

Chapter 4

Immigrant Struggles, Immigrant Gifts

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For The Immigrant Learning Center®



CHINESE AMERICANS

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ON FEBRUARY 28, 1882, Senator John F. Miller of California opened debate in the United States Congress on a bill to bar the entry of Chinese immigrant laborers from the country. Over the next two hours, the California Republican spelled out the imminent danger posed by Chinese immigration to the United States and exhorted his colleagues to support the bill that would become known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. According to Miller, Chinese immigrants were members of a “degraded and inferior race.” Other senators compared the Chinese to “rats,” “beasts,” and “swine.” “Oriental civilization,” they claimed, was incompatible with America and threatened to corrupt the nation.

Miller felt Chinese immigrant laborers also posed an economic threat. They competed with white workers with their “machine-like” ways and their “muscles of iron.” The American workingman—whether on the farm, at the shoemaker’s bench, or in the factory—simply could not compete with his low-paid Chinese counterpart. A vote for Chinese exclusion was thus a vote for both American labor and for the “public good” of the country, Miller proclaimed.

The debate over the law did engender a modicum of opposition. Former Radical Republicans, like Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts, called Chinese exclusion “old race prejudice,” a crime committed against the Declaration of Independence. Overall, however, politicians in both the Senate and the House quickly agreed on its rationale. Discrimination was acceptable if conducted in defense of the nation, they believed. “Why not discriminate?” Miller asked. “Why aid in the increase and distribution over . . . our domain of a degraded and inferior race?” If the stream of Chinese immigration was not stopped, “these stubborn invaders” would threaten “American Anglo-Saxon civilization itself.”¹

The Chinese Exclusion Act became law on May 6, 1882. The new measure barred the entry of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years, allowed only certain “exempt” classes of Chinese (students, teachers, travelers, merchants, and diplomats), and prohibited all Chinese from obtaining naturalized citizenship. It was the country’s first significant

restrictive immigration law as well as the first to restrict a group of immigrants based on their race, nationality, and class.²

The Chinese Exclusion Act was a crucial turning point in the long history of Chinese immigration to America. A trickle of Chinese began coming to the Americas as early as the sixteenth century, and today there are 3.8 million people of Chinese descent in the United States.³ Their experiences in the United States reflect the histories of global mass migration, and racism and xenophobia, as well as the spirit, perseverance, and striving common to so many immigrant groups.

Chinese began coming to the United States in large numbers during the mid-nineteenth century in search of *gum saan*, or Gold Mountain. Among the thousands of gold seekers who rushed to the West Coast during the California Gold Rush were 325 Chinese “forty-niners.” In 1850, 450 more came. Within a year, the rush of Chinese gold seekers had begun in earnest: 2,716 Chinese came to California in 1851 and 20,026 in 1852. Only a few struck it rich in the gold fields, but there were enough economic opportunities in America as well as problems back home in China to make the prospect of new lives in America worth pursuing. By 1870, there were 63,000 Chinese in the United States, a large majority of them (seventy-seven percent) in California.⁴

Most of the Chinese who came to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province. A population explosion, natural disasters, and political upheaval (like the Opium Wars with Great Britain from 1839–1842, and the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64) created an environment of crisis in the region. Unequal treaties between China and western imperial powers often meant higher taxes on local peasants. More frequent contact with the West also brought the establishment of regular steamship routes between Hong Kong and San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, and a host of ports along the west coast of North America. Farmers who could no longer make a living on their small plots of land began to migrate, first from the countryside to the coastal cities. There they encountered American traders, missionaries, and labor recruiters. Thoughts of America and journeys across the Pacific soon followed.

In the early-twentieth century, political, economic, and social crises in China deepened as attempts to restore order under the Qing Empire faltered and Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). European imperialist powers tightened their grip on China’s economy by forcibly occupying new territory, including key port cities. When the 1911 Chinese Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen failed to bring stability, powerful warlords emerged as the dominant power brokers in many parts of China. Internal rivalry between the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Communists beginning in the late 1920s and a full-scale war with Japan in the 1930s continued to breed chaos in all spheres of life and provided additional incentives for many of the more ambitious Chinese to seek work and permanent resettlement abroad.⁵

Meanwhile, industrialization and the expansion of American capitalism whetted an almost insatiable appetite for labor in the United States. A massive labor force was needed particularly in the developing western states to exploit natural resources and to build a transportation infrastructure. Chinese immigrant laborers, who worked cheaply, quickly became indispensable as miners and as railroad and farm hands. They were hired again and again for jobs that were believed to be too dirty, dangerous, or degrading for white men and were paid on a separate and lower wage scale from whites.

From 1865 to 1869, Chinese laborers were instrumental in building the country's first transcontinental railroad. Hired by railroad barons Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, 12,000 Chinese laborers made up ninety percent of the work force of the Central Pacific Railroad, which stretched eastward from Sacramento, California to Promontory Point, Utah. They cleared trees, laid track, and handled explosives for boring tunnels through the mountainous regions.

At the close of the nineteenth century, Chinese laborers had been pushed out of the mines and railroads and began to migrate back to the central valleys and cities of the Far West. An increasing number entered agriculture, fishing, trade, and manufacturing. By 1873, Chinese laborers were producing over fifty percent of California's boots and shoes, and in 1882, the Chinese made up from half to three-quarters of the harvest labor in some California counties. Chinese laborers constructed an intricate irrigation system that turned vast marshes in California's central valley into some of the most productive and fertile farmland in the country.⁶

