Introduction

This is the transnational story of how the Chinese Six Companies in California responded to racist challenges by organizing its own community, developing modern nationalism, and teaching the Qing dynasty how modern nationalism should be pursued diplomatically. The Six Companies, or the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, was the most important popular Chinese organization in the United States in the nineteenth century. It began as huiguan, or native-place associations, long-standing institutions found everywhere the Chinese migrated both inside China and abroad. During the anti-Chinese movement in the United States, the Six Companies stepped into the void created by the slow and ineffective responses from the Qing government. In the process of adopting new policies and strategies to counter racism, the Six Companies’ native-place sentiments evolved into modern nationalism. Unprepared for the practice of modern national diplomacy, the Qing legation turned to the Six Companies for help, and then took over their techniques and arguments. Thus the Six Companies was a major influence in generating the nationalist turn of China’s approach to foreign relation in the nineteenth century. This study therefore will show how the early history of Sino-American relations looks if examined in the framework of Six Companies diplomacy, and how, in such a framework, modern Chinese nationalism may be better understood.

I focus on the period before the 1906 San Francisco earthquake for three reasons. First, this was when the Six Companies handled all problems affecting all the Chinese in America, and so it was the time when the organization flourished. Second, it was in the 1870s that the United States began to limit Chinese laborers, a process that reached its zenith in 1904 when Congress made Chinese exclusion indefinite. Only after forty more years, during World War II, would Congress reconsider this issue. Third, this was the most important transition period in the history of China’s foreign relations. Before the Opium Wars (the Opium War from 1839–1842 and the Arrow War from 1856–1860),
China's foreign affairs had been conducted through its tributary system, and the ruling dynasty recognized no state as its equal. The establishment of the Zongli Yamen (Office for the Management of the Business of All Foreign Countries) in 1861, and the legations sent to the capitals of the Treaty Powers in the 1870s and 1880s, created a new situation. The transnational experience of the Six Companies in the nineteenth century, when it was the defender of all Chinese in the United States against exclusion, actually provides an opportunity to examine the influence of the huiguan on China's policy toward the United States and on China's transition from the tribute system to modern diplomacy.

**Transnationalism and the Chinese Six Companies**

The past few decades have witnessed an upsurge of transnational history, with more and more historians trying to explain historical phenomena in greater than single national frameworks. In such cross-national and inter-regional studies, national and regional borders become less essential, as do the boundaries between foreign and domestic affairs. This growing awareness of the linkages between the central and the margin as well as foreign and domestic affairs has encouraged historians to produce many groundbreaking works. Transnational history, which will “be pursued by historians of all nations,” is now ascendant.¹

Political scientists played a vanguard role in this dramatic change in American scholarship.² Lyman White, for example, emphasized in 1951 that the field of international relations needed to appreciate the role of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in pursuing cross-national agendas.³ His initiative concerning the new forces that were shaping the world met with enthusiastic approval from such important political scientists and historians as J. J. Lederer, James Field, Kjell Skjelsbaek, Johan Galtung, Harold Jacobson, Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, Paul Diehl, Margaret Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, Jeremei Suri, and Akira Iriye.⁴

The surge of transnationalism also spread to the fields of Chinese history and Chinese-American studies. The publication of Prasenjit Duara’s “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900–1945,” Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonni’s Ungrounded Empires, and Flexible Citizenship (1999), of which Chinese transnationality is the primary subject, mark a breakthrough in the historiography of the fields.⁵ Following their footsteps, a number of historians have painted a historical picture of how Chinese transnationalism developed across the Pacific Rim. Titles such as Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882–1943, Chinese San Francisco 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community, and Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and
Ideas between China and America during the Exclusion Era suggest that Chinese American history may be understood in the framework of transnational connections—Chinese immigrants maintained various kinds of ties to China at the same time that they were incorporated into the United States.6

