

Shopping at Giant Foods: Chinese American Supermarkets in Northern California. *By Alfred Yee*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. xi + 193 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-295-98304-3.

Reviewed by Yong Chen

Food has been of central significance for ethnic communities, not only culturally but also socioeconomically. Food peddlers have made their presence felt in various ethnic communities at different historical times—from the early-twentieth-century Jewish neighborhoods in New York to the Mexican communities in present-day Los Angeles. Those who managed to accumulate enough resources expanded their operations and opened stores. Alfred Yee's *Shopping at Giant Foods* explores the fascinating and important topic of grocery stores and supermarkets in the context of Chinese American history. As part of a vital economic institution, these stores figured prominently throughout the course of that history, and they continue to stand as unmistakable markers of today's Chinese American communities. Chinese supermarkets have a long, rich, largely unrecorded history. Beginning with the opening of the first stores in northern California early in the twentieth century, Yee's pioneering study tracks their development into the early 1980s. Yee himself is a veteran worker of more than twenty years in the supermarket business.

The first chapter outlines the rise of supermarkets in the United States. Chapter Two sketches the history of Chinese immigration, first to the United States and then to Sacramento and other northern California communities. Most of the book chronicles the three developmental phases of Chinese supermarkets: their beginnings in the early twentieth century; the period of their expansion and prosperity between the end of World War II and the early 1970s; and their decline during the mid-1970s and their disappearance in the early 1980s. Two chapters examine the internal operations of these businesses.

In conducting his research, Yee discovered how difficult it was to obtain archival sources, especially business records. The absence of such records explains in part why Yee's book lacks empirical, especially statistical, specificity. Nonetheless, he has

gathered valuable data, mainly from interviews with Chinese American supermarket owners and operators, enabling him to offer detailed accounts of the experiences of individuals working in this segment of the Chinese ethnic economy that once intersected closely with mainstream society. In 1960, Yee tells us, “Chinese Americans operated 91 of 223 supermarkets and grocery stores in the city of Sacramento” (p. 3).

In selling American groceries, meat, and produce to a non-Chinese clientele, these supermarkets demonstrated striking differences from today’s Chinese food emporiums, such as the Ranch 99 stores. The large size of the earlier stores set them apart from other contemporary Chinese businesses, which tended to remain small. Like them, however, the “grocery stores and supermarkets helped advance the socioeconomic status of Chinese Americans” (p. 12).

Despite the valuable material he has unearthed, Yee fails to locate the history of Chinese supermarkets within a larger context, and the story he tells remains incomplete. A serious oversight is the absence of any discussion of Chinese San Francisco, where grocery stores (an important topic in Yee’s own analysis) have flourished since the mid-nineteenth century. He also inexplicably ignores the new Chinese American supermarkets, funded by immigrant capital, that have mushroomed throughout California and elsewhere since the early 1980s, belying his claim that Chinese American supermarkets vanished from the scene during those years. While most of these new stores are located in Chinese American communities, some have been established in racially mixed areas. And although their merchandise is predominantly Asian, they attract a growing number of non-Chinese customers, allowing them to compete successfully with national chain supermarkets. (Yee counts the expansion of national chains as a primary reason for the demise of Chinese American supermarkets by the early 1980s.) Although the new ethnic markets offer an excellent opportunity to compare the makeup of their clientele, their relation to the mainstream food retail industry, their methods of financing, and their internal operations with the characteristics and methods of their predecessors, Yee fails to do so. Nor does he examine the cultural interaction between the early Chinese food operators and their white customers. He does point out the important fact that the Chinese “favored locating their supermarkets in working-class communities and neighborhoods” because of low operational cost (p. 71). But he does not follow up this

observation by investigating what these locations might have revealed about the intersection of race and class. Yee shows himself to be unfamiliar with recent scholarship in Chinese American history. For example, his uncritical and frequent use of the word “sojourner” to describe Chinese immigrants disregards the long political and ideological history behind this loaded term. He also frequently makes undocumented, inaccurate assertions, such as the claim that beginning in the nineteenth century (p. 11) rural America was more tolerant of the Chinese than were urban dwellers, which ignores the fact that Chinese settlers were driven out of rural areas in the nineteenth century by racial discrimination. He states, without evidence and with no reference to time or place, that laundries were the oldest and most numerous of all Chinese-owned and operated businesses (p. 39). Finally, in a similarly cavalier fashion, he asserts that “Chinese Americans considered operating retail food stores more desirable than operating restaurants, laundries, farms, and other small businesses” (p. 10). This certainly neglects a fundamental fact that restaurants and laundries remained the most important occupations among Chinese Americans. Equally important for members of an ethnic community, entry into a particular occupation is as much determined by personal choices as it is influenced by family resources and by the niche that the ethnic economy has carved out in the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Shopping at Giant Foods offers the first comprehensive account of the Chinese American supermarkets in Sacramento and other northern California communities. It sheds light on an important, yet overlooked, institution of Chinese America and emphasizes the economic importance of food in Chinese American history. However, I wish Yee had taken the time to conduct the research that would have enabled him to explore more fully the broad theoretical and historical significance of this fascinating topic.

Yong Chen is associate professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, where he also serves as the university’s associate dean of graduate studies. He is the author of Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Transpacific Community (2000). His research on Chinese American history, U.S. ethnic food, and higher education, among other topics, has been published in leading academic journals in the United States and China.