Chinese American communities were predominately made up of men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many European immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants often came to America as sojourners, immigrants who intended to return home after a stint of work lasting anywhere from months to years. Chinese women did immigrate to the United States, but their numbers were small. During the nineteenth century, the traditional Chinese patriarchal family system discouraged and even forbade "decent" Chinese women from traveling abroad. Those married to migrants were expected to remain in China and to take care of their spouse's parents, thus performing the filial duties of their absent husbands. Marriage and children tied the sojourner to his family and village, insuring that he would dutifully send remittances, and possibly return home some day. Other deterrents to female immigration included the harsh living conditions in California, high levels of anti-Chinese violence, expensive trans-Pacific transportation, and the lack of available jobs for women. As a result, women made up less than ten percent of the Chinese immigrants to the United States between 1910 and 1940.⁷

Immigration laws also presented formidable barriers to female Chinese immigration to the United States. The 1875 Page Act barred Asian women suspected of prostitution as well as Asian laborers transported to the country under duress. The Exclusion Act of 1882 discouraged the entry of Chinese women, though they were not explicitly barred. The exempt categories listed in the exclusion law—merchants, students, teachers, diplomats, and travelers—were almost exclusively peopled by men in nineteenth-century China.⁸

Most Chinese immigrant families during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were therefore split across the Pacific Ocean, with fathers and husbands working and living in the United States while their wives and children remained in China.⁹ Until the early-twentieth century, when more Chinese women began to pursue higher education and became students, there were no provisions in the law that allowed them to immigrate on their own. Over time, the easing of cultural restrictions on Chinese female emigration and the desire for economic security in the United States also prompted more Chinese women to move abroad as the wives and daughters of Chinese merchants and American citizens.¹⁰

The Chinese who entered the United States in the late nineteenth century were only a small fraction of the total immigrant population of the United States. From 1870 to

1880, a total of 138,941 Chinese immigrants entered the country. They made up just 4.3 percent of the total number of immigrants (3,199,394) who came during the same decade.¹¹ Nevertheless, their presence in the United States sparked some of the most violent and destructive racist campaigns in American history. Belief in white superiority and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny were among the factors driving America's expansion westward. Indian wars, struggles over slavery, and the conquest of the West were all tied to race-based ideas of who belonged in America and where they fit into America's racial hierarchy. Chinese were the largest group of voluntary nonwhite immigrants to the United States, and questions about their status in American life were raised as early as the initial phase of the gold rush in California.

Industrialists praised Chinese immigrants as a means to an end. They provided an ample source of cheap, available labor to build the transcontinental railroad and help develop the lumber, fishing, mining, and agricultural industries of the American West. At the same time, others believed Chinese immigrants represented unfair economic competition, since they were willing to accept low wages and poor working conditions. The opponents of Chinese immigration also fretted over the alleged vices (drug use, prostitution, gang activity) that the mostly male population of Chinese immigrants brought with them to America, in addition to the obvious racial threat they were believed to pose to white civilization in America.¹²

Demagogues, such as California Workingmen's Party leader Denis Kearney, capitalized on the deep sense of economic insecurity among the white working classes in San Francisco during the economic depression of the 1870s. Blaming Chinese workers for unfavorable wages and the scarcity of jobs, labor leaders such as Kearney charged that Chinese workers were imported "coolies" engaged in a new system of slavery that degraded American labor. Chinese immigrants' purported diet of "rice and rats" was cited as a clear sign that they had a lower standard of living, one that white working families could not, and should not, degrade themselves by accepting. Chinese men were also depicted as a sexual threat, preying upon white women. Further, they were characterized as an affront to acceptable gender roles in American society, as they often engaged in "women's work" of cooking, cleaning, and related domestic roles.¹³

Anti-Chinese sentiment manifested itself in legislative and extralegal efforts to bar Chinese from mainstream American institutions as well as from certain occupations and even entire geographical regions. State laws in California often explicitly discriminated against the Chinese. As early as 1850, Chinese miners were required to pay a special tax on foreign miners in California. Though the law was aimed at all foreigners, it was primarily enforced against the Chinese.¹⁴ In 1854, the California Supreme Court ruled that Chinese immigrants, along with African Americans and Native Americans, should be prohibited from giving testimony in cases involving a white person. In support of its decision, the Court argued that Chinese immigrants were a "distinct people ... whom nature has marked as inferior."¹⁵ In 1855, California Governor John Bigler approved a bill that taxed any master or owner of a ship found to have brought Asian immigrants to the state.¹⁶ The following year, the state assembly issued a report that again described the Chinese as a "distinct and inferior race," a "nation of liars," and a danger to white labor.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, anti-Chinese sentiment often turned violent. Beginning in the 1850s and continuing through the nineteenth century, Chinese were systematically

harassed, rounded up and driven out of cities and towns across the West.¹⁸ In the spring of 1852, white miners attacked a group of Chinese miners along the American River in the Sierra district. Over the next few months, Anglo miners in El Dorado County set up barricades to prevent Chinese from passing through. Ruthless evictions continued throughout California's gold country. During the winter of 1858–59, a veritable race war broke out in the gold fields as armed mobs forced Chinese out of various campsites and towns. By the end of the 1850s, only 160 Chinese miners remained in California's Shasta County, down from 3,000 in 1853.

On October, 24, 1871, seventeen Chinese were lynched in Los Angeles after a policeman was shot by a Chinese assailant. A mob of nearly 500—almost a tenth of the population of the city—gathered to force its way into the Chinese quarter. The attackers dragged Chinese men out of their homes, while others hastily erected gallows downtown to hang the victims. Police stood by and did nothing as a broad cross-section of the citizenry, including women and children, assisted the mob in their grisly work. The Chinese massacre in Los Angeles was the largest mass lynching in American history.¹⁹

