

Preface and Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS the third volume in a loosely connected trilogy on the Chinese exclusion era. The first volume, *Entry Denied*,¹ published in 1991, contains eight essays, four of which analyze how the exclusion laws and the changing ways in which they were enforced affected Chinese communities in the United States. The other four essays document how members of those communities dealt with the constraints on their lives by relying on a complex institutional structure that enabled them to combat the laws while connecting them to larger developments in both China and the United States. In contrast to the focus on institutions in the first volume, the seven chapters in *Claiming America*,² the second volume published in 1998, explore the multidimensional consciousness of individuals. They examine how some first- and second-generation Chinese Americans claimed America as their own by forcefully asserting that they, too, believed in democracy and equality. They declared that Chinese were not simply earning a living in the United States as “sojourners,” but were also self-consciously embracing the American creed despite the fact that their presence was not welcomed on American soil. In the present volume, *Chinese American Transnationalism*, the eight contributors dissect the many ways in which Chinese living in the United States maintained ties to China through a constant transpacific flow of people, economic resources, and political and cultural ideas, the exclusion laws notwithstanding.

At first glance, the conceptual frameworks in the three volumes may seem to contradict one another. That is, the overarching theme of *Entry Denied* is resistance against discrimination—the Chinese American version of the “minority” paradigm that chronicles the agency of oppressed groups as they struggle against oppression. In contrast, the studies in *Claiming America* highlight not only the desire of some Chinese Americans to assimilate, but also their determination to claim a rightful place in U.S. society as Americans, thereby illustrating the complex ways in which assimilation theory is applicable to Chinese Americans. The guiding concept in this book is transnationalism. The essays document the many ways that Chinese migrants used to maintain ties to their homeland even as they set down roots in America. But the contradictions among the three conceptual frameworks are more apparent than real: the twenty-three essays in this trilogy, taken as a whole, underline the fact

that the lives and consciousness of the Chinese who came to the United States were multifaceted and far more complex than any single scholarly concept can encompass or explicate. During the exclusion era, Chinese *simultaneously* resisted exclusion and defended the communities they had established in the United States; claimed America by fighting for the same rights that other immigrants enjoyed; and maintained demographic, economic, political, social, and cultural ties to their ancestral land. Studies based on a unitary scheme, be it the long-lived European-immigrant model of assimilation; or the 1960s conglomerate of pluralism, multiculturalism, agency, and resistance; or the currently trendy notion of transnationalism, are all simplistic. Counterposing one against another misses the point because life is more layered, fluid, and contradictory than the concepts that scholars think up to capture, in words, people's lived experiences in the material as well as symbolic realms. Therefore, instead of playing intellectual one-upmanship by declaring, "My theory is more sophisticated than yours," I think it is more important to ask, "What aspects of human existence do studies guided by each framework illuminate?"

Looking back, I am delighted by how much the writing of Chinese American history has changed in fifteen years. Thus, an observation I made when I wrote the preface for *Entry Denied* in 1990 is no longer correct. I had said that "In a double sense, then, the six decades of exclusion are the 'dark ages' of Chinese American history. That period is shadowy because we know so little about it; it is also dark because it was characterized by immense suffering and deprivation." While the suffering and deprivation can never be erased, standing as grim monuments to those decades of extreme hardship met with steadfast courage and endurance, the exclusion period is no longer "dark" in terms of historiography. Some of the best work in Chinese American history published in the late 1990s and the early 2000s deals with the exclusion era. Much of it was written by the contributors to this volume. If faculty teaching Chinese American or, more broadly, Asian American history can choose only one book about the exclusion era to assign in their classes, this book is it.

Two other statements I made earlier also require correction. In the preface to *Entry Denied*, I had said that "the exclusion era has received almost no scholarly treatment, at least not in English, due in large part to the paucity of documentary sources on the period." In the preface to *Claiming America*, which I drafted and Scott Wong revised, we had stated, "Compared with European immigrants, Chinese immigrants and their American-born children have left relatively few historical records." In both instances, the "documentary sources" and "historical records" I had in mind were writings *by* Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans in the form of letters, diaries, journals, newspaper articles, essays, and books. In that sense, the two statements remain true. However, I had

failed to consider the immense collection of government files generated in the process of implementing the Chinese exclusion laws—a mountain of material whose existence I was aware of but had not yet plumbed myself at the time—or the extant Chinese-language sources, especially those published in the twentieth-century segment of the exclusion era. As the endnotes in this book reveal, the documentary evidence from the exclusion era is definitely not “thin,” as I had erroneously characterized it, but is, in fact, so overwhelmingly voluminous that it will take dozens of scholars years to go through it all.

Not only do we know a lot more about the exclusion era as a whole, but the chapters in this book also illustrate the fact that treating the exclusion years as a single “era” camouflages the changes that occurred over six decades. The variations from one span of the “era” to the next were significant, as Erika Lee shows in Chapter 1. Author of an award-winning book, *At America's Gates*,³ based largely but not solely on an analysis of immigration files and oral histories, Lee discusses the changing pattern of Chinese immigration and the different strategies that the aspiring immigrants used to get around the exclusion laws. She examines their socioeconomic class backgrounds, the relative proportion of women to men, what difficulties each group encountered, and how they surmounted those hurdles. Using many telling examples of individuals and their experiences, she paints a picture that foregrounds the admirable determination, resourcefulness, and ingenuity of the Chinese who sought admission into the United States. Lee concludes that “of the different strategies the Chinese tried, the most effective one was learning to negotiate their way *through* exclusion, instead of attempting to dismantle the laws altogether.” Seeking and using information from immigration officials, attorneys, and fellow Chinese already in the United States, the aspiring immigrants defied exclusion and outsmarted the bureaucrats guarding America’s gates. Some 300,000 of them entered during the exclusion era—a number that matches those who came between 1849 and 1882 when no restrictions existed. The fact that Chinese communities on American soil did not disappear is a testament to their success.

