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## Book Review

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# *The War That Helped Bring Law and Order to Los Angeles*

By Scott Zesch

The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871. London: Oxford University Press, 2012.

The greatest strength of Scott Zesch's, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871*, is his detailed description of the factors that led to a little-known massacre of a small Chinatown community in Los Angeles and his emphasis on the role of the criminal justice system in the investigation, prosecution, and court trial in its aftermath. In the early evening of October 24, 1871, hundreds of rioters surrounded Chinatown, which was located in the area of Los Angeles called Calle de los Negros (a lane of about five hundred feet from the intersection of Arcadia and Los Angeles Streets which is now the southeast corner of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument). Enraged by the murder of a local townsman, Robert Thompson, the angry throng of Angelenos – Whites and Latinos – were held back by a handful of policemen.

An hour earlier, gunfire was heard in the small neighborhood of Chinatown, which numbered <200 residents. Thompson, the proprietor of a local saloon, was drawn outside by the commotion. He found a young teenager, Juan José Mendibles, shot in the right leg, and Officer Jésus Bilderrain, the first officer to respond, standing in the street, his shirt bloodstained from wounds. Officers rushed to assist Bilderrain only to be shot at by several Chinese firing indiscriminately as they made their escape. In the mayhem, Thompson was shot above the heart while trying to assist the officers. He staggered into the street and gasped to a local townsman his final words, "I'm killed."

Word of Thompson's murder and the Chinese shooting at police officers spread quickly. Tensions had been mounting for the past year regarding numerous indiscretions by the Chinese. Inflamed by Los Angeles newspaper stories about Chinese corruption, they erupted into an all out riot. The rioters were unaware that the Chinese perpetrators of the initial gunfight and murder of Thompson had long made their escape. Only the residents remained, trapped by a bloodthirsty mob. The police, unable to fend off the Chinese shooters, now found themselves ill-equipped and under-manned to confront an angry gang of Angelenos numbering close to 500 by nightfall.

As the hours passed, the mob got the better of the police officers, and at 8:45 p.m., they burst into Chinatown, grabbing Chinese from their homes and shops and dragging them into the streets. Frightened and wailing in terror, the captive Chinese were punched and pummeled to the ground and dragged off by their queues. By 9:20 p.m., Chinatown was sacked and the violence had run its course (p. 148), and the bodies of dead Chinese hung high in the streets of Calle de Los Negros.

By the next morning, 15 Chinese had died by hanging, and three were shot to death (p. 150). Journalists who covered the massacre noted that the faces and bodies were “ghastly and distorted,” “besmeared with blood, and pierced with bullets.” Many of those who were lynched still had the ropes tightly affixed around their necks. Four victims had their queues cut off, and two victims’ bodies were riddled with bullets (p. 151). In a population of 200, one in 10 Chinese had been murdered, and everyone in the small community was directly affected (p. 152).

The tragedy of the massacre was how it started and was allowed to continue. In a town where vigilance committees were a despised yet necessary practice in the face of an incompetent and dishonest justice system, the murderous rampage on October 24, 1871 became what historian Victor Jew called a “flashpoint” for changes in the system of governance and a pretext for the modernization of Los Angeles. Zesch identifies the critical event but tells us that what ended the practice of vigilance committees was not the event itself, but the work of a meticulous, dedicated cadre of judges, police officers, and investigators who arrested and prosecuted those responsible for the murders, adhered to the rule of law, and in some cases defied anti-Chinese laws to favor justice. Zesch depicts the events and the cooperation of politicians, business interests, and journalists during the delicate period following the massacre as a major step toward modern policing and governance for Los Angeles.

An historian, Zesch relies on several important resources and archives: the consultation with and resources of historian, Him Mark Lai, whose vast collection of research materials is now housed in the Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley; the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California; court records of early Los Angeles at the Huntington Library; and California newspapers of the era. By focusing on the criminal justice system, Zesch affirms the criminal justice system’s important social and political role in determining the identity and guilt of those responsible for the mayhem and murder; in ascertaining the truth of that night; and most importantly, in restoring the integrity of the rule of law.

His account of the legal investigation and attention to the details of its process add a critical dimension to his study of the massacre, which is how the instruments of law can be used to reveal and reconcile truth and bring justice to the victims. In the aftermath of the massacre, the courts in Los Angeles played

an unusual role for the Chinese in making the truth known and ensuring that justice was served (pp. 209–210) despite burgeoning anti-Chinese sentiment in southern California and the passage of California state laws that discriminated against Chinese. For example, Zesch recounts the case of Ah Mouie who won a civil suit against a well-known sheriff even though California law prevented her from testifying against White men. He recounts a decision by Judge Widney, who ruled that anti-Chinese prejudice was a relevant consideration in selecting jurors. Widney, who would later found the University of Southern California, reminded Angelenos that the Chinese were “human beings and not filthy animals” as local newspapers portrayed them (p. 210).

The book is organized into two parts. The first five chapters set the historical stage by describing Los Angeles from the 1850s to the 1870s. At the time, San Francisco was the major urban and commercial center of California. With a population estimated at 150,000, it was the tenth largest city in the US, while Los Angeles was a town with fewer than 6000 residents. It was under-developed, lacked sanitation or urban amenities, and had no commerce beyond a thriving cattle and agricultural industry.

