New Scholarship Reclams the Place of Chinese People in Oregon History

Portland, OR — January 20, 2022 — In partnership with the Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project and guided by co-guest editors Jennifer Fang and Chelsea Rose, the Oregon Historical Society’s scholarly journal, the Oregon Historical Quarterly (OHQ), recently published the Winter 2021 “Chinese Diaspora in Oregon” special issue, which makes visible the long, complex, and geographically diverse history of Chinese Oregonians.

The Oregon Historical Society has made available for free online the introduction to the special issue, “Erasure and Reclamation: Centering Diasporic Chinese Populations in Oregon History,” written by Jennifer Fang. Readers can also access the introduction translated into Chinese, 抹杀和复原：聚焦俄勒冈史上的离散华人群体.

Focused on the period beginning in 1850 and continuing through the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, this heavily illustrated special issue offers both new research and new conclusions about the history of Chinese people in Oregon — a subject that has been erased in Oregon’s public memory over the course of 200 years. In her introduction, Fang emphasizes the importance of this publication:

*The works in this special issue compellingly demonstrate that reclaiming the place of Chinese people paves the way for nothing less than a new understanding of Oregon history.*

The special issue was over two years in the making and draws on the expertise of twenty authors, including historians, archaeologists, genealogists, and community knowledge-holders, who help readers better understand this part of Oregon’s past. Maps, images, and primary documents throughout the issue help to document complex transpacific networks and how early Chinese communities were integral to the shaping of Oregon. These communities existed in every corner of Oregon, in rural and urban areas, and
thrived while navigating complex governmental, social, and cultural systems that were often unwelcoming and oppressive.

The “Chinese Diaspora in Oregon” issue of OHQ begins with the findings of archaeological investigations that document the work, skills, and living conditions of Chinese miners in eastern Oregon and Chinese laborers in southern Oregon. Through these compelling histories, readers learn about highly skilled kongsi miners, who brought with them to Oregon in the 1860s over a hundred years of experience moving people, supplies, and gold over great distances in foreign lands. Authors also document the ways Chinese laborers accessed, lived, and worked at the remote Buck Rock Tunnel site, an abandoned tunnel on the Oregon & California Railroad’s Siskiyou Line. They explore early Chinese communities in Salem and Eugene that have been erased from the physical landscape and, until recent years, from public memory. A history comic illustrates the imagined life of a Chinese cowboy who lived and worked in Grant County and dispels misconceptions that often permeate the history of Chinese pioneers in America.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, building on the Page Act of 1876, dominated the experiences of many Chinese people and divided the Chinese community into two distinct classes: laborers and a privileged class that included merchants. Through the lives of Chinese merchants in Ashland, Salem, Eugene, Portland, and The Dalles, readers learn about the critical role merchants served in Chinese communities — as business owners and leaders who used their social mobility to resist and persist throughout history. The scrutiny and complicated documentation process that the U.S. government imposed during the Exclusion Era — on both American-born citizens and Chinese nationals — is documented in two articles that explore Chinese Exclusion Act case files held by the National Archives and Records Administration. Concluding the special issue is an invaluable guide on researching Chinese ancestry. These articles are all launching points for researchers, especially Chinese and Chinese Americans, to learn about and document their families’ diverse histories and continue the important work of reclaiming the place of Chinese people in Oregon history.

Published continuously since 1900, OHQ brings well-researched, well-written history about Oregon and the Pacific Northwest to both scholars and general readers. OHQ is one of the largest state historical society journals in the United States and is a recognized and respected source for the history of the Pacific Northwest region. The Winter 2021 “Chinese Diaspora in Oregon” special issue and many back issues of the Oregon Historical Quarterly are available for purchase through the Oregon Historical Society’s Museum Store for $10, and a subscription to OHQ is a benefit of Oregon Historical Society membership.
About the Oregon Historical Society

For more than a century, the Oregon Historical Society has served as the state’s collective memory, preserving a vast collection of artifacts, photographs, maps, manuscript materials, books, films, and oral histories. Our research library, museum, digital platforms & website (www.ohs.org), educational programming, and historical journal make Oregon’s history open and accessible to all. We exist because history is powerful, and because a history as deep and rich as Oregon's cannot be contained within a single story or point of view.