In Chapter 2, Madeline Hsu, author of another award-winning book, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*,⁴ discusses a mechanism—*jinshanzhuang* (Gold Mountain firms)—that facilitated Chinese migration and enabled the migrants to maintain their lifestyle. In addition to the supportive kinship networks and white allies Erika Lee identifies, Hsu’s study, based on an imaginative use of Chinese-language sources that have survived war, revolution, famine, and natural disasters in China—specifically, in Taishan District, Guangdong Province—reveals that Chinese overseas migration was, in fact, a well-organized *business*: “Overseas migration in the thousands was not accomplished by crossing the Pacific in fishing

boats, wooden junks, or even clipper ships. Migration in such numbers demanded a level of technological development and the existence of global networks of trade more sophisticated and reliable than had existed in China before the nineteenth century.” Jinshanzhuang began as exporters of Chinese groceries. They established a foothold in North America—Canada, the United States, and Mexico—as well as in Australia in the early 1850s. For a century, not only were they “instrumental in the growth of China’s foreign trade routed through Hong Kong,” but they also enabled Chinese living and working abroad to continue eating the food, using the medicinal herbs, wearing the clothes, and reading the newspapers and magazines to which they were accustomed. Equally important, the firms acted as a postal system that enabled the migrants to send letters and remittances to family and clan members left behind, and to receive mail from their relatives and friends in a period when China’s postal system was not yet well developed.

Sucheng Chan turns to yet another hitherto untapped body of evidence in Chapter 3—the 1900 and 1910 manuscript census schedules—to track the changing patterns of Chinese female migration, marriage, and family formation. Dividing California into three sections—San Francisco, agricultural counties, and mining and mountain counties—she discovers that *where* Chinese immigrants and their American-born progeny lived affected what work they could find. Those occupations, in turn, correlated with differential rates of marriage among the men, while the percentage of men whose wives lived with them in the United States also varied by the occupational grouping to which they belonged. However, contrary to the common belief that it was mainly merchants who could enjoy the company of their nuclear families, men in a wide array of occupations also managed to live with their wives and children in America. Chan’s findings indicate that the prevailing narrative of Chinese marriage and family formation must be modified significantly. Though China was indeed the main site of marriage and family formation, the United States was *also* such a site, not only among U.S.-born Chinese, but among immigrant men and women as well. Most intriguing of all, a large number of the China-born married women did *not* wed before they came to America; rather, about three-quarters of them had been in the United States for some years before they married. Questions about various aspects of these women’s lives can be answered only by combining the information in the manuscript censuses with other bodies of evidence—research that will take years of intensive labor to complete.

Haiming Liu author of *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family*,⁵ takes a close look at an interesting group of immigrants—practitioners of Chinese herbal medicine—who relied on transnational ties to establish their profession-cum-business in the United States. In

Chapter 4, using both Chinese and English sources, he discusses the history of herbal medicine in China, who the immigrant herbalists were, how they got their professional training, the manner in which they conducted their profession/business in the United States, the legal and social problems they confronted, and how they overcame the obstacles in their path. Focusing on this specific group, Liu argues more broadly that the nature of Chinese American culture was and is “open, engaged, and cosmopolitan.” By telling stories about individual herbalists, he shows how adeptly they “crossed ethnic borders.” He brings to life the strategies they used to expand their culturally transplanted practice and to make it economically viable by serving non-Chinese clients—many of whom came from well-to-do backgrounds—in addition to Chinese ones. Some of the non-Chinese clients performed an important advertising function on behalf of their Chinese healers by telling their friends about the effectiveness of Chinese herbal medicine. “Thus,” Liu observes, “Chinese herbal medicine can be seen as an instance of reverse assimilation.” Unlike most of the writings on Chinese Americans that assess whether they adapted to life in the United States, Liu’s chapter spotlights the impact of a certain group of Chinese immigrants on those aspects of American culture related to health, illness, and healing.

In Chapter 5, Yong Chen, author of a compelling book that tapped both Chinese and English sources, *Chinese San Francisco*,⁶ argues that “We cannot comprehend the Chinese American historical experience fully by concentrating on the U.S. setting alone. Though they were a politically discriminated against and economically exploited minority in the United States, Chinese Americans enjoyed a respected social status in China. . . . They participated actively in the national political discourse of China while simultaneously campaigning against America’s racism.” By examining the “flow of capital from America to China and the social and political significance of those transactions that facilitated the redefinition and expansion of the relationship of Chinese Americans to China,” as well as the immigrants’ willingness to act on their belief that “only a strong and rejuvenated China could protect its emigrants,” Chen offers new insights into the seeming paradoxes that characterized Chinese America and the changing meanings of “Chinese-ness” and “American-ness.” He is attentive to both the material and the ideological dimensions of ethnic identity formation. By telling the stories of individuals, he deftly demonstrates how scholars can “recognize the complexities of Chinese American transnationalism, rather than romanticize it in a simplistic way.”