The violence and expulsions were not confined to California. On September 2, 1885, gangs of white miners attacked Chinese miners who refused to join their strike at Rock Springs, Wyoming. Twenty-eight were killed, another fifteen were wounded, and hundreds were driven out into the desert. On November 3, 1885, a mob of 500 armed men descended upon Tacoma, Washington's two Chinese neighborhoods and forced nearly 1,000 Chinese residents out of the city. Some of the victims of this "racial cleansing" were dragged from their homes and forced to watch their businesses being pillaged and their belongings thrown into the streets. By the afternoon, Chinese residents were being marched out of town in a heavy rain to the Lake View Junction railroad stop to be shipped away. Ironically, the line was part of the Northern Pacific Railroad that Chinese laborers—quite possibly some of the very people who were being forcibly evicted from Tacoma—had originally built during the 1870s. Others struck out afoot, walking as far as 100 miles to Oregon, to British Columbia—to anywhere but Tacoma. Three days later, the City of Seattle demanded that all of its Chinese residents leave town.²⁰

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 reflected a national consensus on the issue of restricting Chinese immigration. The edict was extended in 1892, made permanent in 1904, and remained on the statute books until 1943. Three hundred-thousand Chinese managed to enter the United States during the exclusion era from 1882 to 1943 as returning residents and citizens, exempt-class merchants, and family members. Thousands of Chinese immigrants circumvented the exclusion laws altogether and found ways to come to the United States with fraudulent documents, fabricated relationships, and false identities as "paper sons" and "paper daughters." The first to be restricted, Chinese were the first "illegal immigrants."²¹

One hundred-thousand Chinese entered the United States through the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco. While popularly called the "Ellis Island of the West," the station on Angel Island was in fact very different from its counterpart in New York. Ellis Island enforced American immigration laws that restricted, but did not exclude, European immigrants. Angel Island, on the other hand, was the chief port of entry for Chinese and other immigrants from Asia. As such, officials at Angel Island enforced immigration policies that singled out Asians for long detention

and exclusion. Chinese immigrants faced harsh interrogations, humiliating medical examinations, and long detentions. The Chinese made up the overwhelming majority (seventy percent) of the detainee population at Angel Island, and their average stay was two to three weeks, the longest of all the immigrant groups. Law Shee Low, who was detained there in 1922, recalled the anxiety and despair in the women's barracks over the interrogation: "One woman was questioned all day and then deported. She told me they asked her about life in China: the chickens and the neighbors, and the direction the house faced. How would I know all that? I was scared."²²

Many Chinese poems like the one below were carved into the barrack walls by angry, frustrated, and homesick immigrants. They are powerful reminders of the costs and hardships of immigration under such a discriminatory regime; they are also evidence of resistance and perseverance. And it is this indomitable immigrant spirit that draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Angel Island Immigration Station—now a National Historic Landmark—every year:

I clasped my hands in parting with my brothers and classmates.
Because of the mouth [hunger], I hastened to cross the American ocean.
How was I to know that the western barbarians had lost their hearts and reason?
With a hundred kinds of oppressive laws, they mistreat us Chinese²³

If Chinese made it off Angel Island and into the United States, they were forced to retreat into the segregated confines of Chinatowns or they found themselves isolated in larger communities. The only work available was menial: in restaurants, laundries, and garment factories. Second generation Chinese Americans repeatedly sought bridges to mainstream white society, but were often met with rejection and unequal treatment.

Despite exclusionary laws and the violent anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants continued to come in limited numbers, settle in the United States, form vibrant communities, and raise families. Lue Gim Gong, Wong Kim Ark, and Mamie Tape are three stellar examples of Chinese immigrants who made America their home and left a deep imprint on their adopted country.

Lue Gim Gong was an agricultural pioneer. Originally from a village near Canton, China, Lue was living in San Francisco when he answered the call for Chinese labor by Calvin T. Sampson, a shoe manufacturer in North Adams, Massachusetts. Lue traveled east in 1870 at a time when there were fewer than a hundred Chinese in the eastern states. In North Adams, Lue attended Sunday school and became very close to his teacher, a woman named Fanny Burlingame. Lue converted to Christianity and became a Baptist. He cut off his queue, and adopted Western clothing and manners. Fanny adopted Lue as her son, and he followed her south when she moved to DeLand, Florida, in the late 1880s. Lue managed the Burlingame family's orange groves and began to conduct experiments to develop an orange that could withstand sudden cold snaps. He ultimately succeeded in growing a substantial, juicy orange that could be shipped around the country in large quantities. In 1911, the Lue Gim Gong orange won the American Polomological Society's distinguished Wilder Silver Medal.

Lue went on to develop a new grapefruit strain and several other unusual plant combinations as well, but he never made a profit from his agricultural innovations. Indeed,

after his citrus improvements failed to yield financial dividends, he became highly mistrustful of relinquishing any control over his orchards or of participating in the burgeoning mass market of Florida citrus growers in the early twentieth century. But he garnered deep respect among Florida growers and citizens of DeLand, and many came to his aid when he suffered financial setbacks that threatened to rob him of his land and his home. When he died in 1925, Lue Gim Gong, the so-called “citrus wizard,” was memorialized for the significant role he played in the Florida citrus industry.²⁴

Wong Kim Ark was a native born American citizen of Chinese descent whose 1898 Supreme Court challenge affirmed the constitutional status of birthright citizenship for all persons born in the United States, despite the immigration status of their parents. A restaurant cook and native of San Francisco, Wong was twenty-four years old in 1894 when he returned to California after a visit to China. To his surprise, he was denied entry into the United States. John H. Wise, collector of customs, claimed that Wong, though born in the United States, was not a citizen because his parents were Chinese nationals who were ineligible for citizenship under the Chinese exclusion laws. According to Wise, Wong’s claim to citizenship was invalid and he should be excluded as a laborer “of the Mongolian race.” A self-described “zealous opponent of Chinese immigration,” Wise attempted to apply the exclusion laws as broadly as possible, including second-generation Chinese Americans. Wise ordered that Wong be returned to China.

Wong and his lawyers challenged the decision with a writ of habeas corpus. He claimed that he had a right to be re-admitted into the United States based on his status as a United States citizen under the Fourteenth Amendment. The question for the court was: how does the United States determine citizenship—by *jus soli* (by soil) or by *jus sanguinis* (by blood)? The District Court for the Northern District of California ruled for Wong, but the US



Lue Gim Gong, the “citrus wizard,” was a pioneer in the development of the Florida citrus industry.

