



Chinese American Transnationalism

*The Flow of People, Resources,
and Ideas between China
and America during the
Exclusion Era*

*A poem carved on a wooden barracks wall on Angel Island.
Photograph by Mak Takahashi. Courtesy of Philip P. Choy.
Translated by Sucheng Chan*

This wooden house has kept me for tens of days
For the Mexican exclusion law also lassoed me
What a pity heroes cannot use their martial skills
And can only wait to hear the crack of Zu's whip

As I leave this building far behind
My fellow villagers and I together rejoice
Don't say everything here is Western-styled
Though it might have been built of jade it still becomes a cage

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

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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

legality of the laws and to find ways to be admitted *within* the confines of exclusion. They also protested the exclusion policies individually and through community organizations. They hired lawyers and used the courts to affirm the rights of merchant families, returning laborers, and American citizens of Chinese descent and their families to enter or reenter the country. The Chinese consulate and the Chinese Six Companies sponsored many of the early court cases.⁴⁶ Chinese were extremely successful at using the federal courts to overturn denials by the immigration service.⁴⁷ At the same time, they also used the courts to challenge the policy of exclusion itself, including a failed Supreme Court challenge to the 1892 Geary Act, which extended the ban on immigration for ten years and insisted on the registration of all Chinese.⁴⁸

Outside of the courts, Chinese protested American exclusion policies through a variety of forums. Individually, both Chinese diplomats and working-class immigrants became persistent and vocal critics of the discriminatory treatment Chinese immigrants received.⁴⁹ In 1892, Yung Hen, a poultry dealer in San Francisco, asked a newspaper reporter, "Why do they not legislate against Swedes, Germans, Italians, Turks and others? There are no strings on those people. . . . For some reason, you people persist in pestering the Chinamen."⁵⁰ In 1899, a Chinese woman told government investigator Oscar Greenhalgh that the Chinese "had as much right to land in America as the Irish, who [are] always drunk and fighting."⁵¹ Even thirty years later, anger and a sense of injustice remained deeply ingrained among the Chinese in America. As Woo Gen, a Chinese merchant in Seattle, excitedly explained to interviewers in 1924, "We have *exclusion* law on Chinese. All other countries have what are called *immigration* laws."⁵²

Chinese leaders sent petitions, memorials, and letters to Presidents William Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, arguing that the exclusion laws and their enforcement were unjust.⁵³ In 1900, Wu Ting-fang, the Chinese minister to the United States, complained to the American secretary of state that Chinese were "entirely at the mercy of inquisitors, who . . . are generally unfriendly, if not positively hostile, to them."⁵⁴ Chinese American organizations also fielded complaints about immigration officials and the draconian measures they used to enforce exclusion.⁵⁵

In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court barred the federal courts from hearing Chinese admission cases, a decision that left the regulation of Chinese immigration solely in the hands of immigration officials.⁵⁶ Following the ruling, Chinese anger and frustration over the exclusion policy and continued racial discrimination reached a climax. Combining their anger over racial injustice in the United States with growing Chinese nationalism, merchants in China staged a boycott of American goods in May of 1905.

In a demonstration and expression of a newfound transpacific Chinese nationalism, teachers, students, professionals, laborers, and women joined the merchants and the Chinese in the United States to protest the discriminatory immigration policies.⁵⁷ While the boycott did bring about some important changes in the United States' enforcement practices, the policy of Chinese exclusion itself remained unchanged and became firmly entrenched in American immigration law by 1906. There is no better symbol of its institutionalization than the new immigration station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, which processed its first immigrants in 1910 and quickly became characterized as a "prison" by those detained there.⁵⁸ Indeed, admission through the island station proved to be much more difficult than it had been in the past when aspiring Chinese immigrants were usually kept in a shed owned by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company located on one of San Francisco's docks. After the Angel Island station had been in operation for only a year, the number of rejected Chinese increased dramatically. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company's detention shed had been located near Chinatown, and earlier immigrants could easily rely on kinsmen, friends, and lawyers to facilitate their entry into the United States. On Angel Island, however, Chinese were kept under close surveillance, and a lack of regular ferry service from the city made it much harder to receive assistance from outsiders. According to the annual report of the commissioner-general of immigration, the ratio of rejections to admissions was approximately 73 percent higher in 1910 than in 1909, 92 percent higher than in 1908, 89 percent higher than in 1907, and 100 percent higher than in 1906.⁵⁹

