dreams."