Good as these works are in understanding Chinese immigration and China, they are also problematic when we consider the Six Companies, one of the oldest and most important Chinese INGOs. I was struck by the sporadic and unsystematic scholarly attention this important organization received. Even such a standard history of modern China as Jonathan Spence’s The Search for Modern China includes only two sentences on the Six Companies.7 Michael Hunt’s The Making of a Special Relationship, a foundational work in the field of Sino-American relations, devotes only two paragraphs to it, and David Anderson’s standard monograph, Imperialism and Idealism, does not mention it at all.8 General syntheses on Asian Americans, such as Asian America by Roger Daniels, Strangers from a Different Shore by Ronald Takaki, and Asian Americans by Sucheng Chan, present just odd scraps of information about the Six Companies.9 Authors of single-subject monographs on Chinese American history have also been very slow to realize the importance of the Six Companies, let alone make it a focus in their studies.10

The only exception is Him Mark Lai, a pioneer of Chinese American historical studies, who published “Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/Huiguan System” in 1987, later republished in his Becoming Chinese American.11 Sucheng Chan regards this as “the best study of the Six Companies,”12 and its substantially advanced research provides a more scholarly picture of the organization. Nevertheless, the nature, activities, and influence of the “Chinese American spokesman” in the anti-Chinese movement are so rich and colorful that a single chapter is simply not enough.

Despite its importance as the representative for all the Chinese in the United States in the late nineteenth century, the Six Companies has been a rarity for about 150 years in the narrative that chronicles modern China, as well as in the narrative that chronicles Chinese Americans.13 Although the influence and leadership of the Six Companies declined in the twentieth century, it did not disappear; nor did it become unimportant in Chinese politics and foreign relations, as the following evidence clearly demonstrates.

The Six Companies sent a petition to Prince Tao and the Qing court at the beginning of the twentieth century, a petition published in Xinning magazine.14 The central argument of the petition was that it was essential to have a national assembly and a constitution to meet the challenges of the national crisis. The historical facts indicated that any country with a constitution was likely to develop vigorously, while those without one were ruined. With a constitution,
China would not be subjugated, and overseas Chinese would not be reduced to being the people of a conquered nation. The petition called attention to the fact that in the nineteenth century the imperialist powers had repeatedly forced China to cede territory and pay indemnities, and it demanded immediate action. Otherwise, the petition said, in less than ten years China might be conquered and divided up.15

In 1909, after learning of the border talks between China and Portugal, the Six Companies cabled both Governor Yuan of Guangdong and the Qing Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Never make a concession; fight for every inch of land.”16 On February 22, 1915, after Japan presented the twenty-one demands that would have turned China into a virtual Japanese colony, the Six Companies declared a boycott on Japanese-American services.17 Also in September 1915, the Six Companies, on behalf of all Chinese in the United States, wrote to President Woodrow Wilson asking him to advise Chinese President Yuan Shikai not to restore monarchism in China.18 When in 1919 the Paris Peace Conference decided to transfer Germany’s sphere of influence to Japan, the Six Companies cabled the conference and the Chinese legation in Paris, rejecting the decision.19 And on September 29, 1972, the Six Companies, together with other Chinese associations all over the world, demanded that the United Nations restore the lawful rights of the Republic of China.20

Nevertheless, as always the Six Companies remained almost invisible to writers in both the Chinese-speaking and the English-speaking worlds. In the words of William Speer in 1868 and Shih-shan Henry Tsai in 1983, the Six Companies “have been a continual puzzle to Americans.”21 As Tony Platt commented in 2007 concerning Jean Pfaelzer’s Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans: “The core of the book is thoroughly and convincingly documented. Its subjects are fully realized, with the exception of the Six Companies, which remain something of a cipher.”22 While the political significance of the Six Companies in the anti-Chinese movement has not been properly appreciated, its function in the development of modern China has been so thoroughly neglected and its influence on China’s policy toward the United States in the nineteenth century so ignored that I have no hesitation in saying that to disregard the Six Companies is to misread the histories of China, Sino-American relations, and Chinese Americans in the nineteenth century.

