

history theatre



The Paper Dreams of Harry Chin **Play Guide**

Play written by Jessica Huang



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Sheila Chin Morris Daughter of Harry Chin

The Paper Dreams of Harry Chin is a play about my father's immigration story. It's based on my memories and conversations with my parents, my observations and understanding of the events of our family life, and the decisions my father and mother made. Jessica Huang is a young playwright who discovered dad's oral history at the Minnesota History Center conducted by Sherry Fuller back in 2003. Ms. Huang contacted me two years ago wanting to discuss the possibility of writing a play about the paper son path to America during the decades of the Chinese Exclusion Act. My father's story was more unusual, and it was evident that others were less forthcoming about talking of their experiences.

My father, known to most as "Harry Chin" was one of those thousands of paper sons—he was born Liang Chiang Yu. The impact on our family was multifold: There was the fear that he would be deported in the 1960. There was the discovery that he had lost a wife and baby daughter in China before World War II broke out. Then to find out that his Chinese family had survived and found him in Minnesota in 1960. This set into motion the eventual deterioration of my parent's marriage, my mother's health, and her death. How did two people from such disparate backgrounds meet and fall in love? What was the historical and political context of the time?

How do I feel about this play? This is a public tribute to both my parents. For mom the funeral service we never held. For dad the recognition he always was so very shy about. Both of them caught in terrible circumstances, did the best they could to take care of everyone. Dad was as honest as they come, and happy with every new day, until he died at age 93 after a fall. For mom, she endured her own early family tragedies and died suddenly in 1970.

I gave Jessica Huang creative license to express her own response to my families story. This is historical education presented in a way that may make you want to learn more about the immigration experiences. America is a nation of immigrants, and the quest of survival and freedom is like a current of water, it finds a way.

Chinese Exclusion Act

Per the 1790 Naturalization Act, only free white persons were eligible for citizenship. The Naturalization Act of 1790 set the criteria for naturalization to two years of residency, proof of good moral character, and an oath to support the Constitution. The law's use of the phrase, "free white person," also excluded blacks and immigrants of other races from being eligible for citizenship. In 1795, as anti-immigrant feeling began to grow, the necessary period of residence was increased to five years. Without the right to naturalize, immigrants would not be able to vote and would have no political voice or power. After the Civil War, the act was rewritten to allow persons of African descent to also apply. Asian immigrants were not eligible to be naturalized, but it said nothing about the citizenship status of non-white persons born on American soil.

In the mid 1800's America needed laborers for its burgeoning economy. In China, American labor recruiters distributed leaflets extolling the virtues of America. Tens of thousands of Chinese left their homes and their families to find a better life. They took jobs building railroads, working in fields or mining. Although Chinese composed only .002% of workers in the 1870s, an economic downturn resulted in serious unemployment problems and led to politically motivated outcries against immigrants who would work for low wages.

In the spring of 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by Congress and signed by President Chester Arthur. This act provided an absolute 10-year moratorium on Chinese labor immigration. For the first time, Federal law proscribed entry of an ethnic working group on the premise that it endangered the good order of certain localities.

However, certain groups of Chinese were exempt from the immigration restrictions and were still free to enter the United States. Exempt groups included merchants, government officials, students, and teachers, but none were eligible to apply for U.S. Citizenship. The Act also affected the Chinese who had already settled in the United States. Any Chinese who left the United States had to obtain certifications for reentry, and the Act made Chinese immigrants permanent aliens by excluding them from U.S. citizenship. After the Act's passage, Chinese men in the U.S. had little chance of ever reuniting with their wives, or of starting families in their new home.

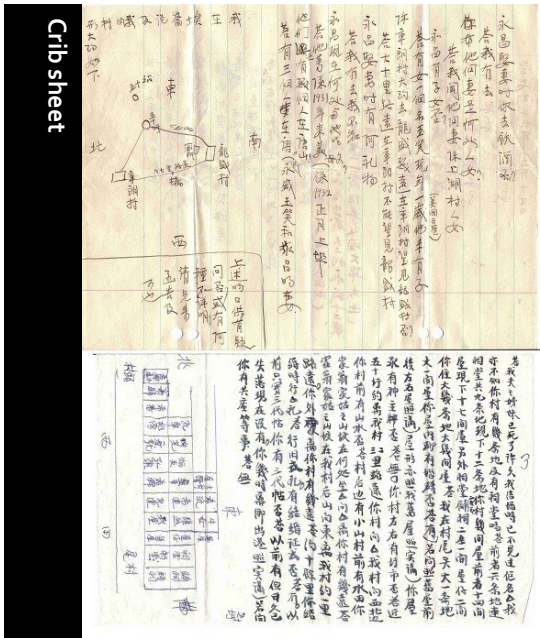


Young boy Interrogated at Angel Island, 1910s

Under the act, admission of Chinese laborers was prohibited. One class of Chinese the U.S. could not keep out were those who were already citizens of the United States by having a father who was a citizen. Until the mid-1920s, women did not have separate citizenship from their husbands and parents. Then, as now, any person born in the U.S. is automatically a citizen, regardless of the status of their parents. The children of citizens are also citizens, regardless of where they are born. Hence, any Chinese who could prove citizenship through paternal lineage could not be denied entry.