Attorney appealed the decision and the case was argued before the United States Supreme Court in March 1897. With a majority opinion by Justice Horace Gray, the court ruled in Wong's favor. *Wong Kim Ark v. United States* affirmed that all persons born in the United States were, regardless of race, native-born citizens of the United States and entitled to all the rights of citizenship. The Court has not reexamined this issue since this ruling.²⁵

In 1884, Mary and Joseph Tape went to enroll their daughter Mamie in San Francisco's Spring Valley School. School officials and the San Francisco School Board refused their application, citing state education codes that allowed schools to exclude children who had "filthy or vicious habits, or children with contagious or infectious diseases." Characterizing all Chinese children as dangerous or diseased, the school board trustees used these codes to keep Chinese students out and maintain a strict policy of racial segregation in the public schools. Because there was no other public education option available to the Tapes, the family launched a legal fight for equal access to education. They sued the San Francisco Board of Education and argued that as a native-born citizen of the United States, Mamie was entitled to the free education that was every American's birthright. San Francisco Superior Court Judge Maguire agreed. In 1885, he ruled, "to deny a child, born of Chinese parents in this State, entrance to the public schools would be a violation of the law of the State and the Constitution of the United States."

While the school board appealed the decision to the state supreme court, Spring Valley school officials continued to bar Mamie from the school. Mary Tape wrote a letter of protest to the Board of Education: "I see that you are going to make all sorts of excuses to keep my child out of the Public Schools. ... Is it a disgrace to be born a Chinese? Didn't God make us all!!! What right! Have you to bar my children out of the school because she is of chinese Descend." The San Francisco School Board responded by establishing a separate Chinese primary school in the Chinatown district. Mamie and her younger brother Frank were the first two students to show up for class when the school opened in April, 1885.²⁶

Chinese Americans like Lue Gim Gong, Wong Kim Ark, and the Tapes all struggled with discrimination in the United States throughout the early twentieth century. In addition to the exclusion laws that restricted Chinese immigration and barred them from naturalizing, there were state "alien land laws" that prevented Chinese and other Asian immigrants from owning, and sometimes even leasing, land. Immigration officers seeking to deport Chinese immigrants staged terrifying raids in Chinese communities in Cleveland, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, San Francisco, and other cities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In 1923, the San Francisco Chinese community charged that they lived under a "veritable Reign of Terror." "No matter how long their residence or how firm their right to remain, Chinese are being arrested, hunted, and terrorized," the Chinese Six Companies organization reported to President Woodrow Wilson in 1918.²⁷

The decade of the 1930s brought even more hardship for Chinese in America, with the Great Depression in the United States, the invasion of China by Japan, and the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War. Like their fellow Americans, Chinese Americans suffered from economic insecurity, but they were also distressed about the safety and wellbeing of family and friends in war-ravaged China. Then came the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and American views of China and Chinese Americans changed dramatically,

almost overnight. For decades, the Chinese in America had been publicly vilified as “Chinks,” “heathen Chinese,” and “inassimilable aliens.” After Pearl Harbor, public opinion quickly shifted in favor of the Chinese, whose homeland had been under attack by Japan since the early 1930s. After the United States entered the war and became allies with China, Chinese Americans were now officially labeled “friends.” The Chinese in America energetically threw themselves into the war effort. Communities organized “Rice Bowl” parties in over seven hundred cities across the nation to raise money and spread propaganda for war relief in China. In 1938, more than 200,000 people packed San Francisco’s Chinatown as part of its first Rice Bowl party.²⁸

Twenty thousand Chinese men and women served in all branches of the US military during the Second World War, the majority in the army. Maggie Gee was one of two Chinese American women to transport military aircraft around the country with the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots Program (WASP). Inspired by Amelia Earhart, Gee endured the same lengthy and rigorous flight training as her male counterparts. “We flew the open cockpit Stearman ... the 650-horsepower AT-6,” she explained, “which had radio and retractable landing gear—the kind of plane used in combat in China.” WASPs completed three-fourths of all domestic aircraft deliveries by 1944 and were known for flying longer hours and having fewer accidents than male pilots. Opposition from the Army Air Force, however, caused the female flight program to be disbanded a few months before the war ended and the WASPs were not granted veteran status until 1977. Maggie Gee returned to Berkeley and trained to become a physicist. She also worked as a political activist.²⁹

Before World War II, Chinese Americans had long been excluded from occupations outside of Chinatown, but the war economy opened up new, well paying jobs in shipyards and factories, where they could earn stable wages and mix with other ethnic groups. The biggest wartime change for Chinese Americans, however, was political. On December 17, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Magnuson Act repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Chinese immigration was placed within the same quota system regulating European immigration under the 1924 Immigration Act.³⁰ The repeal was an important symbolic gesture of friendship to China, now a wartime ally against Japan, and in his signing statement the president cited the need to “correct a historic mistake.”³¹

The repeal had mixed results. Because the quota system had been designed to favor “old stock” western European immigrants, only 105 Chinese were allowed to enter the country per year and America’s gates remained largely shut to Chinese immigration.³² The Magnuson Act did, however, allow Chinese immigrants to become eligible for naturalization. Several war-related measures also expedited naturalization for Chinese American members of the armed forces, and the War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1947 permitted citizen members of the military to bring their foreign born spouses and minor children into the United States outside of the small Chinese quota.³³

Demographically speaking, these new naturalization and immigration opportunities for Chinese Americans had a much bigger impact than the formal end of Chinese exclusion. In the immediate postwar period, more Chinese women entered the United States than ever before. From 1948 to 1952, an estimated ninety percent of new Chinese immigrants were women joining their husbands after years of separation.³⁴ Chinese



Mary Tape (far right) fought for the right of her daughter Maimie (center) to attend elementary school in San Francisco in the 1880s.

sojourners and transnational families gave way to family reunification and permanent settlement in the United States.