Latinos constituted the majority of the population, but their percentage declined to 19% as European Americans arrived and became the dominant ethnic group. Like many new immigrants, the Chinese were drawn by the prospect of jobs and money. There were 30 Chinese in 1861, and by 1870 the population had grown to 179. These demographic, economic, and cultural shifts were dramatic, and frictions intensified as the threat of competition divided communities along racial and class lines.

Zesch pays particular attention to the early Chinese settlers to Los Angeles and the gradual growth of anti-Chinese sentiment due to racism and labor competition, familiar reasons for the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment. Zesch also cites the very public criminal activities of various Chinese individuals and their companions as a source of public condemnation. As the problems of violence and lawlessness persisted, vigilance committees formed as a corrective when the justice system failed.

Ironically, the problems that affected Los Angeles – lack of police, effective courts, and civic consciousness, along with the prevalence of “gambling halls and pleasure palaces” – gave a few Chinese a viable and lucrative entry into non-Asian society. These Chinese formed alliances with Anglos and Latinos in the “Los Angeles underworld” through which the “shadier portion of the town’s racially and culturally diverse population found common ground and a reason to work together” (pp. 33–34).

This other side of assimilation offers an intriguing and provocative depiction of the Chinese in Los Angeles in Zesch’s account. The Chinese disputes and crimes

seemed no different from those in every other community. Some were dismissed as “entertaining high jinks” and newspapers reported them as “cheap humor” (p. 29). But when the crimes involved children, women, and murder, Angelenos took notice, which often meant taking the law into their own hands (p. 29).

The latter activity, for example, a brazen attack on the police on December 22, 1870, when over 100 Chinese tried to prevent the arrest of a Chinese woman (p. 101), fueled a kind of anti-Chinese sentiment that was distinct from the virulent anti-labor based movements in San Francisco and the upper Northwest. The anti-Chinese sentiment in Los Angeles, Zesch argues, was not animated by pro-White labor concerns, but was primarily the result of criminal activities that antagonized Angelenos – White, Black, and Latino – to the point of public frustration and eventual outrage. This outrage was fed by newspaper stories documenting kidnappings of Chinese women, drug wars, unpaid gambling debts, and disputes resolved by shootouts. The media coverage, combined with ineffective police and courts, created a racist framework for anti-Chinese sentiment unique to Los Angeles.

The second part of the book is perhaps the strongest as well as the most heart wrenching. One chapter consists of a detailed, almost hour-by-hour, account of the massacre of October 24, richly supported by eyewitness testimonies and journalistic reports. But the most compelling chapters are those following the aftermath of the massacre – the criminal investigations and arrests, the court trial, the local and national media outcry over the murders, and the pressure to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice.

Zesch details how the investigation and trial revealed the extent of the atrocities committed on the night of the massacre. The accounts were so horrifying that news agencies in California and across the country were in near universal condemnation of the town of Los Angeles and its utter lack of human decency. More significantly, Zesch shows how the investigation and trial became important symbols, processes, and modes of administering justice.

Where the law and the police failed in every respect before and during the massacre, Zesch shows how, in capable hands and minds, the law can be an exemplary institution in the investigation, prosecution, and incarceration of criminals on behalf of victims and their families. Zesch documents how public confidence in the courts in Los Angeles increased and argues that this sentiment could have precipitated an end to mob justice after 1871. The convictions proved to Angelenos and the nation that they had a functioning police and court system, which laid the foundations for a modern city.

Zesch ends on a cautionary note, and a more accurate title for his book might be “The Race Riot That Didn’t Change a Damned Thing” (p. 213). He argues that even though the riot was thought to have ended vigilante justice and mob

violence, Los Angeles was still swept up in the same anti-Chinese hysteria that gripped many American cities especially on the West Coast. In fact, anti-Chinese prejudice increased after the 1870s when more Chinese migrated to Los Angeles after the completion of the railroad in 1875.

An “Anti-Coolie Club” formed in 1876 included the town’s most respected citizens, and the city charter was amended to prohibit the employment of Chinese laborers on public works projects in 1878. A business license tax was levied that directly discriminated against Chinese launderers and vegetable grocers in 1879, and many Angelenos rallied in support of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (p. 213). These discriminatory acts clearly demonstrate that while the dangers of mob justice may have been learned, those of racial tolerance were not.

Zesch considers the current multi-ethnic Los Angeles and its history of inter-racial violence to reflect on the legacy of the Chinatown massacre: “forgetting what happened in Chinatown that night would further diminish all of us. The very act of remembrance is one way of restoring our blemished humanity. And if remembering ... makes us more mindful of the vulnerable, marginalized people around us ... so much the better” (p. 220).

I understand the sentiment and its appeal to humanist sensibilities. But I would contend that what Zesch has shown is a fascinating historical case study on how a corrupt and inept criminal justice system that contributed to a community tragedy can be an instrument for its recovery. The social function of law and criminal justice has always been frustratingly contradictory from the perspective of minority discourses whether it is the Chinatown Massacre in 1871 or the Rodney King Riots in 1992.

At times when racial conflicts intensify, reach a flashpoint, and finally subside, the law and the system of criminal justice have consistently been instrumental in providing victims protection, a forum to answer questions, a recourse for their suffering, and a significant instrument to enact justice. It has also been an aggressive symbol and apparatus to re-establish law and order in the aftermath of such tragedies – for better or worse. As Zesch concludes, the best way to remember, to be “more mindful of the vulnerable, marginalized people around us” is to continue to strengthen and enforce the laws designed to protect them. The law embodies not only our values, but our history in the long road for a more just society.

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