When the exclusion act expired in 1892, Congress extended it for 10 years in the form of the Geary Act. This extension, made permanent in 1902, added restrictions by requiring each Chinese resident to register and obtain a certificate of residence. Without a certificate, she or he faced deportation.

In 1906, the fires following the earthquake that devastated the city of San Francisco destroyed the office containing birth records. This allowed many Chinese residents to successfully claim citizenship because the government could not dispute their claim. As American citizens, these Chinese were entitled to bring in wives and children from China.



Because of the fire and the natural born citizen exception, many young Chinese, known as “paper sons” or “paper daughters” risked the long journey under the false pretense that they were the sons of a resident American. Many bought false birth papers identifying them as children of American citizens and coaching books with detailed information on their “paper” families, which they studied to pass grueling interrogations. Once a paper son established his citizenship, he could later go back to China, have children and claim citizenship for them, repeating the cycle. Men often could not bring over their Chinese-born wives, creating a system of serial immigration repeated over several generations.

U.S. immigration knew about paper sons and devised a method to screen them. American immigration officials established a screening process to weed out such immigrants. More than 30% of those applying for entry into the United States, as paper sons, were rejected and forced to return to China. Because official

records were often non-existent, an interrogation process was created to determine if the immigrants were related as they claimed. Questions could include details of the immigrant’s home and village as well as specific knowledge of his or her ancestors. They could be as arcane as asking the full names of the children of the man living five houses to the left or how many steps it was to the village duck pond. Interrogations could take a long time to complete. The average detention was two to three weeks, but many stayed for several months.

The Chinese Exclusion Act, was extended and expanded by the 1924 Immigration Act; which was also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. This limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota. The quota provided immigration visas to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 national census. It completely excluded immigrants from Asia. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by the 1943 Magnuson Act, during a time when China had become an ally of the U.S. against Japan in World War II. The Magnuson Act permitted Chinese nationals already residing in the country to become naturalized citizens and stop hiding from the threat of deportation. While the Magnuson Act overturned the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act, it only allowed a national quota of 105 Chinese immigrants per year, and did not repeal the restrictions on immigration from the other Asian countries.

This immigration quota system was abolished by the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, which abolished an earlier quota system based on national origin and established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled labor to the United States. Effective July 1, 1968, a limit of 170,000 immigrants from outside the Western Hemisphere could enter the United States, with a maximum of 20,000 from any one country. Skill and the need for political asylum determined admission. The Immigration Act of 1990 provided the most comprehensive change in legal immigration since 1965. The act established a “flexible” worldwide cap on family-based, employment based, and diversity immigrant visas. The act further provides that visas for any single foreign state in these categories may not exceed 7 percent of the total available.

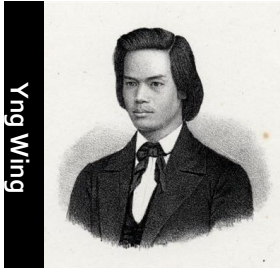
About 150,000 Chinese entered the U.S. as paper sons and daughters with over one million Americans today who can trace their origin to these paper sons and daughters. Many are unaware they carry their paper names as surnames.

Timeline of Chinese American History

1785 The arrival of three Chinese seamen in Baltimore marks the first record of Chinese in the United States

1848 Gold is discovered in California and a gold rush begins. The first wave of immigrants to the US arrived at the San Francisco house during the summer of 1848.

1850 Anti-immigrant sentiment grows as the gold begins to run out. The California legislature passes the Foreign Miners Tax that charges foreigners \$20 a month for the right to work their claims.



1855 Yung Wing receives a B.A. from Yale University, becoming the first Chinese graduate of an American university.

1860 Chinese American population in US is 34,933 out of a total population of 31.4 million.

1869 The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad is completed on May 10, 1869 by which time 11,000 of the railroad workers were from China.

1870 Chinese migrants constitute 25% of the labor force in California.

1871 San Francisco's Chinatown is the site of riots and violence on October 24, 1871 which became known as the Chinese Massacre of 1871. An estimated 17 to 20 Chinese immigrants were systematically tortured and then hanged by the mob of around 500 white men.