During the 1950s, Cold War politics and the rise of Communist China placed Chinese Americans in a vulnerable position

once again. In 1949, Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong emerged victorious over his nationalist rival, Chiang Kai-shek, in China's long civil war. The positive feelings toward China and the Chinese that had prevailed during World War II quickly evaporated. Chinese Americans came under particular scrutiny in 1950, when China intervened in the Korean War. An anti-Communist campaign led by politicians and government officials sought to expose alleged Chinese Communist spies in the United States.

American authorities also began investigating Chinese American communities to root out those who had entered the country during the exclusion era with fraudulent documentation. The so-called "Confession Program" was created to encourage Chinese Americans to confess their misuse of immigration documents and expose any relative or friend who had also committed an immigration-related crime; coming clean would result in amnesty. The confessions set off a domino effect that wrought havoc in the Chinese American community. Immigrants in a position to legalize their status could adversely affect their paper relatives or even their real relatives who were reluctant to confess. Many Chinese Americans described the Confession Program as a "no-win situation." Altogether, some 30,530 Chinese immigrants confessed. In return, they were granted legal status to remain in the United States as long as they were not involved in any Communist or "subversive" activities.³⁵

But even as the Cold War created an environment of suspicion, it also facilitated the entry of a new generation of Chinese immigrants. Professional and elite Chinese began to arrive in the United States from Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1950s as part of government-sponsored programs to recruit scientific workers and engineers in the field of military technology. They joined a small group of Chinese students who chose to remain in America after the Communist takeover in 1949.³⁶

One of these new immigrants was Chang-Lin Tien. He arrived from Taiwan in 1956 and ultimately became the first Chinese American chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley—the first Asian American to head a major research university in the United States. His parents had been prosperous and politically active in China, but lost all of their wealth when the Japanese invaded in the 1930s. When the Communists came to power in the following decade, the family escaped to Taiwan. Life was hard: squeezed into one tiny room, the parents and their ten children slept in shifts. Chang-Lin took on odd jobs to help support the family while he attended school. He graduated from National Taiwan University and then applied to 240 schools in the United States in hopes of winning a scholarship. He attended the University of Louisville, where he experienced racial discrimination firsthand. It was this unsavory experience that led to his later advocacy of affirmative action in higher education. Tien completed his master's degree in one year, while two more years of study yielded a doctorate from Princeton. After having served as a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of California, Berkeley he moved into academic administration, serving as the school's chancellor from 1990 to 1997.³⁷

The passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was a major turning point for Chinese Americans. The statute abolished the national origins quota system, institutionalized a family reunification program and ushered in a new surge in immigration from Asia and Latin America, a trend that continues to this day. These momentous changes were felt almost immediately in Chinese American communities across the country. In 1960, the Chinese population in the United States was only 237,000. This number grew to 812,000 by 1980 and exploded to well over three million by 2010.

The normalization of relations between China and the United States in 1979 was predictably followed by a surge of immigration. This latest group of immigrants, or *san yi man*, is an extremely diverse set. It includes both men and women, members of the working and professional classes, and Cantonese and Mandarin speakers.

Many Chinese who first arrived in the 1960s pursuing educational opportunities helped to initiate an extensive “chain migration” under the family preference categories of the 1965 immigration act. This part of the law allowed them to sponsor their spouses and children, parents, brothers, and sisters. Once naturalized, these new Americans could in turn arrange for the entry of their spouses and children as well, and as a result the Chinese immigrant community in America has grown at an exponential pace.³⁸

Chinese immigrants come to the United States for a variety of reasons. Some seek political asylum; Chinese emigration shot up dramatically from Taiwan and Hong Kong after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The imminent handoff of British control of Hong Kong to mainland (Communist) China in 1997 resulted in a similar exodus. In the 1980s, surveys of Hong Kong residents found that sixty percent of its lawyers, seventy percent of its government doctors, and forty percent of its civil engineers made

plans to leave the colony before 1997. Many paid tens of thousands of dollars to establish themselves in Canada, Australia, and the United States.³⁹

Other new Chinese immigrants have very diverse backgrounds. There are “uptown, high-tech Chinese” who are English speaking scientists, real estate moguls, capitalist entrepreneurs, and professional elites. Then there are the “downtown, low-tech” Chinese who are low-skilled, blue-collar workers, waiters, domestics, cooks, and laundrymen.⁴⁰ Elite and professional Chinese immigrants arrive in the United States with education, savings, and skills that are sometimes much higher than the average American. Statistics published for 2004 reveal that fully half of adult Chinese Americans and two-thirds of immigrants from Taiwan (twenty years old or more) had attained four or more years of college education. In comparison, thirty percent of non-Hispanic whites achieved this academic benchmark. Chinese Americans were also shown to be more likely to work in professional occupations than non-Hispanic workers (fifty-two percent versus thirty-eight percent), and the annual median household income for Chinese Americans was higher. Many of these professional immigrants formed new ethnic enclaves in the suburbs, complete with Chinese-owned banks, restaurants, malls, and Chinese language newspapers. Monterey Park in Southern California, where Chinese made up more than one third of the city’s population, was nicknamed “the first suburban Chinatown.”⁴¹

Another feature of elite and professional Chinese immigrants is their strong ties to their homeland. Like earlier generations, contemporary Chinese immigrant families are sometimes stretched across the Pacific Ocean. Some Hong Kong and Taiwanese families choose to split up the family unit in order to make the most of business opportunities in Asia and educational opportunities for children in the United States. Thus “astronaut” or “spacemen” Chinese fathers shuttle across the Pacific for business while their wives and children live and attend school in the United States. Some Taiwanese “parachute” kids are left alone in the United States or with caretakers and relatives to go to school and improve their chances of gaining admission to a prestigious American university while their parents stay behind to work in Taiwan.⁴²