In Chapter 6, Shehong Chen focuses her analytical lens on three ideological strands originating in China that generated vigorous debate within Chinese communities in America. Drawing from her outstanding book, *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American*,⁷ she discusses the various

ways in which Chinese in the United States responded to and interpreted major events in China while articulating their own preferences with regard to republicanism, Confucianism, Christianity, and capitalism. Based on a close reading of three Chinese-language newspapers published in the United States—*Chinese World* (the mouthpiece of the reform movement in China), *Young China* (the organ of the revolutionary movement headed by Sun Yat-sen), and *Chung Sai Yat Po* (a newspaper founded by Ng Poon Chew, a Chinese immigrant Protestant minister who linked the fates of China and Chinese America)—Chen demonstrates that the Chinese in America did not adopt wholesale the ideological currents flowing across the Pacific. Rather, they melded their own American experiences with critical assessments of events in China. They strongly supported a republican form of government but were not ready to jettison the core values of Chinese civilization, as embodied in Confucianism, which they continued to cherish even as intellectuals and student activists in China launched a New Culture Movement to change fundamentally China's literary tradition, to promote the study of science, and to liberate women. Also, some Chinese in America converted to and embraced Christianity, in contrast to many Chinese in China who participated in an anti-Christian crusade. Finally, the Chinese in America expressed a strong preference for capitalism over Communism, in the process reflecting what their own economic interests were.

Him Mark Lai, often called the “father” or “dean” of Chinese American history, analyzes in Chapter 7 how Chinese-language schools in America attempted to socialize Chinese American children in order to make them “authentic” Chinese. Based on both research and his own experiences as a youngster attending such a school, he describes how the first schools were established, who the teachers were, the contents of textbooks used in various grades, and what extracurricular activities were available. These schools were very much affected by the cultural, literary, and language reforms taking place in China during the early decades of the twentieth century. In particular, the reformers advocated changing the old literary style called *wenyan* to a simpler style known as *baihua* or *yutiwen*. They also promoted an oral national language called *guoyu* that all educated Chinese were supposed to learn in addition to the myriad regional dialects they spoke. Similar changes could not be implemented easily in North America, however, for several reasons. The exclusion laws limited the influx of teachers trained in the new written and oral linguistic forms; a majority of the Chinese in America spoke dialects that differed significantly from *guoyu*; and the financial resources of the immigrant communities were limited. Not surprisingly, the Chinese who set up these schools attempted to use them to disseminate the ideologies they

supported, in a manner akin to how newspapers served as the mouthpieces of various political factions.

Despite the efforts to maintain economic, ideological, cultural, and educational ties between China and America, a small but growing number of U.S.-born children of Chinese ancestry eventually adopted an agenda of their own, as Xiao-huang Yin illuminates in Chapter 8. Drawing upon his insightful analysis of Chinese American texts in *Chinese American Literature Since the 1850s*,⁸ Yin explicates two classic Chinese American autobiographies, *Father and Glorious Descendant* by Pardee Lowe and *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong. He places these books, which are like windows through which we may catch glimpses of the conflicted nuances of an emerging Chinese American consciousness, within the larger sociohistorical contexts in which they were written and published. As Yin puts it, “the American-born of the exclusion era shared a common characteristic: they were ‘American’ by culture and Chinese only by race.” This was so, despite the efforts of Chinese-language schools to make them into “authentic” Chinese. Yin summarizes the dilemma faced by Lowe and, by extension, other American-born youth of Chinese ancestry as follows: “how should he interpret the contradictions between the social reality that confronted him and the ideal of the American dream if the very American democracy and equality he admires exclude him from full participation in all aspects of American life?” Both works have endured and continue to be read decades after their first appearance because they capture how an articulate Chinese American young man and an equally eloquent Chinese American young woman negotiated their way through difficult psychological and social terrain, thereby enabling us, who live in quite a different racial and social environment—in which prejudice and discrimination still exist, but not by any stretch of the imagination similar to what prevailed in the early part of the twentieth century—to see how far we have come even though we still have a long way to go. Reading Chapter 8 in tandem with Chapters 6 and 7, we hear a stereophonic rendition of the multiple voices that rang out from Chinese America during the first several decades of the twentieth century while the exclusion laws were in effect.

Finally, a word about transliteration: when Chinese-language sources are cited or when Chinese terms are used, they are transliterated according to the pinyin system with the exception of well-known personal and place-names like Sun Yat-sen and Hong Kong or Canton. The pronunciation in the pinyin system is based on *putonghua*—the Communist name for what used to be called *guoyu* or “mandarin.” When referring to place-names in the regions whence a vast majority of the immigrants came, both the pinyin and the Cantonese or Taishanese transliterations are given, with one of them in square brackets. When citing English-language sources,

proper nouns are reproduced as they appeared in the original texts, however haphazard the transliterations may be. When citing Chinese-language sources, personal names are written in the Chinese order, with family/last name preceding given/first name. When citing English-language sources, personal names are written in the Western order, with given/first name preceding family/last name.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank K. Scott Wong, advisory editor for history manuscripts in the *Asian American History and Culture* book series published by Temple University Press, and an anonymous reviewer for his or her insightful comments and suggestions that improved our work. We are also grateful to Janet Francendese for guiding the manuscript so efficiently through the review process, Jennifer French of Temple University Press and Joanne Bowser of TechBooks, who coordinated the production process, and Melissa Messina, who copyedited the manuscript.

