

# Chinese American Transnationalism

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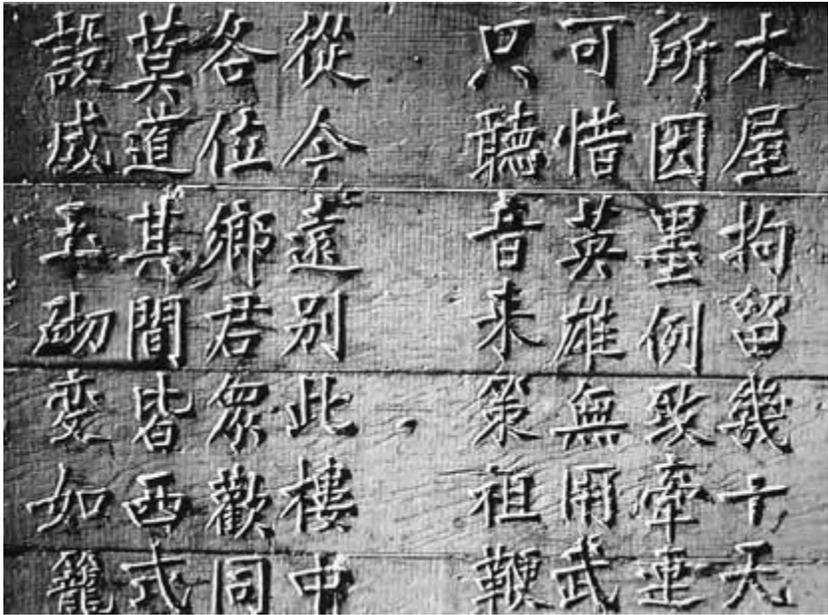
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*A poem carved on a wooden barracks wall on Angel Island.  
Photograph by Mak Takahashi. Courtesy of Philip P. Choy.  
Translated by Sucheng Chan*

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

# Chinese American Transnationalism

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

*Edited by*

SUCHENG CHAN



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS the third volume in a loosely connected trilogy on the Chinese exclusion era. The first volume, *Entry Denied*,<sup>1</sup> 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*,<sup>2</sup> 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*,<sup>3</sup> 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*,<sup>4</sup> 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*,<sup>5</sup> 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*,<sup>6</sup> 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*,<sup>7</sup> 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*,<sup>8</sup> 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.

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# Chinese American Transnationalism



# 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?<sup>1</sup>

—*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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.