The “downtown, low tech” immigrants often labor in difficult working conditions in crowded garment factories in American cities, and struggle with high poverty rates.⁴³ Others include those who have entered the country without proper documentation, sometimes with the help of smugglers, or “snakeheads.” With neither professional skills nor relatives already in the United States who could sponsor their legal immigration, an estimated 150,000 Chinese entered without documentation during the 1990s.⁴⁴ Many come from the coastal province of Fujian hoping to strike it rich. They pay huge sums and take great risks to fulfill deep-rooted American dreams. “Before I came here, I imagined America would be a wonderful place to live,” said one thirty-eight-year-old woman. “I thought that if I ever had the opportunity to come to the United States, my life would not be wasted. [Everyone says,] ‘The United States is better than China.’”⁴⁵

Under the control of smugglers, immigrants are often forced to take long, circuitous, and dangerous journeys in order to get to the United States. Some head to Africa or Europe first. Others are deposited in Canada and Mexico and then cross the land border without documents. An unknown number have died en route. In 1995, eighteen Chinese suffocated to death inside a sealed trailer on its way to Hungary. Five years later, fifty-eight dead Chinese were found inside a refrigerated container full of rotting tomatoes in Dover, England. In 1993, a ship called the *Golden Venture* ran aground on Rockaway

Peninsula near New York City with 260 Chinese immigrants aboard. Urged by the crew to swim ashore, the Chinese jumped overboard. Ten drowned in the attempt.

Even if they survive the journey to the United States, undocumented Chinese immigrants often face years of exploitation at the hands of the “snakeheads” who brought them to the United States. Hidden in urban centers, they spend years working menial jobs in an effort to pay back the exorbitant smuggler’s fees (often as much as \$60,000 to \$70,000) and to send money back home to waiting relatives. Some are imprisoned, beaten, and forced to work for extremely low wages. Some repay these dubious debts and buy their freedom—a few have even become financially successful. Many find only hardship and sometimes death in the United States.⁴⁶

Two other groups of recent Chinese immigrants include ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and adopted Chinese children. The victory of the North Vietnamese forces in Vietnam in 1975 instigated the migration of 1.5 million Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees of which around 450,000 came to the United States. After the beginning of the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, Chinese businesses, schools, and newspapers in Vietnam were shut down and discrimination against ethnic Chinese became government policy. Beginning in 1977, ethnic Chinese were systematically expelled from Viet Nam. By 1979, 65,000 were being forced out each month. Many escaped by any means possible, often under the cover of darkness in barely seaworthy vessels. Traveling with only their most precious possessions, these so-called “boat people” fell victim to pirates who terrorized and often killed their refugee victims. Some estimates claim that thirty to fifty percent of these refugees lost their lives during their escape.⁴⁷

Le Tan Si and his family fled Vietnam in 1979 in a boat with fifty-eight people on board. “The trip was full of hardship,” he reported years later. The engine broke down and the boat was repeatedly approached by groups of Thai pirates who robbed the refugees of their possessions, raped the girls and women, and killed all who resisted. Eventually, the survivors made their way to Malaysia with the help of a group of Thai fishermen. Le Tan Si and his family lived in two refugee camps for fourteen months with the support of the United Nations. In 1980, just as the United States was formalizing its refugee admission procedures, he arrived in Seattle. “I then really had freedom and a new life in this country,” he wrote.⁴⁸

Adopted children from China began to arrive in the United States during the 1990s. Strict enforcement of the Communist government’s one child policy established in 1979 to curb population growth led many families to put children up for adoption or to abandon them outright. Because of patriarchal values that led families to value sons over daughters, a large majority of these children have been girls. Orphanages became overcrowded and abuse was commonplace. In 1992, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began to encourage large-scale international adoption. The United States became a major receiving nation for children adopted from China. Many childless couples frustrated with the American bureaucracy eagerly turned to China for adoption. The Chinese adoption program provided healthy young infants free of ties to birth families. They soon acquired a reputation as “model adoptees.” Adoption was viewed as a humanitarian act, in that American couples felt they were rescuing “unwanted” children; it also served as a potent symbol of progress for multicultural America. By 2000, China became the leading provider of children put up for international adoption, with over 5,000 Chinese adoptees arriving in the United States that year.⁴⁹

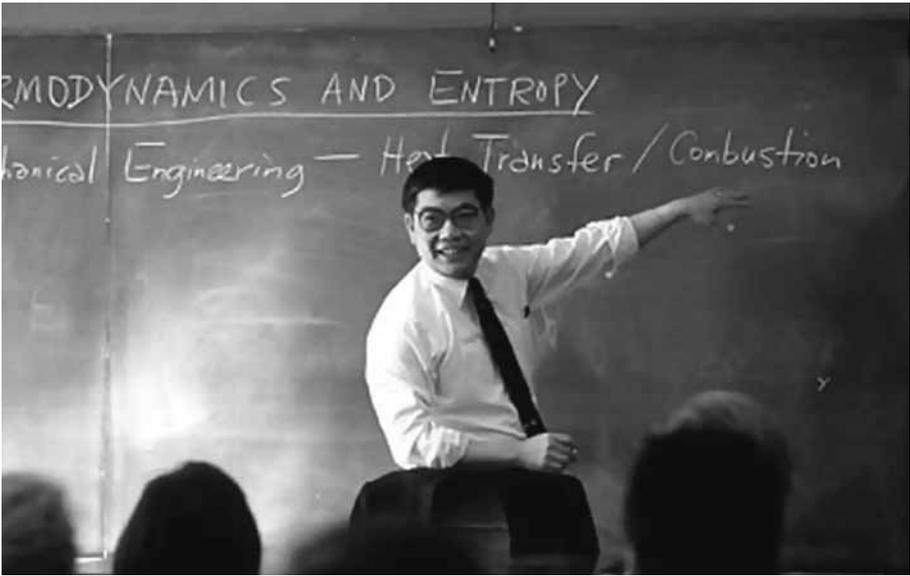
As the Chinese American community has become more diverse in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Chinese Americans have been received in conflicting ways. Beginning in the 1960s, the image of Chinese Americans began to change. Caricatures of Chinese as inassimilable coolie laborers faded into the background as Chinese and Japanese Americans came to acquire the status of a “model minority.” Economically and academically successful, such model minorities were said to have achieved success the old fashioned way—through hard work and perseverance.⁵⁰