One problem contributing to the invisibility of the Six Companies is the unavailability of documents for the nineteenth century in its archives. They may have been all lost in the great earthquake of 1906 and the subsequent fires, which lasted in Chinatown for “three or four days and nights”; all buildings in Chinatown were burnt to “flying ashes and scorched earth.”23 Yet docu-
ments about the Six Companies’ resistance to the anti-Chinese movement in this period do exist elsewhere. The Six Companies sought to challenge the discrimination they faced by publishing articles in American newspapers and journals, by sending letters and petitions to the American and Chinese governments, by filing lawsuits in the American courts, and by reforming their own society. A substantial record of this resistance may be found in American newspapers, periodicals, federal records, the Chinese press, and Chinese governmental records. By making an exhaustive search for these materials, this study has rescued an important part of the Six Companies’ history from permanent oblivion and has “rebuilt” its nineteenth-century archives.

Therefore this study is a criticism of much of the literature on Chinese transnationalism which I believe neglects and underestimates the significance of the Six Companies. Indeed we need to re-envision Chinese and Chinese-American history to include and highlight the role of the Six Companies, and to do so in a broad and transnational way. To borrow the words of Madeline Hsu, in order to bridge “historically related but as yet critically unlinked fields of Asian American and Asian Studies,” I argue that the transnational experience of the Six Companies provides a good framework for linking one of the most impressive developments of Chinese history and Chinese-American history.

**Culturalism-to-Nationalism, Native Place, and the Six Companies**

In addition to inserting the Six Companies into the master narratives of Chinese and Chinese-American history, this study offers a focused critique of the culturalism-to-nationalism thesis and better our understanding of Chinese nationalism and Sino-American relations in the nineteenth century. Because the current culturalism-to-nationalism thesis is generally accepted as the authoritative interpretation for China’s approach to foreign relations, a brief introduction is necessary. In *Liang Chi-ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China*, Joseph Levenson put forward the thesis and immediately won widespread acclaim. Prior to the twentieth century, James Harrison affirmed that the “traditional Chinese self-image” was generally “defined as ‘culturalism,’ based on a common historical heritage and acceptance of shared beliefs,” namely, Confucianism, rather than “nationalism, based on the modern concept of the nation-state.” Because of their overwhelming sense of cultural superiority, the Chinese felt it beneath their dignity to adopt foreign ways of thinking or to recognize any country as their equal. “In the eyes of most of the emperor’s subjects the empire was not a country but the country, not a culture but culture itself.” Therefore, “imperial China was not a nation-state” and was “totally devoid of national consciousness.” Though “barbarians,” such as Mongols and Manchus, had invaded
China several times before the Opium War, and taken the reins of power, they were all “conquered” by Chinese culture. In the nineteenth century, however, the Western powers and Japan not only defeated China militarily but also posed a real threat to Chinese culture. China suddenly realized that it became “a semi-colonized land in a Eurocentric world” rather than the center of the world any more. In order to save China, Chinese intellectuals rejected culturalism and summoned the Western concept of nationalism “as a new basis for China’s defense and regeneration,” so China might achieve equality with the other great powers that denied it this status. This great change happened in the late Qing and early Republican period, principally the years between 1895 and 1919, as “the first emergence of modern Chinese nationalism” and a transition from the China-centric universalism to nationalism. This transition, Levenson tells us, was the “biggest change in the Chinese three thousand years’ history.” And Zhao asserts that “Zhonghua minzu (the Chinese nation) as a modern concept was adopted from the writings of Meiji Japan and was associated with nationalistic writings warning the Chinese people of the danger of annihilation under Western invasion at the turn of the twentieth century.”