Chinese diplomats, Chinese-language newspapers, and Chinese and Chinese American organizations continued to be vocal critics of the U.S. immigration service and its enforcement procedures throughout the exclusion era. But by the early 1900s, it also became increasingly clear that legal, political, and economic attempts to repeal the laws were unlikely to succeed.⁶⁰ Given these failures, Chinese turned to a strategy that relied on negotiating their way *through* exclusion, instead of attempting to dismantle the laws altogether. They first educated themselves about the details, loopholes, and enforcement procedures of the laws. Chinese and their friends turned to federal immigration officials for information about admission and readmission standards and regulations. Hundreds of letters written by Chinese residents, their attorneys, ministers, neighbors, politicians, and friends poured in not only from San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Boston, but also from Springfield, Massachusetts; Rochester, New York; Jersey City, New Jersey; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Baltimore, Maryland; Norfolk, Virginia; Augusta, Georgia; Peoria, Illinois; Memphis, Tennessee; Fairmont, Nebraska; Boise City, Idaho; Denver, Colorado; and East Las Vegas, New Mexico.⁶¹

Networks of family and kin proved to be essential in financing and facilitating the journey to the United States and helping an immigrant navigate his or her passage through the bureaucratic procedures. Families with aspiring emigrants commonly pooled their savings to pay for the latter's steamer tickets, attorneys' fees, and possibly false immigration papers. As Arthur Lem explained, "everyone was very willing to help another family member to come to the Gold Mountain."⁶² The actual journey to the United States was also a family affair. In my survey of over six hundred files of immigrants applying for admission into the United States through the port of San Francisco (1884–1941), 25 percent claimed that they were traveling with a family member and 78 percent claimed that they had family members already in the United States.⁶³ Of the 25 percent of immigrants who were accompanied by a family member, slightly more than a third of them came with a sibling, 31 percent with a child, 21 percent with a parent, and 16 percent with a spouse.

The benefits of relying on family members throughout the immigration process were enormous. Prospective immigrants depended on a steady stream of information and advice from their relatives and clansmen already in America to assist them with the necessary paperwork, government interrogations, and strategies on how to withstand the scrutiny of immigration officials. While Wong Quong Ken was preparing to sail to San Francisco in 1917, for example, his clansman, Wong Gong Kim, sent news of his impending arrival to the latter's two brothers who were already settled in that city. "If he should write you for assistance," instructed Wong Gong Kim, "be sure to go to the immigration office and give him whatever assistance needed. If you have to spend a little money for him, it will be all right; he will give it back to you when he is landed."⁶⁴ Likewise, Lee Young Sing in Hong Kong wrote to his brother in San Francisco asking him to look after a fellow clansman about to arrive in San Francisco and to give advice to their young nephew who would also be sailing soon and who "knew very little about things in the world."⁶⁵

Once in the United States, immigrants routinely relied on family members upon arrival and throughout the government's investigation and detention process. They could count on their relatives and fellow clan members to greet them when their steamers finally docked in San Francisco. In December of 1899, Wong Hong and Chew Dong Ngin were among a welcoming crowd waiting at the pier. They had made a special trip to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's dock to welcome young Fong Tim, the son of one of their Chinatown friends and probably a fellow villager from Ting Ching village in Ying Ping [Enping?] District. Fong Tim, recognizing the two faces in the crowd, nodded his head and waved.⁶⁶ The family friends would later spend much time in the interrogation room filing affidavits and answering questions asked by the immigration officials about

Fong Tim's family and his trip from China. They were expected to know every minute detail about the Fong family and were carefully scrutinized. "What kind of feet has Fong Tim's mother?" (This question was meant to distinguish whether a Chinese woman had bound or natural unbound feet.) "Where were the children born?" "When were they born?" "Did the boy's mother ever have brothers or sisters?" If the witnesses could not give exact answers, the immigration officials immediately jumped on them. "Why should you remember the day of one [boy's birth] and not the other?" demanded the official when Wong Hong could only give the approximate date of birth of Fong Tim's brother. "Would you not know of uncles or aunts if the boy had them?" the official continued. Fortunately for Fong Tim and his father's friends, these small gaps in the testimony were considered minor, and Fong Tim was landed.⁶⁷ Immigrants detained by the U.S. government also relied on family and friends as their link to the outside world. In 1906, Wong Ngum Yin's uncles and cousins in San Francisco hired an attorney, gained his release from the detention shed, and provided clothes to protect him from the cold. "I will surely repay you [and not] bring shame unto our Tribe," he promised.⁶⁸

