

The Story of the Hong Wah Kues

How Inequalities Are Reinforced and Mediated through Sport

IN 1939, SIX CHINESE AMERICAN male basketball players from San Francisco temporarily escaped the Chinatown ghetto and saw the country. For two seasons, this professional Chinese American basketball team, known as the *Hong Wah Kues*, played basketball on the barnstorming circuit around the United States and Canada. Playing approximately one hundred games in eighty days, they competed against local teams and other traveling teams such as the African American Harlem Globetrotters, the white ethnic Bearded Aces and the Native American Sioux Travelers-Warriors.

ketball in San Francisco's Chinatown from 1930 to 1950. The project features five different stories—a playground, a championship amateur women's team, the Hong Wah Kues, and a pair of brother and sister sports icons. While these stories speak to Asian American history in several ways, this work takes the specific experience of Chinatown basketball to explore the broader theoretical question of how inequalities are reinforced and mediated through sport. The research analyzes the links between sport and power by looking at how race and gender are constructed through basketball.

“Connecting an everyday story with an analysis of contested power dynamics is at the core of Asian American Studies and amplifies Pitzer's values of anti-oppression/diversity, academic excellence and social responsibility.”

Described by the newspapers as “the tiny oriental rug cutters,” the gendered and racial spectacle in the media coverage of these traveling men's basketball teams were used to reinforce the subordination of African Americans, Chinese Americans and Native Americans. While the Chinese men were depicted as disembodied and sneaky, the Native American men were reduced to a “noble” male warrior spirit and African American masculinity was framed as overly embodied, hampered by supposed innate laziness. In contrast, white masculinity was portrayed as a balance of body, mind and humanity.

My research draws from stories like the *Hong Wah Kues* and examines bas-

Sport is a fascinating area of study because it is everywhere. From young girls playing street hockey in the suburbs of Pennsylvania to kids kicking a soccer ball on the beach in Bali, sport is a global phenomenon. Since athletics are accessible and omnipresent, they are often seen as free of politics and symbolic of democracy and meritocracy. Supposedly, athletes can leave their race, gender or socio-economic class in the locker room and just compete, free from politics and power dynamics.

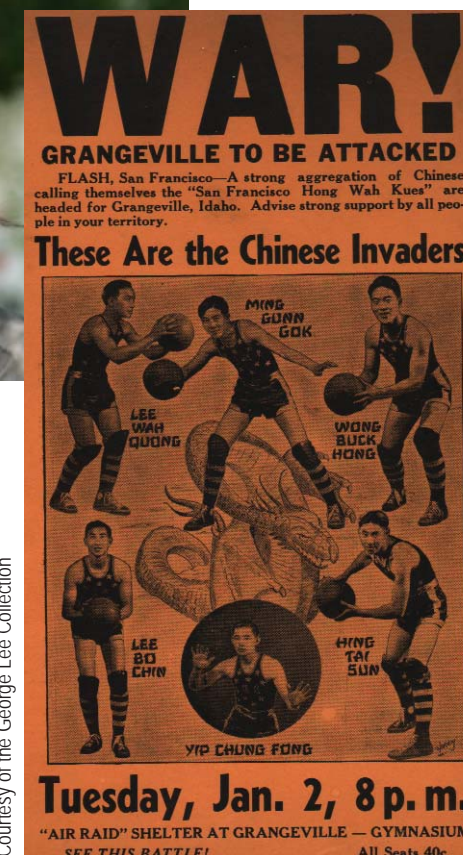
Despite the popular myths about sport, many scholars have shown athletics are deeply embedded with politics. Academics, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Messner and C. L. Cole, have



argued that athletics do not just reflect society but also shape it. My research explores the question of how sport is used to strengthen and contest structural inequalities.

The key aspect to the research is highlighting the relationship between structural domination and individual agency. While the *Hong Wah Kues* were orientalized in the mainstream media, the tour created an opportunity to temporarily sidestep racial barriers and move outside of their segregated existence in Chinatown. By traveling to the Northwest, the Midwest and Canada, the Kues learned how whites viewed Chinese and how Chinese were positioned with respect to highly segregated black-white relations and Native American-white relations. Through this physical mobility, they gained a sort of epistemological mobility into the multi-racial landscape of the United States. In a sense, the same medium that objectified the *Hong Wah Kues* also created space for them to assert themselves as second-generation Chinese American men in the highly segregated late '30s. While playing basketball did not eradicate political and economic inequalities, it was a space to imagine and practice freedom temporarily.

This research began while sorting through a shoebox of photos and letters at my grandmother's house. A tattered postcard sent in the late '30s from one of



Courtesy of the George Lee Collection

the *Hong Wah Kues* to my grandparents was as a point of departure to examine broader themes such as the political function of embodied cultural practices. Students taking Pitzer Asian American Studies classes, such as my sport sociology class, use hidden stories to explore and revise social theories such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation, Chela Sandoval's oppositional consciousness or Antonio Gramsci's hegemony. Connecting an everyday story with an analysis of contested power dynamics is at the core of Asian American Studies and amplifies Pitzer's values of anti-oppression/diversity, academic excellence and social responsibility. ■

—KATHLEEN S. YEP, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND SOCIOLOGY

Q&A with Wesley Wu '94

Why did you choose to major in Asian American Studies?

The early '90s were an exciting time for Asian American Studies at The Claremont Colleges. Professors Jack Ling and Linus Yamane were teaching The Asian American Experience, the first Asian American Studies course at the 5Cs in about a decade. Increasing numbers of faculty with some degree of interest in Asian American Studies were being recruited into various departments, and the opening of the Asian American Resource Center at Pomona College positively contributed to the increasing need to include Asian American Studies as a field of study. At that time, nobody had majored in Asian American Studies on any of the five colleges (that I knew of), and there was no better place to do it than Pitzer. Assembling twelve courses and taking every Asian American Studies course offered not only gave the field representation from the student side, but proved that it was indeed possible and viable.

Describe your current occupation and how what you learned as an Asian American Studies major helped you achieve success.

I am currently a human resources consultant with Towers Perrin. I believe a Pitzer liberal arts education provided me with a broad framework with which to face both life and my career. Asian American Studies at Pitzer gave me the ability to redefine myself—I became informed about how culture and ethnicity are shaped. Growing up, my brother and I were a close approximation of the model minority, and we operated within that stereotyped framework. Pitzer was the beginning of my personal redefinition, but the process of my personal defining took many more years. The knowledge I gained from Asian American Studies gave me the wherewithal to undergo a reshaping of my professional self.

What was your most memorable course in Asian American Studies?

I'll never forget Joe Parker sending me into my first class: The Other Speaks Back with Dorinne Kondo at Pomona. My first exposure to Asian American Studies was a whirlwind of ethnic and cultural politics mixed with post-structuralist theory barely discernable as English. To say I was in over my head was a gross understatement. Somehow, I got through it with a basis for the rest of my learnings and a zeal to continue on. Learning that there is an underlying politic that surrounds and shapes our experience as Asian Americans cemented my desire to pursue Asian American Studies as a major, and I began my journey in clarifying who we are and where I fit. ■