PAPER SONS OF THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ERA

WHO WERE THE PAPER SONS?

In 1882, President Chester Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA), a federal law that restricted Chinese immigration into the United States. The restriction excluded select cities, U.S. citizens, and their direct relatives. After birth certificates and immigration files were destroyed in the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, the U.S. Immigration Bureau developed a grueling system to interrogate the tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants who testified their citizenship status or relation to a citizen.

PAPER SONS refer to Chinese immigrants who adopted an alias identity and family lineage in order to circumvent the law. However, the presumption that all Chinese people were paper sons perpetuated racial discrimination, strict documentation, and social control of the community. Since the exact number of paper sons is unknown, descendants today strive to uncover the untold sacrifices of an invisible community that paved their way to, and across America.

SEEKING REFUGE AND WORK

There were three major factors that led to the surge of Chinese immigration:

1. The Qing Dynasty reign was in turmoil after the loss of the First (1839-1842) and certification. The ruling of permanently extended the law with added restrictions. Only an elite class of would dwindle and leverage the labor competition (since Chinese communities were

2. The Gold Rush of California attracted 25,000 Chinese immigrants in search of economic opportunities. Mining companies paid them 45% less than White workers, plus a $20 monthly foreign miner's tax.

3. Chinese people were recruited for the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad when the company couldn’t fill 5,000 positions. Over 90% of railroad workers were Chinese, earning $8 a week.

CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT (1882-1943)

Throughout this time, prejudice against the Chinese community set a precedent that eventually prohibited the entry of Chinese immigrants. Anti-Chinese propaganda, riots, and massacres increased as Asians were viewed as an unassimilable race. On race, the Panic of 1873 led to a worldwide economic recession, which triggered intense labor competition and racial bitterness towards the “undesirable” in America.

The Chinese Exclusion Act initially covered ten years, in hopes that the targeted group would dwindle and leverage the labor competition (since Chinese communities were predominantly male and because interracial marriage was illegal). Later, the Geary Act permanently extended the law with added restrictions. Only an elite class of merchants, diplomats, educators, and students were allowed entry with proper government-issued certification. The ruling of United States v. Wong Kim Ark later exempted birthright citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment.

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTATION

Chinese passengers were detained on Angel Island in San Francisco and interrogated by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Paper sons prepared for the interview by memorizing voluminous coaching books that contained personal information, village history, and genealogy of their new identity. Most books were discreetly destroyed but the few that survived detailed meticulous facts, including pictorial maps of villages. A relative or witness must separately match all the answers correctly.

Immigration inspections were devised to uncover discrepancies in testimonies, as all Chinese people were presumed suspect. Federal agencies actively enforced the Chinese Exclusion Act by documenting cases relating to immigration, travel, trade, and social history. Immigration records generally contained the subject's name, place, date of birth, medical files, occupation, ship passenger log, and genealogy. Materials could also include INS proceedings, subpoenas, and transcripts of the interview. The stringent documentation reflected the stereotypical belief that Chinese people were inherently immoral.

Examples of interrogation questions:

- List all the people who lived within five houses on all sides of your residence.
- What direction does your house face? How many houses are on your street?
- Describe the clock in your parlor.
- Name all the men in your village that have bound feet.
- What year did your grandfather come to the country?

PHOTOGRAPHS

The Chinese community was the first ethnic group required to have photo identification. All residents must register and carry identification papers at all times. The visual identification and registration system implemented the idea that all Chinese were suspect. At the time, identity photographs were primarily used for criminal purposes, and the system was developed to mitigate paper immigration while alienating the targeted group. It also created an archive of visual knowledge that immigration stations used to share, cross-reference, and fact-check information. In response, the Chinese created their own photographic collection to keep track of their paper family.

"Inspectors conducted increasingly detailed investigations into identity photographs and created an extensive national archive of Chinese identity documents. It emphasized their own power, particularly their ability to see through fraudulent applications" (Peleg-Gordon, 2005, p. 71).

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REFERENCES


GUIDES TO RESEARCHING IMMIGRATION RECORDS

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION Immigration files, aka Alien Files or A-Files, exist if the person became a citizen, registered with the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS), or was associated with the Chinese Confession Program. Original records relating to Chinese immigration and exclusion can be found in local archives.

ANGEI LSAL IMMIGRATION STATION is now a National Historic Landmark, with hundreds of Chinese poems carved into the walls of old detention barracks. The poems detailed

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the knowledge gap and research tools can be further explored.

FRIENDS OF ROOTS is an organization that helps Chinese Americans conduct research and discover their genealogical roots. It has its own village database, searchable by surname and village name. The organization runs educational programs, and arranges visits to ancestral villages and other historical sites in Guangdong Province.

NARA case files are indexed by Ancestry and searchable by district, ethnicity, vessel, and passenger data. Information is also available at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and USCIS Genealogy Program. Historians, scholars, and organizations, such as Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, have created multiple discplines on the history of Chinese Americans.

Other online databases and resources include FamilySearch (Genealogical Society of Utah), Chinese Family History Group (Southern California Genealogical Society), and Guide to Reading Engravings on Chinese Tombstones. Academic institutions, such as C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University and Harvard University, may also hold archival materials relating to Chinese immigration and cultural heritage.


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