1882 Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act, suspending the immigration of Chinese laborers to the US and denying Chinese the right to become American citizens. It is the first US restriction on immigration based on race and nationality.

1888 The Scott Act is passed prohibiting Chinese from re-entering the US after a temporary departure.

1898 In Wong Kim Ark v. U.S., courts rule that anyone born in the U.S. is a citizen.

1910 Chinese American population in U.S. is 94,414 out of a total population of 92.2 million. Angel Island Immigration Station opens to process potential Asian immigrants.

1913 The California Alien Land Acts prohibit Chinese and Japanese from owning land. Other states pass similar laws.

1924 The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, extends & expands on the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. This new act limits the number of immigrants allowed entry into the US through a national origins quota.

1943 Through the Magnuson Act, Congress repeals all Chinese exclusion laws, grants Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens, and allows 105 Chinese to immigrate to the US each year.

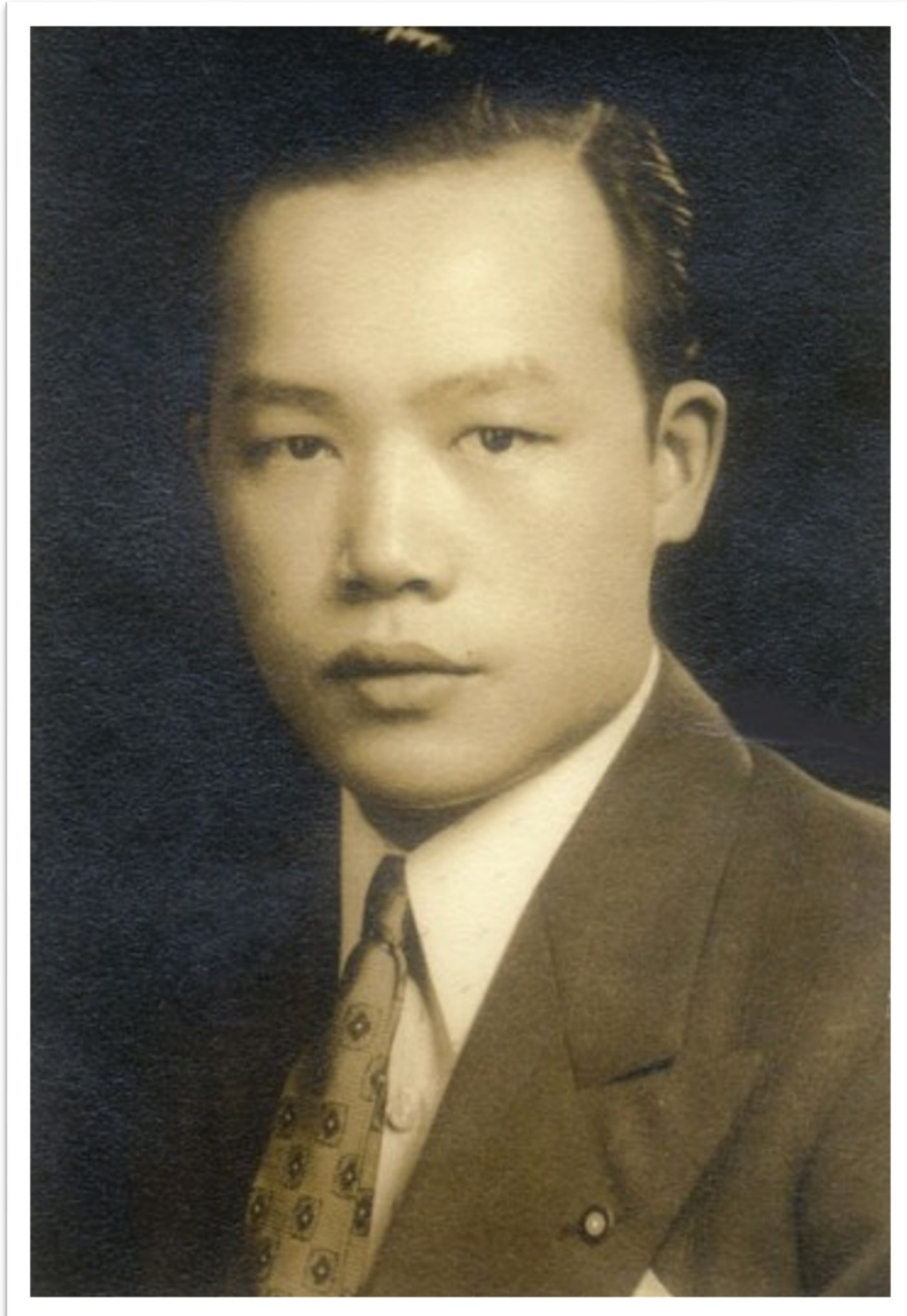
1959 Representing Hawaii, Hiram Fong becomes the first Chinese American to be elected to the US Senate.