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1 Defying Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants and Their Strategies During the Exclusion Era

ERIKA LEE

The reason we Chinese come to the United States is because of . . . extremity at home, we have no other method by which we can keep our bodies and souls together. Should we be blocked in this . . . will our calamity not be inexpressible?¹

—*Chinese Six Companies, May 2, 1910*

DURING THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ERA, prospective Chinese immigrants faced a most difficult dilemma. While largely prohibited from immigrating to the United States by the Chinese exclusion laws, they also faced increasing economic, political, and social instability at home.² As the Chinese Six Companies, the umbrella organization for Chinese immigrant kinship and mutual benefit organizations in America, made clear in 1910, migration to the United States was essential in “keeping body and soul together” and in sustaining families both in the United States and in China. Chinese were thus highly motivated to continue to gain entry into America. Because of the immigrants’ determination and ingenuity, the Chinese exclusion acts failed to end Chinese immigration altogether. During the exclusion era (1882–1943), an estimated 300,955 Chinese successfully gained admission into the United States for the first time or as returning residents and U.S.-born citizens. In fact, the number of exclusion-era Chinese admissions was greater than during the pre-exclusion era, from 1849 to 1882, when 258,210 Chinese entered the United States.³ That so many managed to enter despite the exclusion laws is truly significant. It raises questions about the efficacy of restrictive immigration laws and demonstrates the power of immigrant resistance and agency.

Once the original Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed, the restrictions on Chinese immigration grew increasingly rigid over the course of the entire exclusion period. New laws were passed and administrative regulations were strengthened to make entry even more difficult for the Chinese who continued to seek admission into the country. By the

end of the exclusion period, immigration restriction had become the rule rather than the exception—not only for Chinese, but also for other Asian immigrants and southern and eastern European immigrants. Government statistics, immigrant testimony, and other records reveal that the exclusion laws erected barriers that cast a large shadow over all Chinese immigrants, dictating who could come, when, and under what conditions. They also influenced the types of lives Chinese would have once in America. Nevertheless, the exclusion laws were not insurmountable and Chinese were willing to go to great lengths to live and work in *Gam Saan* [*Jinshan*, which means Gold Mountain]. Gold Mountain men and women, merchants and laborers, U.S. citizens and aliens, legal and illegal immigrants all passed through America's gates, most of them successfully. They came for work and other opportunities in order to sustain their families, and they adapted to and even contested the exclusion laws in ways that American lawmakers could hardly have predicted. This chapter first examines the reasons that Chinese continued to migrate to the United States after the exclusion laws were passed. It then offers a detailed demographic portrait of the immigrants themselves. The last section analyzes the broad range of strategies that Chinese used to pass through America's gates.

COMING TO AMERICA FOR A “BOWL OF RICE”

The Chinese who migrated to the United States during the exclusion era were just one part of the immense international migration of labor accompanying the global expansion of capitalism during the nineteenth century.⁴ The European and American presence in China set in motion important preconditions for large-scale migration abroad. In other words, the Chinese went to America because Americans went to China.⁵ It is no coincidence that the Chinese who immigrated to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries originated almost exclusively from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province, a center of American and European trade in China.⁶ Domestic factors such as civil and ethnic unrest, rapid population growth, and natural disasters all took their toll on Chinese families, but as historian Yong Chen makes clear, they alone do not fully explain why Chinese emigrated from the delta to the United States and elsewhere; he argues that European and American imperialism brought instability not only to the region but also to the entire country in the form of increased taxes and unequal economic and political relations between China and its European and American trading partners. At the same time, China's trade with the United States and European countries fostered a diversified market economy that benefited the region—albeit unevenly—and allowed venturesome individuals to migrate abroad.

Migration was a tool to accumulate additional wealth and to maintain their families' prosperity or even to enhance their status in future generations.⁷

Equally important, new steamship routes between Hong Kong and San Francisco (established by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in 1867) made possible large-scale migration from China to the United States—another legacy of American expansion across the Pacific.⁸ In addition, contact with American missionaries and merchants introduced the idea of America to local Chinese, establishing an important precondition for emigration.⁹ Wong Lan Fong, for example, immigrated to the United States in 1927, but her knowledge and exposure to American customs and institutions had begun at least twenty years earlier. Living in Canton, the heart of European and American economic trade in China, the Wong family had converted to Christianity, learned English, and entered an American mission home soon after Wong Lan Fong was born in 1908. They stayed there until she turned ten. Wong's father developed close ties with American missionaries by teaching Chinese language, history, and literature in the missionary schools and giving private lessons to American missionaries and Japanese merchants. Wong herself attended an American missionary school for Chinese girls. Having been in close contact with foreigners—Americans, specifically—every day for a number of years, Wong's decision to come to the United States as a merchant's wife when she was twenty years old was in part based on the family's positive experiences with Americans in China. She remembered the missionaries as “remarkable,” generous individuals who took care of orphans and introduced “modern,” Western ways, including education for girls. When her stepmother proposed that Wong marry a *Gam Saan haak* [*Jinshan ke*], a Gold Mountain man (*haak* in Cantonese or *ke* in *putonghua* means “guest,” implying that a man who went to the Gold Mountain was only a guest there), in order to go to the United States, Wong's first thought was that “going to America meant having a good time.”¹⁰