That the Chinese willingly traveled great distances, invested many hours, and even put themselves at risk of investigation to help relatives, friends, and clansmen is evidence of the importance of family and kin networks in the immigration process. As sociologist Paul Siu bluntly explained, "all laundrymen have relatives in China, but only those who have money and have good connections are able to have them come."⁶⁹ Wen-hsien Chen, another sociologist, agreed: new arrivals without relatives or friends in America were at an inherent disadvantage. If denied entry, these immigrants "seldom made an effort to force entry." However, those who had relatives and friends in the United States possessed the financial and moral support to fight the decision and "make every effort to secure entry."⁷⁰

Strong connections and supportive family members were just two tools Chinese immigrants and returning residents used to facilitate immigration during the exclusion era. Other strategies involved an adept negotiation around government policies and procedures that favored certain classes and categories of Chinese immigrants over others. For example, because the exclusion laws exempted merchants, Chinese applying for admission under this category learned to emphasize their class status whenever they dealt with immigration officials. They hoped that they would not have to endure as much scrutiny and would pass easily through America's gates. In 1899, merchant Lee Fook hired an immigration attorney who repeatedly referred to his client as a "capitalist" and a "gentlemen of means, of elegant leisure."⁷¹ Likewise, knowing that immigration officials generally treated first-class passengers better than those in steerage, merchant Lee

Chi Yet went so far as to save his wages as a laundry worker for an extra year to bring his wife, Wong Lan Fong, over in first class. When she arrived in Angel Island in 1927, she was processed and admitted within a day.⁷²

Chinese women, whom immigration officials routinely suspected of being prostitutes, adopted similar strategies and offered evidence of their "proper character" or class status. One of the first women to apply for admission through the port of San Francisco after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed was Leong Cum, a U.S. citizen born in Lewiston, Idaho. Applying for readmission in May of 1884, Leong found it necessary to distinguish herself from less desirable female applicants. A garment maker by profession, she presented three affidavits to immigration officials. Each emphasized that she was "a woman of excellent reputation and irreproachable character." One of the affidavits was from Jerome Millian, a Chinese interpreter who likely worked for the immigration service. Both the affidavits and Millian's endorsement worked in Leong's favor. She was landed two days after she arrived.⁷³

Because immigration officials expected merchant families to possess fine clothing, a respectable manner, and especially, in the case of women, bound feet—a marker of wealth and status in traditional China—women applying as merchants' wives learned to highlight those traits. In 1901, Gee See, a merchant's wife residing in Los Angeles, submitted an application for readmission upon her return from a trip to China complete with a full-length photograph and an X-ray of her feet. Her affidavit explained that she was "a small footed woman or bound-footed woman." The photograph showed Gee See sitting down and holding a small child. Her small feet were clearly displayed. The X-ray was described as showing "conclusively that the feet of this woman are what is known as 'small' or 'bound,' the position of the bones and their abnormally small size distinctly appearing."⁷⁴

In addition to emphasizing clear markers of class status and morality to suspicious immigration officials, Chinese immigrants and returning residents also relied on sympathetic neighbors, friends, politicians, employers, attorneys, and Christian ministers from across the country to file affidavits, write letters, and even travel to the immigration office to testify on their behalf.⁷⁵ As the Bureau of Immigration valued (and at times required) testimony from whites over Chinese to substantiate claims of entry and reentry into the United States, this assistance and support was very valuable. In 1889, A. S. Schell, a longtime resident of Knights Ferry, California, asked a lawyer to assist his two neighbors—American-born citizens Jin Young and Charley Foo—in their attempt to reenter the United States. Schell's letter was full of compliments. He tried his best to sway the immigration service in favor of his friends: "I trust that with your assistance, backed up with this and perhaps other testimonials, he [*sic*]

will have no difficulty in landing. Both are excellent and good men." Schell also circulated a petition to a dozen other non-Chinese residents of Knights Ferry who signed it, corroborating his own judgment that the two Chinese residents were men of good character who should be admitted promptly. Soon thereafter, Jin Young and Charley Foo were landed.⁷⁶ Likewise, in 1890, McConnell Jenkins of Logansport, Indiana, wrote on behalf of a longtime Chinese neighbor who desired to go to China to visit his mother and then return to the United States. "He is a laundryman, a good citizen, industrious, temperate, and highly esteemed by all who have business relations with him," McConnell wrote.⁷⁷ Wong Let, a merchant in Riverside, California, astutely recognized that credible witnesses from the middle and upper classes increased his chances of reentering the country. Thus, he secured affidavits from a number of merchants, lawyers, and even the city's marshal, postmaster, and ex-postmaster, confirming his long-term residence in the city and the status of his business. J. S. Noyes, a superior judge for the state, also filed an affidavit supporting the character of both Wong and the witnesses for the case.⁷⁸