The institutional expression of Chinese culturalism, the tribute system that dominated the Chinese world order for over two thousand years, is the subject that requires focus here. An expression of Chinese cultural self-focus intended to regulate Chinese foreign relations, it originated in the Shang dynasty (fifteenth- to eleventh-century BCE). It took shape in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), after which it was exercised successfully at times when China was strong and “flexibly” when China was weak, reaching its peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911); it declined after the Opium War. In the hierarchical tribute system, China was the “Middle Kingdom,” meaning the center of the earth. The Chinese emperor, as the “Son of Heaven,” was legitimized by the Mandate of Heaven to rule all-under-heaven. Never seeing other entities as equals and never exchanging any permanent diplomatic envoys with other countries, all Chinese emperors demanded submission under the tribute system from foreigners whom they regarded as “barbarians.” Other countries, needing trade with Chinese, sent missions to China to submit to the sovereignty of the Son of Heaven. Before the Chinese emperor, members of foreign missions had to perform ceremonies of “surrender.” Known as kowtow, this surrender took the ritual form of three separate kneelings, each kneeling followed by three separate knockings of the head on the floor. The whole process was organized by the verbal commands of a lowly ceremonial usher: “Kneel!” “Fall prostrate!” “Rise to your knees!” “Fall prostrate!” The ceremony of the full kowtow was generally administered by the Reception Department of the...
Board of Ceremonies, but during the Qing dynasty a new agency, Li Fan Yuan (the Court of Colonial Affairs), was also established to deal with tributary states from the north and west.35

All tributary states were dependent states of China. After the rite of kowtow, a certificate that recognized the tributary ruler's status, along with a noble rank and an imperial seal, were granted to him; all documents and other communications between these dependents and the emperor's court were dated by the Chinese dynastic reign-title and calendar.36 In addition, the authority and superiority of China was perpetuated by China's appointment of new kings in tributary countries. Whenever a new king of a tributary state was to be enthroned, he was required to send a tributary mission to obtain the imperial patent of appointment.37

Many people have suggested that tribute was a cloak for trade because for "barbarians" the profits were worth the annoyances. They are doubtless right in part, but some of the tributary kings sincerely acknowledged their inferior status. The following proclamation of a king of Vietnam to his people is just one of many examples I have encountered: “I heard that two heroes cannot appear together, that two sages cannot exist in the same generation. The Han (Chinese) emperor is the sagacious Son of Heaven. Henceforth I shall suppress my own imperial edicts, imperial cart, and the [imperial] banner of the left command.”38

The extension of authority over foreign entities worked to reinforce “the imperial prestige within China proper.” Seeing the rest of mankind acknowledge the rule of the Chinese emperor, Chinese support for the ruler's Mandate of Heaven increased and helped confirm the emperor's claim to rule China.39 Hence, the nature of the tributary system is not difficult to see. China developed what may be called premodern diplomatic imperialism—a foreign policy of extending authority over foreign entities as a means of maintaining the Chinese empire itself.

As good as the culturalism-to-nationalism thesis is for understanding China, it has one important problem. So much emphasis placed on China-centric universalism obscures the fact that loyalty to one's native place also defined the Chinese self-image before the twentieth century. A critical component of personal identity in traditional China, a person's native-place identity, and even that of his descendants, did not change along with their places of residence. Chinese immigrants were by no means uprooted; they would return to their native places regularly on any important occasion and finally upon death. “The concept of native place was a critical component of personal identity in traditional China, and geographic origin was generally the first matter of inquiring
among strangers, the first characteristic recorded about a person (after name and pseudonyms), and the first fact to be ascertained regarding individuals coming before the law,” explains Bryna Goodman.40 These patterns of belief and practice stimulated the cultivation of linkages among fellow-countrymen traveling beyond the native place and promoted the establishment of huiguan (sometimes called “guilds” in English)—the institutional expression of native-place sentiment—associations of people from the same places who were staying in distant cities.41

The Wuhu huiguan, the first such organization in China, was a hostelry established in the early sixteenth century in Beijing for students from the Wuhu district who were preparing themselves for the imperial examinations.42 In the Chinese cities of Ming and Qing (1368–1911), huiguan were very popular and the result of migration. In Sichuan province, for example, there were seven Jiangxi huiguan, seven Shanxi huiguan, eight Huguang huiguan, one Fujian huiguan, and eight Guangdong huiguan.43 The constitution of the Ningbo huiguan at Wenzhou confirms this view: “huiguan were first established at the metropolis by mandarins among compatriots or fellow provincials for mutual aid and protection. . . . Later merchants formed guilds like those of the mandarinate, and now they exist in every province.”44 Like the first huiguan, those established by merchants usually erected their own buildings, which were “truly palatial, representing the highest specimens of Chinese architecture.”45