Even Chinese who had little firsthand contact with Americans in China possessed distinct understandings of America itself. Tales of fantastic wealth in the United States had first drifted back to China during the California gold rush. The “world rushed in” to California's gold fields following the discovery of gold in 1848, and Chinese were among the crowds of people, mostly men, eager to try their hand at mining.¹¹ Long after the rush ended, Chinese still found reasons to go to Gold Mountain, especially as economic and political conditions grew more desperate in China during the early twentieth century. Mr. Low, who was born in the United States, but who returned to China for schooling in the 1920s, observed that many Chinese could find little or no paying work in the farming areas or in the surrounding cities. “You gotta remember that all

Chinese wanted to come to this country for a bowl of rice. That's the main thing. And in order to get a bowl of rice, you gotta have a job. And what jobs are open? Back then in those days, there's a lot of people that work for free," he explained.¹² Emigration was a logical choice for another emigrant, Mr. Yuen: "In those days, it's almost impossible to find a job," he explained. "So coming to America is one of the better ways perhaps to have a better future."¹³

For some, the exclusion laws did act as a major deterrence. Fong Ing Bong, an applicant for admission into the United States in 1907, explained to immigration officials that he "understood it was impossible to get in before," so he did not even try.¹⁴ Many others, however, considered emigration as the only means available to improve their economic and social standing in an increasingly unstable and tumultuous environment. Frequently, migration to the United States was regarded as nothing less than a necessity for survival. Lee Chi Yet, orphaned at a young age in Poon Lung Cheng village in Toisan [Taishan] District, was "kill[ing] himself for nothing" as a farmer in the early 1900s. People were starving to death around him, and the situation in his village was desperate. He immigrated to the United States in 1917. More than eighty years later, he explained his decision: "What the hell kind of life I have? I suffer! My eye just looking for a way to get out. I got to look for a way to go. I want to live, so I come to the United States."¹⁵ Conditions were equally bad in Kung Yick village, also located in Toisan [Taishan] District, where Jeong Foo Louie lived. That village sent 40 percent of its inhabitants to the United States in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ Like Lee Chi Yet's and Jeong Foo Louie's villages, other villages in Guangdong province, and especially in the Pearl River Delta, were filled with talk about going to the United States. Most of the young men in the countryside tried to leave by the time they were of working age; in some villages as many as 80 percent of the men were overseas, with the remaining village population—mostly women, old people, and children—relying on them for support.¹⁷

The idea that the United States was Gam Saan, Gold Mountain, remained firmly entrenched throughout the exclusion era. Although Chinese migrated throughout the world, many prospective migrants believed that their best future could be secured in America. The large numbers of Chinese who continued to come to the United States after 1882 is perhaps the strongest evidence of the positive (if unrealistic) perceptions that Chinese continued to have of life in America. Letters and visits home by Chinese in America and contemporary popular culture all reinforced the enduring vision of America as a land of opportunity. Early twentieth-century Cantonese folk songs praised the "sojourner [from] Gold Mountain" who had at least "eight hundred," if not "one thousand in gold," but chastised the "uncle from the South Seas" (Southeast Asia).

“Just look at your money bag,” the lyrics went. “It’s empty, it’s empty.”¹⁸ Letters sent from prospective migrants in China to their relatives already in the United States echoed similar perceptions. In a 1916 letter to his elder brother in San Francisco, Lee Young Sing wished him success living in “the land of beauty and finding the fountain of wealth.”¹⁹ Wong Ngum Yin, another aspiring emigrant, outlined a similar vision of America in a poem that was ironically later confiscated by the immigration authorities. His verse clearly spells out the belief that migration to America could enable hardworking peasants to make their dreams come true. For Wong, those dreams consisted of a temporary sojourn abroad to secure financial stability for his family in China. He imagined that “after years of planning and trading (in America), property (in China) is regained, hundreds of *mou* of fields acquired and a mansion for the use of my maiden (wife) and myself is built. I clothe myself in the finest of fur garments and mount a fat horse. Upon bended knees I care for my parents and freely provide for my family. All these [are] my desires!”²⁰

The existing immigration records do not reveal whether Wong Ngum Yin was able to achieve his goals, but many other Chinese found plentiful work opportunities in the United States. Industrialization and the expansion of American capitalism, especially in the American West, in the late nineteenth century created an incessant need for labor in building and maintaining railroads, growing and harvesting crops, manufacturing various goods, and mining. Chinese laborers filled many of the available jobs. Even after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, American employers remained more than willing to hire Chinese laborers despite the exclusion laws. In 1905, Harold Bolce, a U.S. Bureau of Immigration investigator, reported that there was a marked scarcity of labor throughout the western United States and that labor contractors were eager to hire Chinese workers whenever possible. One contractor who employed men to construct tunnels, aqueducts, piers, and railways explained that if they could, they would “put to work every Chinaman [they] could get.”²¹

The employment patterns of Chinese began to change around the turn of the century. Anti-Chinese violence had pushed many out of the rural areas and into urban Chinatowns. By 1920, the Chinese were concentrated in only a few occupations that they dominated. In 1920, 48 percent of the Chinese in California—home to the largest number of Chinese in the United States—worked in small businesses, laundries, restaurants, or stores. Twenty-seven percent were domestic workers. Only 11 percent worked in agriculture and 9 percent in manufacturing and various skilled crafts.²² Mr. Low, who grew up in New York City’s Chinatown, recalled that before World War II, the vast majority of Chinese earned a living in only three types of work: “In those days, it’s the laundry, the restaurant business, or a store helper. That’s it.”²³

Despite the limited occupational opportunities in the United States, Chinese migrants continued to come for work. The wages earned in the United States as a lowly laundryman were still better than what most could earn in China. During a good week in the 1920s, a laundryman could earn up to fifty dollars a week. He could generally support his family in China on that income if he was frugal. When the Great Depression caused a dramatic decrease in income (to only twenty-five dollars a week), a laundryman could still fulfill his responsibility to support his family. In fact, sociologist Paul Siu found that in the 1920s and 1930s, an immigrant with some savings was able to buy a laundry for the relatively low investment of \$2,800 to \$3,000.²⁴ Such opportunities continued to lure Chinese immigrants to the United States. Although they did not find streets paved with gold, they did find jobs that provided sustenance for their families better than what they could find in China.