In addition, Chinese turned to Christian organizations like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco to substantiate their claims. Both were active in the Chinese American community and were well respected by the immigration service. In 1915, the YMCA even had a full-time immigration secretary in San Francisco. Both organizations frequently intervened on behalf of Chinese immigrants and returning residents. In 1915, for example, Lee Sue Ben, a returning student and former teacher at the YMCA in Canton [Guangzhou], sought the organization's assistance while he was detained on Angel Island. Frank B. Lenz, the YMCA's immigration secretary, wrote a letter to the immigration inspector in charge and pointed to Lee's right to enter the United States. He also urged a "speedy settlement of the case."⁷⁹ Likewise, Lee Sue Ben himself wrote to influential Chinese newspaperman Ng Poon Chew, editor of *Chung Sai Yat Po*, to ask for his assistance, and to Samuel Backus, commissioner of immigration in San Francisco, to "find out what the trouble is" regarding his own landing. Ng Poon Chew urged that Lee be admitted as promptly as possible. After several days of detention, Lee was landed the day after Commissioner Backus received the letters.⁸⁰

Donaldina Cameron, director of the Presbyterian Mission Home, a "rescue" home for Chinese prostitutes, was another particularly important ally of Chinese immigrants attempting to enter the United States.⁸¹ Historian Judy Yung notes that "it was generally known that a supporting letter from Donaldina Cameron . . . often helped get cases landed."⁸² In 1916, Cameron came to the assistance of Lee Kan, a Chinese merchant whose wife and two sons were being detained on Angel Island. In her letter

to the commissioner of immigration, Cameron stated that she had known Lee Kan for some years and that he was indeed a bona fide merchant. At Lee's request, Cameron even traveled to Angel Island to meet the family. In her letter, she asked that parole be granted for the wife and youngest child if the entire family could not be landed immediately. She also made an investigation herself into Lee's status and reported to the immigration service, "I have made special inquiry and investigation to further assure myself that Mr. Lee Kan's interests centered in the store . . . I have been assured from reliable sources that he has been at all times engaged in the mercantile business. . . . In view of these and other facts, I trust that in due course of time it will be deemed advisable to land the family of Mr. Lee Kan."⁸³ With Cameron's help, Lee Kan's entire family was finally landed. Such assistance from non-Chinese acquaintances, friends, and allies was essential in enabling Chinese to continue immigrating to the United States while the exclusion laws were in effect.

By far, Chinese immigrants' most valuable resource during the exclusion era was an organized network of immigration lawyers. Chinese had a long history of hiring the best American lawyers to challenge anti-Chinese legislation even before 1882. During the early years of the exclusion era, these lawyers helped spearhead the constitutional challenges to the exclusion policy itself. They also represented Chinese immigrants who sought entry through the judicial courts.⁸⁴ Legal representation in Chinese immigration cases continued into the exclusion era, especially as Chinese appealed to the courts to overturn immigration officials' decisions to deny them entry. Collector John Wise noted in 1895 that "the interests of the Chinese are looked out by a Chinese Consul and also by shrewd lawyers."⁸⁵ In 1899, the Treasury Department found that as a rule, the "very best attorneys in the city" represented the Chinese.⁸⁶ Although one might suspect that only those Chinese with the most financial resources could afford to hire lawyers, Chinese from all class backgrounds found it expedient to do so. By the early twentieth century, when immigration cases were heard solely by the administrative officers of the immigration service, lawyers were still instrumental in keeping track of the necessary paperwork, lobbying on behalf of clients, and facilitating entry and reentry in ways that would have been extremely difficult for Chinese to accomplish on their own. The number of immigration lawyers hired by the Chinese grew in direct relationship to the increasing severity and complexity of the exclusion laws and their enforcement. By the 1930s, sociologist Wen-Hsien Chen observed that "without exception," all cases of Chinese aliens arriving at the port for the first time with an application for permanent residence were looked after by lawyers, and that even returning Chinese residents secured the services of an attorney "as a safeguard" because of the precarious nature of the immigration investigation.⁸⁷ My

survey of over six hundred Chinese who entered the United States from 1884 to 1941 revealed that 90 percent had hired immigration attorneys to process papers and to represent them before the immigration service.⁸⁸

