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The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy toward Exclusion

Yucheng Qin

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This is a striking, original portrait of the Chinese Six Companies (Zhonghua huiguan), or Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the most prominent support organization for Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. As a federation of "native-place associations" *(huiguan)* in California, the Six Companies responded to racist acts and legislation by organizing immigrant communities and employing effective diplomatic strategies against exclusion. Yucheng Qin substantiates recent arguments that Chinese immigrants were resourceful in fighting for their rights and, more importantly, he argues that through the Six Companies they created a political rhetoric and civic agenda that were then officially adopted by Qing court officials, who at first were unprepared for modern diplomacy. Out of necessity, these officials turned to the Six Companies for assistance and would in time adopt the tone and format of its programs during China’s turbulent transition from a tributary system to that of a modern nation-state.

Eventually the Six Companies and Qing diplomats were defeated by a coalition of anti-Chinese interest groups, but their struggle produced a template for modern Chinese nationalism?a political identity that transcends native place?in nineteenth-century America. By redirecting our gaze beyond China to the Six Companies in California and back again, Yucheng Qin redefines the historical significance of the *huiguan.* The ingenuity of his approach lies in his close attention to the transnational experience of the Six Companies, which provides a feasible framework for linking its diplomatic activism with Chinese history as well as the history of Chinese Americans and Sino-American relations.

The Diplomacy of Nationalism enlarges our view of the immigrant experience of Chinese in the U.S. by examining early Sino-American relations through the structure of Six Companies diplomacy as well as providing a better understanding of modern Chinese nationalism.

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