The same promise of economic security also motivated many Chinese women to migrate to the United States, usually as the wife or daughter of a returning resident or exempt-class immigrant. Wong Lan Fong's experience was not uncommon. A lack of steady work plagued her family following the 1911 Revolution in China, and by the 1910s, they were forced to move around Canton [Guangzhou] in search of work and to sell the family possessions. "I remember moving every couple of years," Wong Lan Fong reflected. "The house would become smaller and not so nice. We would have to sell things . . . my father always said that this was the last thing he would sell, because he hated it, but he always had to do it again." After Wong Lan Fong's mother fell ill and died, her father and new stepmother urged her to look for a Gam Saan haak, a Gold Mountain man, to marry so that she could go to the United States. It was the only way to secure her economic future, they explained. In 1926, she married Lee Chi Yet and came to the United States a year later.²⁵ Law Shee Low's parents made a similar decision. After bandits destroyed the family's farmland and property in the 1910s, life became difficult. "My parents decided to marry me off to a Gam Saan haak from the next village," she explained to an interviewer. "We were poor and there was no other way."²⁶

IMMIGRANT CHARACTERISTICS

The Chinese who came, like other immigrant groups in America, were likely not the poorest members of society, but rather, those who had enough money to cover the expense of migration. By the 1920s, transpacific steamship passage could cost up to four hundred dollars, although most Chinese traveled "down in the bottom" in steerage, which cost significantly less.²⁷ Still, there were other costs associated with migration,

notably the fees paid to immigration attorneys who were indispensable in filing the correct papers, finding witnesses, and arguing their cases before reluctant and unsympathetic immigration officials in the United States. Those who came as “paper sons” or “paper daughters” using fake immigration papers could expect to spend several hundred more dollars.²⁸

Of the exclusion-era Chinese who managed to come, 80 to 90 percent were young, able-bodied men from the farming and laboring classes who could work and send money home, but taken as a whole, the Chinese who journeyed across the Pacific had diverse backgrounds. They included men and women, young and old, laborers and exempt-class migrants, citizens and aliens. For example, from 1880 to 1932, 8 percent of the Chinese immigrants admitted into the country were either under the age of sixteen or older than forty-four. The former, whose numbers grew significantly beginning in the 1910s and continued through the 1930s, were most likely children joining their parents who were already in the United States. There was also an increase in the number of Chinese older than forty-four years admitted (or, more likely, readmitted) into the United States beginning in the 1910s, but that number dropped significantly by 1930.²⁹ These older Chinese were probably either long-term residents who routinely crossed the Pacific to visit their families or to conduct business, or sojourners who had returned to China, where their accumulated savings dissipated. Such was the case of Yuen Tim Gong, who after working for eight years in the United States as a laundryman, returned “triumphantly” to China in 1928 with a new suit and a new pair of shoes. In his home village, he hosted a big banquet, bought a large tract of farmland, and built a grand four-story house. But life as a “Gold Mountain man” in his home village did not live up to his expectations, and his savings were quickly spent. The turbulent political and economic conditions in China convinced Yuen to move back to the United States in 1930. This time, he brought his wife with him, opened a supermarket, and remained in America for the rest of his life.³⁰

Not only did Chinese immigrants of various ages come, those who were admitted also represented a range of class and citizenship categories. Sociologist Paul Siu found that the Chinese he interviewed in Chicago who came during the 1920s included village storekeepers, Hong Kong merchants, office clerks, politicians, teachers, students, seamen, and others, all of whom sought their fortunes in the United States.³¹ U.S. government statistics also provide evidence of the immigrants’ varied class backgrounds and point to changes in their demographic composition over time. As Table 1.1 illustrates, Chinese of the merchant class (including new and returning merchants as well as merchants’ sons) constituted a third of the total number of Chinese men admitted from 1910 to 1924. U.S. citizens made up 42 percent of the admissions, while returning

TABLE 1.1. Number and Percentage of Chinese Male Immigrants Admitted by Class, 1910–1924

Year	New Merchant	Returning Merchant	U.S. Citizen	Returning Laborer	Merchant's Son	Total Males Admitted Including Other Classes
1910	228 (4%)	869 (16%)	2,060 (37%)	1,037 (19%)	882 (16%)	5,606
1911	199 (4%)	1,092 (23%)	1,570 (33%)	1,113 (23%)	404 (9%)	4,778
1912	170 (3%)	1,093 (22%)	1,689 (34%)	1,092 (22%)	412 (8%)	5,029
1913	105 (2%)	986 (19%)	2,076 (40%)	1,035 (20%)	555 (11%)	5,220
1914	180 (3%)	881 (16%)	2,126 (40%)	994 (19%)	647 (12%)	5,372
1915	238 (5%)	958 (18%)	1,935 (37%)	882 (17%)	624 (12%)	5,267
1916	242 (5%)	859 (18%)	1,871 (39%)	689 (14%)	605 (13%)	4,815
1917	180 (4%)	689 (16%)	1,906 (44%)	610 (14%)	560 (13%)	4,365
1918	128 (5%)	520 (19%)	868 (32%)	487 (18%)	274 (10%)	2,737
1919	136 (5%)	512 (17%)	905 (31%)	411 (14%)	190 (6%)	2,963
1920	102 (2%)	525 (13%)	1,693 (41%)	313 (8%)	443 (11%)	4,128
1921	284 (4%)	702 (10%)	3,120 (42%)	353 (5%)	986 (13%)	7,427
1922	642 (7%)	762 (9%)	3,823 (43%)	1,423 (16%)	1,012 (11%)	8,859
1923	495 (5%)	978 (11%)	4,452 (48%)	1,410 (15%)	1,002 (11%)	9,350
1924	452 (5%)	1,226 (13%)	4,521 (48%)	1,298 (14%)	745 (8%)	9,410
Total	3,781	12,652	34,615	13,147	9,341	85,326