Immigration attorneys were not allowed to participate or be present in the initial hearings and interrogations conducted by the immigration service, but if a Chinese applicant was denied entry, he or she could then hire an attorney to examine the file in order to rebut the decision. Attorneys lacked access to the entire file, but, despite this handicap, they continued to be invaluable assets to new and returning immigrants.⁸⁹ They effectively and consistently pointed out flaws in the judgments and conclusions of immigration officials, oftentimes successfully forcing a reversal in their decisions. They also marshaled outside experts, previous rulings and court decisions, witnesses, and evidence to challenge the government's findings.⁹⁰ As Commissioner of Immigration John D. Nagle commented in 1927, attorneys remained "indispensable" allies to the Chinese.⁹¹

Most of the lawyers who represented Chinese clients in the first decades of exclusion were prominent attorneys in San Francisco who worked not only on behalf of individual Chinese clients, but also on behalf of the Chinese Six Companies and the Chinese Consulate. Thomas Riordan, for example, was the principal attorney representing the Chinese in the 1880s and 1890s and was retained by the Chinese Consulate to represent all high-profile cases. His successor, Oliver P. Stidger, also became a vocal critic of the exclusion laws and built a formidable practice based on the Chinese immigration business.⁹² In 1915, Stidger was listed as the official attorney for the Chinese Chamber of Commerce as well, and the firm of Stidger, Stidger, and Kennah—made up of Oliver Stidger, his son, Jason, and former immigrant inspector Henry C. Kennah—became one of the leading law firms representing Chinese immigrants.⁹³ Other individuals representing the Chinese before the Bureau of Immigration acted more like brokers who arranged for witnesses to testify before the immigration service, filed witness affidavits, and secured more experienced counsel if necessary. Some had deep-rooted connections with the Chinese community; a few had even been former members of the Bureau of Immigration and found that their inside knowledge of the agency translated into well-paid work outside the service. That the business of immigration lawyers was a lucrative one cannot be doubted. In 1885, Treasury Department officials estimated that the attorney's fee for habeas corpus cases was no less than one hundred dollars per case.⁹⁴ Moreover, as long as the exclusion laws remained in effect, the demand for skillful lawyers remained high, and attorneys proved their worth in a variety of ways. Immigrants like Chin Sing, a U.S.-born Chinese returning from China to the United States, could count on his attorneys to file the necessary documents and arrange for witnesses to travel to Angel Island even

while he was detained and largely powerless to lobby on his own behalf. When Chin Sing returned to the United States after a two-year absence in 1911, immigration officials denied him admission on the suspicion that he was not the real Chin Sing, but an impostor. Although Chin could speak English and demonstrated a "good knowledge" of his hometown of Dutch Flat, California, he had neither the necessary certificate of identity that proved his status as a "returning native" (it had been burnt in a fire) nor any witnesses (preferably white) who could identify him and confirm his birth in the United States. Chin hired attorneys George McGowan and Alfred Worley to appeal the decision and launch a search in Dutch Flat for any old acquaintances who could come and testify on his behalf. After a two-month search, the lawyers located two witnesses and brought them to Angel Island, where they and Chin immediately recognized each other. Chin was finally landed in July 1911, five months after he arrived back in the United States.⁹⁵

CONCLUSION

The strategies adopted by Chinese immigrants and returning residents and citizens to adapt to and negotiate their way through the exclusion laws proved to be highly successful. Indeed, most Chinese men and women were admitted into the country. From 1910 to 1924, the average admission rate counting both men and women, under the exclusion laws was 93 percent,⁹⁶ though non-Chinese immigrants subjected to the general immigration laws did have a higher admission rate of 97 percent.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, considering the immense barriers that the Chinese exclusion laws posed to new immigrants, returning residents, and citizens alike, the fact that over 300,000 Chinese successfully defied exclusion is testament to their persistence and motivation. In their opinion, the exclusion laws were unjust and discriminatory. Relying on family, clansmen, white allies, and lawyers to help them navigate their way through the maze of bureaucratic procedures and policies, they mobilized all of the resources at their disposal to challenge the laws in the nation's highest courts and in countless U.S. immigration service interrogation rooms across the country. Insisting that they had the right to immigrate to the United States, they played a crucial role in ensuring that Chinese communities would not disappear on America soil.