1965 The Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Law) abolished the nation-of-origin restrictions on immigrants.

2000 Chinese American population of the U.S. is 2,879,636 out of 281,421,904.



Activities



Editorial Cartoons: A Historical Example of Immigration Debates

Introduction

Editorial cartoons comment on current political topics. Some topics—like immigration—that are part of today’s political debates have also been part of political debates in the past. This cartoon is an example. This cartoon was published in the March 9, 1882 issue of *Puck*, the Chinese Exclusion Act became law in May of 1882, so this cartoon was part of the legislative debate then. The Chinese Exclusion Act banned immigration from China; it was the culmination of decades of discrimination against Chinese immigrants, many of whom had come to work in the U.S. It was not repealed until World War II, when China was a U.S. ally.

PUCK, a magazine of political commentary and humor, published this cartoon (next page). Because the cartoon is from the past, it looks a bit different from the cartoons you see today. Working with a group, make sure you understand what is going on in the cartoon. What activity is going on in the picture? What do the two captions: #1 caption: The Anti-Chinese Wall #2 caption: The American Wall Goes Up as the Chinese Original Comes Down—tell you about what is going on? Who is doing the activity? What can you tell about them? How can you tell?

Caption: "The Anti-Chinese Wall"

Source: *Puck* Artist: F. Graetz

Second caption on cartoon that you can’t see reads: "The American Wall Goes Up as the Chinese Original Comes Down."

Although the ugliest and most racist caricatures are probably those of Chinese, here caricature is utilized sympathetically, showing the irony of European immigrants helping Uncle Sam to prohibit immigration from China.

Each brick bears a reason that the Chinese were not accepted in this country.

The Cartoon’s Strategies

Now look at the strategies that make the cartoon “work.”

1. Irony

Remember that irony refers to a situation in which something happens that is the opposite of what was expected. What is ironic about the people in the cartoon doing what they’re doing?

2. Caricature

Caricature is another strategy that cartoonists use to make their points. Caricatures often grossly exaggerate certain features of people or specific stereotypical group features. Caricature makes the people recognizable to readers; it can also make people laugh. You may have seen prominent individuals drawn as caricatures. For example, the size of Barack Obama’s ears is exaggerated in some cartoons, as is the size of Sarah Palin’s hair. Whole groups can be drawn as caricatures, too. For example, law enforcement officers are often shown as extremely beefy and aggressive.

This cartoon uses caricatures to represent specific groups of people. What groups do the caricatures in this cartoon represent? Why do you think the cartoonist used them? How else might he have conveyed the same information? Do you think he made good use of caricature or do you not like it? Why?

Conclusion

What point was the cartoonist making about Chinese immigration?

Extension Activity:

Research the Chinese Exclusion Act and the current arguments about immigration to the United States. Compare the immigration debates during the two time periods, and use it as the basis for a compare-and-contrast essay

Immigration Discussion Questions

1. Describe some parallels between the Chinese experience and the work lives and social lives of recent immigrants.
2. Have students brainstorm about why the Chinese were targeted for exclusion in 1882. What economic and social events were happening for it to be acceptable for the majority of Asian Americans to be treated in this way?
3. Ask students to discuss current popular views on immigration. Can they cite any other evidence of popular culture being used to ferment anti-immigrant sentiment? Can they find similarities in the two centuries of rhetoric?
4. Stage a debate on the rights of immigrants. Some students could play the part of people today and some could represent people from the 19th century/early 20th century.
5. Have your students design an ad which directly challenges a particular stereotype.
6. Ask students if they have heard of Ellis Island. Then, ask if they have heard of Angel Island. Talk about what countries people came from to each of these islands and what they were used for. If more students were familiar with Ellis than Angel Island, consider and discuss why that is the case.

Interrogation

Ask student to quickly write down the answers to the following questions. Give them only a few moments to answer each question. After the quiz is done, ask who had answered all the questions correctly.

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Who was your last teacher?
4. Who lives three houses down from you to the left of your front door. Please name them and give me their ages.
5. Can you name everyone who lives in that house.
6. Describe the oldest person living in that house.
7. What does that person do for a living?
8. Who lives in the second house in the street to the east of yours?
9. How long have they lived there?
10. How many houses are on the block you live on?

Explain to the students that this was a simulation of the kind of questions asked of detainees during the intensive interrogation on Angel Island between 1910-1940. If they could not answer the questions during the interrogation, even for reasons such as nervousness or their inability to understand English, they were detained and deported. Ask the student the following question: How do you think the detainees felt when being asked questions like the ones I just asked you?

For Further Reading

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