By the 1980s, these outwardly positive portrayals of Chinese and other Asian Americans took a darker turn as some complained that Asian Americans were taking the place of deserving whites at the nation’s best institutions of higher education. Some made tongue in cheek references to schools allegedly overrun with Asians. MIT was said to mean “Made in Taiwan,” while UCLA was supposedly the “University of Caucasians Lost Among Asians.”⁵¹ These sentiments were often overlaid with anxieties about American economic decline and international rivalries. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, China slowly began to emerge as a military and economic power that might some day rival America. At the same time, the United States de-industrialized and sank into a recession in the 1980s and again in the early twenty-first century.

The People’s Republic of China is now seen in America as both an important business partner and a dangerous rival. By 2003, the United States had a trade deficit of \$489.4 billion, \$129 billion of which came from a shortfall in trading with China.⁵² Sensationalist bestsellers like *Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World*; *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*; *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon—A Global Call to Action*; and *China Shakes the World: A Titan’s Rise and Troubled Future—and the Challenge for America* have fueled Americans’ growing unease with China. They claim that China’s rise to power will topple European and American hegemony and reshape global trade and politics. Some even go so far as to describe China’s ascent as an all-out assault on America. As evidence, some outspoken commentators contend that China gobbles up the world’s natural resources while exporting “poisoned food, spiked drugs, toxic toys” that injure or kill Americans ever year.⁵³

Many in the federal government, the national media, and academia have also expressed concern. According to the *Washington Post*, an anti-PRC group of politicians, congressional staff members, analysts, political operatives, journalists, lobbyists, and academics known as the “Blue Team” have been vocal in expressing the belief that “a rising China poses great risks to America’s vital interests.” In 1999, Representative Christopher Cox (R-California) released a 700-page report that charged China with stealing classified data on American nuclear weapons. That same year, Senator Richard Shelby (R-Alabama), who was then chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, told reporters that the “Chinese are everywhere, as far as our weapon’s systems [are concerned]. . . . They’re real. They’re here. And probably in some ways, very crafty people.”⁵⁵

This general atmosphere of suspicion, rivalry, and insecurity with China has also spilled over into perceptions of Chinese Americans and their role in American life. As in the past, Chinese in the United States have been continuously conflated with China. When Chinese fighter jets intercepted a US Air Force surveillance plane flying over the South China Sea, Chinese Americans took the brunt of American angst. A Springfield,



Chang-Lin Tien, professor of mechanical engineering, applied from Taiwan to 240 universities in an effort to win a scholarship for graduate work in the United States. He later became chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley (1990–1997), the first Asian American to lead a major American research university.

Illinois radio talk show host angrily advised his listeners to boycott all Chinese restaurants, declaring that all Chinese in the United States should be sent home to “their country.” California Representative Christopher Cox made unsubstantiated charges that Chinese government-owned firms in the United States might be acting as fronts for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army and then conflated Chinese American scientists, students, and businesspeople with Chinese government personnel.⁵⁶

Chinese American scientists have often been accused of spying for China. The most egregious case involved Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-born Chinese American physicist and research scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Lee came under investigation in 1999 when the *New York Times* alleged that an insider at the Los Alamos lab had been passing nuclear warhead technology to China; intelligence officers were convinced that a Chinese spy was responsible. Because of his ethnic background and access to the secret data, Wen Ho Lee was identified as the prime suspect. News of the investigation was leaked to the press and Lee was arrested, shackled, and placed in solitary confinement for nearly seven months. After five years of intensive investigation, the US government unearthed no evidence of espionage activity by Lee. Eventually, it was conceded by various experts that the case had been severely mishandled. Robert Vrooman, former head of the counterintelligence unit at Los Alamos, went so far as to say that the entire investigation had been “built on thin air,” and that the reason that the

federal government had targeted Lee in the first place was because he was Chinese. The US District Court judge in New Mexico in charge of Lee's case issued a formal apology: "I believe you were terribly wronged by being held in custody pretrial ... under demeaning, unnecessarily punitive conditions. ... [Top government officials] have embarrassed our entire nation."⁵⁷

Beginning in the 1980s, Asian Americans were increasingly targeted by a rash of hate crimes, including intimidation and murder. The first high-profile case occurred in Detroit, where the American auto industry was in serious economic decline while Japanese and Korean auto manufacturers flourished. It was not uncommon for autoworkers and the media to blame Japanese imports for Detroit's economic woes. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American engineer, was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two white autoworkers who equated him with Japan's increasing power in the auto industry. The two men reportedly called Chin a "Jap" and yelled, "It's because of you, motherf**ers that we're out of work!" The men were convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years probation and \$3,780 in fines and court costs. The murder and the incredibly light sentence prompted protests from the Asian American community and civil rights organizations across the country.⁵⁸

