

Community Archives as Agency: Intersectionality as a Framework to Document Chinese American Experiences in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. has a long history of anti-immigrant and anti-Asian. Asian Americans strive for agency in defining their identities. Intertwined with their history of exclusion is the absence and misrepresentation of Asian Americans in mainstream archives.

In this dissertation, I first explore Chinese Americans' understanding of their identity and its reflection of social inequality. Then, I investigate what they want to preserve to document their history to counter injustice. Lastly, I examine how Chinese Americans want to use community archives to enhance their agency and fight against social injustice.

I use interviews, workshops, and ethnographic methods to collect conversations with 17 participants who self-identify as Chinese descendants in the U.S. I use a thematic approach to analyze the conversations.

My dissertation finds that participants' racial and ethnic identities shape their experiences of discrimination, pressure to assimilate to White society, a lack of belonging, and difficulty fitting into the broader Asian American Pacific Islander group. Furthermore, gender identity influences their experiences. For example, Chinese American women often face social expectations to prioritize family over themselves. Alongside unjust experiences, community members also share lived experiences of resilience, joy, and achievements. My dissertation proposes intersectionality as a framework to understand the representational value of community archives. The intersectionality framework asserts, "it is not enough to simply 'add race and stir'" (Smooth, 2013).

My dissertation finds that participants challenge a thing-oriented approach that prioritizes preservation alone. Instead, they prefer an engagement-oriented approach that uses archives to transform counter-stories into agency, specifically into what Yosso (2005) calls cultural wealth, such as aspirational and social capital.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Archives; Social justice; Information needs; Community engagement; Collections development.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Community archives; Social justice; Digital preservation; Community engagement; Intersectionality.

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