To deal with matters of common concern, some huiguan worked together and formed confederacies. As a case in point, for much of the nineteenth century the eight most important huiguan at Chongqing acted in a confederation known as the “Eight Provinces huiguan.”46 The example is not isolated. In a medium-sized commercial city near the Hunan-Guizhou border, an umbrella organization of ten major huiguan was formed and became the principal vehicle of public-welfare activism after the 1860s.47

Huiguan had already been fused into Qing administration system for maintaining public order in the eighteenth century.48 Officials and merchants who were from the same native places and staying in distant cities cooperated in huiguan affairs—some huiguan adopted a “[co-district] official management with merchant capital” makeup; some reported to the local government and asked to be put under its protection; and others were established by co-district officials’ financial or material assistance. Huiguan confederations especially had a close relationship with the government. In the 1840s, for example, the Chongqing Eight Provinces huiguan’s arbitration and decision-making power was recognized by the local authorities, and eventually it came to exercise a wide range of governing powers over the city as a whole. When Shi Dakai’s Taiping forces attacked the city, the Eight Provinces huiguan assumed the authority of central
government. After the immediate threat receded, even though its influence was not as great as before, the Eight Provinces huiguan continued for the rest of the century to play a primary role in providing local leadership. By this time the huiguan in China were not simply organizations of merchant interests, but they also exercised political power.

During the Ming and Qing periods, Chinese emigrants brought this custom to racially and culturally different lands. Malaysia and Singapore are filled with examples. Jiaying huiguan, founded in 1801, was one of the earliest native-place associations in Singapore, comprising Hakkas from Mei county, Jiaoling, Xinning, Wuhua, and Pingyuan of Guangdong province. In addition, Singapore's Hakka from ten counties under Huizhou—namely, Huiyang, Boluo, Longchuan, Heyuan, Zijin, Haifeng, Heping, Lianping, and Xinfeng—were embraced by the Huizhou huiguan established in 1805. Indeed, it was a Chinese custom that in every big commercial city the merchants and other temporary residents from other provinces banded together in the form of huiguan. Once established, this custom developed a momentum of its own and was carried abroad in the hearts and minds of Chinese emigrants.

The functions of these popular organizations were diverse. Huiguan emphasized the solidarity of homeland ties. For example, the objective of the Shan-shan huiguan in Hankou of China was “to promote friendly relations, to talk about the happiness of the native place, and to create homeland atmosphere in an alien land.” In addition, an inscription on a stele records, “We established huiguan to promote the solidarity of homeland ties because it is easy for merchants and officials in an alien city to dissolve and become estranged.”

Magnanimous acts for the benefit of individual members was another feature. Hosea Morse remarks that one of the most important duties of the huiguan was to provide for “the suitable burial of the dead . . . in order that their bones may lie in ground which is substitute for their native soil.” It also took their poor members’ difficulties into account and provided coffins, “either free or at reduced cost,” and had a mortuary for the coffined bodies of the wealthier members so that their bones might be someday taken back for burial in their ancestral homeland.

Huiguan generally provided its members a place for worship in its own huiguan-house; there they could offer sacrifices to the gods or the spirits of the dead. Chinese merchants were anxious to take advantage of this service in case misfortune struck them. The huiguan building usually had “an open courtyard for the generality, galleries on both sides for privileged spectators, the stage at one end and the altar at the other.” The altars were dedicated to minor gods, to the Goddess of Mercy, to canonized emperors, to canonized worthies, or to other famous natives of the home province.
Huiguan also had judicial power over its members. For instance, the constitution of the Huguang huiguan at Wuzhou indicated that if conflicts arose between members, the president would act as mediator. Any members who ventured to appeal first to a court of law without authorization would be fined. The constitution of the Canton huiguan at Wuzhou further provided that before disputes were laid in front of the huiguan, the complainants should first pay the committee 200 coppers for the expenses of a meeting. If the decision of the advisory committee was not acceptable, the complainants then could make an appeal to the courts.56