Even as the Chinese American community is facing increased scrutiny and sometimes harassment and violence at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is also sending forth some of its most committed visionaries in a variety of fields to lead the United States into the future. Gary Locke traces his roots to an ancestor who settled in Olympia, Washington, in 1874, worked as a domestic servant, and became a leader of the Chinese American community in Seattle. Locke's father served in World War II and Gary spent his early years living in public housing for veterans' families in Seattle. After graduating from Yale University and Boston University Law School, Locke returned to Washington and began a career in state politics. In 1996, he was elected governor of Washington, the first Chinese American governor in the nation's history. In 2003, he delivered the Democratic Party's response to President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address. His comments emphasized his own story, which exemplifies Chinese immigrants' role in achieving the American Dream: "My grandfather came to this country from China nearly a century ago and worked as a servant. Now I serve as governor just one mile from where my grandfather worked. It took our family one hundred years to travel that mile. It was a voyage we could only make in America."⁵⁹

After a two-year stint as President Obama's Commerce Secretary, Locke was named as the US ambassador to China. In his new role, Locke has sought to dispel notions of Sino-American rivalry. In his first speech in China in September of 2011, he announced, "President Obama and I reject the notion that China and the United States are engaged in a zero-sum competition, where one side must fall for the other to rise. We can and must achieve security and prosperity together."⁶⁰ He insists that this process requires China to open important sectors of its economy to foreign investment and relax online censorship.⁶¹ Ambassador Locke has proven to be extremely popular among everyday Chinese. A photograph of him buying his own coffee and carrying his luggage at the Seattle airport on his way to his new posting was widely circulated throughout China. The image of a high-ranking government official performing such mundane tasks for himself shocked many Chinese, who are not used to seeing the same behavior displayed

by their own officials. “This is something unbelievable in China,” said ZhaoHuiTang, a Chinese American who snapped the photo. “Even for low-ranking officials, we don’t do things for ourselves. Someone goes to buy the coffee for them. Someone carries their bags for them.”⁶²

Activist and author Grace Lee Boggs is another leader charting a new future for Chinese Americans. Born in 1915 to Chinese immigrant parents, Boggs grew up in Providence, Rhode Island. She attended Barnard College and then went on to Bryn Mawr where she received her PhD in 1940. Unable to find a post in academia, she relocated to Chicago where she became involved in African American civil rights activism through her work with West Indian Marxist C.L.R. James. She was inspired by African Americans’ struggle for civil rights, especially labor leader A. Philip Randolph’s successful campaign to establish fair hiring practices in American defense plants during the 1940s. “When I saw what a movement could do I said, ‘Boy that’s what I wanna do with my life,’” Boggs recalled.⁶³ She married African American activist James Boggs and moved to Detroit in 1953. The pair worked together for decades playing a key role in the many social and “humanizing” movements of the late twentieth century, including civil rights, Black Power, labor issues, women’s rights, antiwar campaigns, environmental concerns, and Asian American rights.⁶⁴

At the age of ninety-five, Grace Lee Boggs still expresses her steadfast belief in the power of ideas. She published her autobiography, *Living for Change*, in 1998 and a collection of essays, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, in 2011. Her words continue to inspire all Americans: “These are times that try our souls,” she writes of the global economic crisis, divisive politics, war, and disinvestment in cities and public education. “How are we going to build a twenty-first-century America in which people of all races and ethnicities live together in harmony ... ?”⁶⁵ The answer, she claims, is openness and activism: “We must open our hearts to new beacons of Hope. We must expand our minds to new modes of thought. We must equip our hands with new methods of organizing.”⁶⁶

Contemporary Chinese Americans are also great innovators in business and technology. Jerry Yang was born in Taiwan in 1968. His father died when he was two years old and his mother, fearing that her sons would be drafted into the Taiwanese army, moved the family to San Jose, California when Jerry was ten. He spoke very little English, but rose to the challenge. “We got made fun of a lot at first,” he recalled. “I didn’t even know who the faces were on the paper money. But when we had a math quiz in school I’d always blow everyone else away. And by our third year, my brother and I had gone from remedial English to advanced-placement English.” While studying electrical engineering at Stanford University during the early 1990s, Yang and his friend David Fillo started an Internet company they initially named “Jerry and Dave’s Guide to the World Wide Web.” Later, it came to be known as Yahoo!, one of the world’s foremost search engines. Yang served as the company’s CEO from 2007 to 2009.⁶⁷

Chinese Americans have a long history in the United States; trans-Pacific journeys brought gold prospectors, prostitutes, merchants, students, and families from China to the United States. They struggled to forge new lives in a strange land while suffering the indignity of racism and discrimination. Today’s diverse community of Chinese Americans comes from many different political, economic, and social backgrounds, a

reflection of the changing face of America. As one of the fastest growing immigrant groups, Chinese Americans will continue to shape America's future—just as they did America's past.

Endnotes

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State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens Thereof." In 1857, in *People v. Downer*, the California Supreme Court ruled that the law was an impermissible interference with the national government's exclusive power to regulate foreign commerce. See Charles McClain, *In Search of Equality*, 17–18.

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²⁶ McCunn, *Chinese American Portraits*, 41–45; Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010), 43–57.

²⁷ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 228–31.

²⁸ R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 147–48; Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 239.

²⁹ Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 252, 257.

³⁰ "An Act to Repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, To Establish Quotas, and For Other Purposes," Act of Dec. 17, 1943, (57 Stat. 600; 8 U.S.C. 212(a)).

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³³ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 105–109.

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³⁵ E. Lee, *At America's Gates*, 240–42.

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⁵¹ Chang, *Chinese in America*, 329; Takaki, *Strangers*, 479.

⁵² Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 428.

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⁵⁴ The term is borrowed from American military training simulations, in which the "good guys" are always the blue team, while the so-called "Aggressor" force is the red team. It is no coincidence that the color red is also associated with communism.

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⁵⁶ Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 430, 438.

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⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33, 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

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Biography

Erika Lee is an American historian and director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. She has written four award-winning books on immigration from Asia to the United States, the history of Asian Americans and xenophobia. Lee has given invited lectures at numerous universities, media outlets and community organizations throughout the United States and Canada. Her most recent book, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*, won the American Book Award. She is the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants who entered the United States through both Angel Island and Ellis Island.