Sources: U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Immigration, *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1910–1911* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910–1911); U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Annual Reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1912–1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912–1924).

laborers composed 17 percent during the same period. By the 1920s, the class composition of Chinese who successfully gained entry had changed dramatically as a result of the proliferation of illegal immigration using false papers, usually individuals claiming U.S. citizenship. During the 1920s, Chinese entering the United States as U.S. citizens were almost half of all admissions, and from 1930 to 1940, they accounted for 79 percent.³²

Most Chinese probably wished either to visit temporarily or to sojourn only long enough to accumulate sufficient savings to enable them to return home in triumph rather than to settle permanently, as was the case with many European and Mexican immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite their intentions, many stayed in the United States much longer than they had originally planned, and some never made it back to China at all. Moreover, they did not have the wherewithal to visit China as often as they might have wished. My survey of over six hundred immigrant files, documenting Chinese immigrant arrivals from

1884 to 1941, indicates that only 4 percent were able to make two visits home to China, while another 9 percent made only one visit during their years in America.³³

Many first-time arrivals joined family members already in the United States. Indeed, family reunification was a common motivation for emigration. Family members not only provided solace to homesick immigrants, they also facilitated the accumulation of more wealth in a shorter period. Some families sent all of their able-bodied sons to the United States. Arthur Lem, who entered the United States in the 1920s, explained that his uncle, who had been recruited to work as a laborer in the United States in the early 1900s, worked for many years in order to bring Lem's father to the country. "Still later, my father provided the money to bring my third uncle here. So—all three brothers were here in the United States in the 1920s." The Lems pooled their money and sent much of it to their families in China.³⁴ Kaimon Chin's family acted in a similar way. Once his father was able to establish himself as a merchant in New York City, "he sent for his brothers, and their families, and he provided a lot of money for the passage and for buying the papers and things like that."³⁵

As Arthur Lem's and Kaimon Chin's families illustrate, Chinese immigration during the exclusion era was multigenerational. In many cases, the burden of working overseas was transferred from one generation to the next while the family maintained a permanent home in China.³⁶ Brett de Bary Nee and Victor Nee found that most of the men they interviewed in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1970 belonged to the second or third generation of men their families had sent to work in America. The first ancestors had come in the 1850s and 1860s to mine for gold and to build railroads. In time, the families in China became dependent on wages earned in America for survival. So, a new cycle of migration began. As one immigrant explained, "from one generation to another, everybody tries to send a man overseas. That's the only way you can make things better."³⁷

The multigenerational pattern of male sojourning helps explain why Chinese male immigrants outnumbered Chinese females throughout the exclusion era. But patriarchal cultural values that discouraged and even forbade "decent" Chinese women from traveling abroad, anti-Chinese legislation, and the expense and trouble associated with migration also discouraged Chinese women from joining their husbands, brothers, and fathers in the United States. Immigration officials' enforcement of the exclusion laws added even more barriers to female immigration. Convinced that all Chinese women were either probable or potential prostitutes, they subjected female applicants to added scrutiny.³⁸ Thus, when the first Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, women accounted for only 0.3 percent of the total number of Chinese admitted into the United States;

in 1900, they made up only 0.7 percent of the total number of Chinese entering the country.³⁹ Over the course of the exclusion era, changes in both China and the United States affected Chinese female immigration. Changing attitudes about gender roles and an easing of cultural restrictions on Chinese female emigration made it easier for more women to leave China. In America, the immigration of Chinese women was made slightly more feasible through favorable court decisions that allowed the wives and children of Chinese merchants and U.S. citizens to apply for admission. An increase in educational and employment opportunities for women in the United States also made migration an attractive option for Chinese women.⁴⁰ In total, an estimated forty thousand Chinese women were admitted into the United States from 1882 to 1943. Although their numbers never equaled those of male immigrants, immigration statistics do indicate a trend toward gender parity over time.⁴¹ In 1910, women were 9.7 percent of the total number of Chinese immigrants entering the country. Ten years later, they were 20 percent, and by 1930, the proportion of women immigrants had risen to 30 percent.⁴²

Chinese women had varied reasons for coming to the United States. A small number came to study or teach. Some were U.S. citizens reentering the country after a visit abroad. Women who came as wives of merchants or U.S. citizens, however, made up the bulk of Chinese female immigrants, in large part because of the class and gendered dimensions of the exclusion laws. The exempt categories listed in the exclusion laws—merchants, students, teachers, diplomats, and travelers—were professional categories that applied almost exclusively to men in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. Most women were simply not eligible to enter independently. Instead, they depended on male relatives to sponsor and support their admission into the country.⁴³ As Table 1.2 indicates, from 1910 to 1924, 2,107 women (27 percent) entered as independent immigrants and 5,702 (73 percent) were admitted as dependents.