Huiguan were especially important for mediating debt disputes. One huiguan constitution stipulated that if members had disputes about money matters with each other, they should submit their cases to arbitration at a huiguan meeting for a satisfactory settlement of the dispute. Appeal might be made to official courts if it proved impossible to arrive at an understanding within the huiguan. If the complainant went to the official judiciary directly, without first referring to the huiguan, he would be subject to a public reprimand, and any future case he might present for the opinion of the huiguan would be dismissed without a hearing.57

Huiguan usually supported their members’ interests against nonmembers and against outside prejudices. The Ningbo huiguan at Wenzhou stated in its preamble that Ningboese who could not find employment as local agriculturists usually resorted to other places for trade. “Here at Wenzhou we find ourselves isolated; mountains and sea separate us from Ningbo, and when in trade we excite envy on the part of Wenzhouese and suffer insult and injury, we have no adequate redress.” It continued: “It is this which imposes on us the duty of establishing a huiguan.”58 Similarly, the Beihai huiguan, a district organization of Cantonese established at Beihai, stated in its charter: The Beihai people are “very covetous” and “licentious.” Showing little respect for the laws, they rob and steal from “our merchants.” When disputes occur “between our trades and local merchants,” there is “no way of dealing with the latter.” It is hoped, the charter stated, that the establishment of huiguan would “lead to uniformity of action and unanimity of feeling among our members” to “secure ourselves against gradual degeneration” and “to oppose wrong, unscrupulous merchants and bad characters.”59

Another important feature of the huiguan is that they were all-inclusive and due-collecting associations. Their structures were similar. All natives of the home district were eligible for membership and were required to register if they wished to get help in the alien place.60 In order to maintain the organization and promote its interests, its members needed to contribute funds. In the
rules of the Hanyang huiguan at Yichang, for example, the members were asked to contribute 0.3 percent on their trade, and temporary visitors from the home district were to be assessed 3 percent on the value of their trade.\textsuperscript{61}

Leaders of huiguan were elected. There were usually a general manager and an assistant manager, elected annually, who received salaries, ranging from as little as $6 to as much as $1,000. Under the managers was an advisory committee, from three to twelve in number, also elected annually. “The most important officer of the club [huiguan] is the permanent secretary, a salaried scholar of literary rank.”\textsuperscript{62}

Scholars in the field of Chinese history are becoming aware of the importance of the huiguan for understanding late imperial China. Some studies include: Ho Ping-ti’s study, Zhongguo huiguan shilun (On Chinese huiguan) (1966); William Rowe’s Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889 (1984) and Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895 (1989); Bryna Goodman’s Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853–1937 (1995); and Wang Rigen’s Xiangtu zhilian: Mingqing huiguan yu shehui bianqian (The chain of native places: Huiguan and social development in Ming and Qing) (1996). These studies have brought out an important fact that there was an expanding sphere of collective but extragovernmental activism among huiguan throughout nineteenth-century China and that huiguan played an important role in the social and political development in late imperial China. Goodman further suggests that huiguan in Shanghai were actively involved in nationalist social mobilization and “may modify our general understanding of nationalism and more precisely describe the ways in which nationalism developed and worked in a Chinese context.”\textsuperscript{63}

Although I wholeheartedly agree with these arguments, the scholarship as a whole appears incomplete when the Six Companies in the United States is taken into account. Since current huiguan scholarship focuses on huiguan within China’s territory and takes no note of the Six Companies, this obviously obscures the facts that huiguan experience is transnational and the Six Companies may have been the biggest and most important huiguan in all huiguan history.\textsuperscript{64}

The Six Companies’ activism in diplomacy is perhaps one of the most spectacular developments in modern Chinese history, although it has received little attention. By moving our historical gaze beyond China to the Six Companies in the United States and back again, this study may redefine and enlarge the significance of the huiguan in the making of modern China. By tracing how the two traditional Chinese identities, Chinese culturalism and attachment to
native place, were transformed into modern nationalism in nineteenth-century America, this study will argue that however influential the transition from culturalism to nationalism, the transition from attachment to native place to nationalism was equally important. In addition, this study argues that the first emergence of modern Chinese nationalism occurred in the nineteenth century in the United States.