Entering as a dependent was disadvantageous. Because most Chinese women derived their right to enter the country from their male relatives' immigration status, their decisions to migrate were largely in the hands of their male relatives. Moreover, without male sponsorship, some women could not come to the United States at all. Moy Sau Bik, for example, was eligible to enter the United States as a merchant's daughter, but her father was not the person who sponsored her entry into the country because he had sold or given her immigration slot to her male cousin. He was able to do this because the papers he had filed with the immigration service listed a son, not a daughter. Acting on the prevailing patriarchal Chinese attitude that privileged sons over daughters, Moy's father apparently believed that his nephew was more worthy of immigration than his own daughter. Ineligible to enter as an independent immigrant, Moy Sau Bik was

TABLE 1.2. Chinese Women Admitted, by Class, 1910–1924

Year	Merchant Wife No. (%)	Merchant's Daughter No. (%)	Wife of U.S. Citizen No. (%)	New or Returning Merchant No.	Returning Laborer No. (%)	U.S. Citizen No. (%)	Student No. (%)	Teacher No.	Total Chinese Women Admitted Including Other Classes
1910	120 (35%)	27 (8%)	110 (32%)	0	0	49 (14%)	3	0	344
1911	136 (41%)	19 (6%)	80 (24%)	0	0	69 (21%)	5 (2%)	0	329
1912	118 (32%)	28 (8%)	88 (24%)	0	0	67 (18%)	9 (2%)	2	367
1913	155 (35%)	28 (6%)	126 (29%)	0	1	95 (21%)	19 (4%)	0	442
1914	133 (33%)	27 (7%)	122 (30%)	0	6 (2%)	75 (19%)	11 (3%)	0	401
1915	107 (27%)	15 (4%)	106 (27%)	2	7 (2%)	55 (14%)	29 (7%)	0	394
1916	108 (29%)	28 (7%)	108 (29%)	0	1	61 (16%)	16 (4%)	0	378
1917	111 (27%)	23 (6%)	110 (27%)	2	8 (2%)	102 (25%)	2	0	409
1918	88 (20%)	28 (7%)	132 (31%)	1	4	78 (18%)	28 (7%)	3	429
1919	91 (24%)	24 (6%)	91 (24%)	2	7 (2%)	50 (13%)	33 (9%)	0	377
1920	166 (30%)	35 (6%)	141 (25%)	3	7 (1%)	68 (12%)	47 (8%)	5	562
1921	271 (30%)	59 (7%)	290 (32%)	3	15 (2%)	119 (13%)	59 (7%)	4	896
1922	301 (26%)	47 (4%)	396 (34%)	9	44 (4%)	221 (19%)	75 (6%)	3	1,166
1923	319 (26%)	56 (5%)	387 (32%)	4	43 (1%)	238 (20%)	52 (4%)	4	1,208
1924	273 (21%)	78 (6%)	396 (31%)	3	42 (3%)	233 (18%)	81 (6%)	8	1,284
TOTAL	2,756 (28%)	522 (6%)	2,848 (30%)	29	185 (2%)	1,580 (18%)	469 (5%)	29	9,565

Sources: U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Immigration, *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910–1911); U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Annual Reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912–1924).

effectively excluded from the country until she married a merchant and gained entry as his wife in 1931.⁴⁴ It is difficult to determine how many other families also chose male relatives over female ones; what is clear is that there were far more opportunities for males than for females to come to the United States.

Class biases in the laws structured Chinese immigration patterns as well. From 1910 to 1924, wives and daughters of merchants formed the largest group (34 percent) of Chinese female applicants. Wives of U.S. citizens were a close second, making up 30 percent of the total female applicants, and female U.S. citizens represented 18 percent. Female students made up only 5 percent. The rest of the women applied for admission as new or returning merchants (often taking over the businesses of deceased husbands), returning laborers, teachers, or miscellaneous other categories, as shown in Table 1.2.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Chinese women not only immigrated in larger numbers, they also enjoyed a slightly higher admission rate than did their male counterparts. From 1910 to 1924, an average of 98 percent of all merchants' wives applying for admission were allowed into the country. Ninety-seven percent of all female U.S. citizens or wives of citizens were admitted, while 96 percent of all women applying as merchants' daughters were admitted. In contrast, 94 percent of new merchant applicants, 94 percent of male U.S. citizens, and 82 percent of merchants' sons succeeded in entering the United States during the same period.⁴⁵

The increase in female migration during the second half of the exclusion era reflects a significant change in Chinese immigration patterns away from sojourning and toward settlement in America. This occurred despite the exclusion laws. The impact of exclusion in shaping immigration patterns and admission processes did not wane, however. Rather, Chinese succeeded because they grew increasingly adept at challenging the laws meant to exclude them.

IMMIGRATION STRATEGIES

The Chinese exclusion laws were not insurmountable barriers. Immigrants who successfully defied them did so by fashioning strategies to combat the increasingly rigid laws and system of enforcement. Some battled fiercely against the laws and the ways they were enforced, charging the U.S. government with racial discrimination and injustice. Others adeptly navigated their way through the bureaucratic maze through legal as well as illegal means.

During the first decades of the exclusion era in the late nineteenth century, Chinese first used the American judicial system to challenge the