UNDER REVIEW

THE LONG SHADOW OF THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT

The true cost of the immigration policy can be measured in the generations of Chinese Americans who were never born.

By Jane Hu

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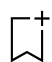
A crowd of men in Chinatown, San Francisco, in the early twentieth century.
Photograph by Keystone / FPG / Getty



Between 1848 and 1852, more than twenty thousand Chinese migrants made their way to San Francisco in search of gold. The vast majority were men—rural peasants from Guangdong Province, situated on the southeast coast of China, near Hong Kong. They continued to leave for the United States throughout the nineteenth century, first working in gold mines, then taking up other forms of labor, including the construction of the transcontinental railroad. They came to be known as "bachelor men," though many were bachelors in name only. Rarely able to send for their wives and often without the means to go home, they established ethnic enclaves, or "bachelor societies," a number of which would develop into California's earliest Chinatowns.

In 1875, the Page Act effectively barred Chinese women from entering the U.S., widening the gender gap even further. (It would begin to shrink after the 1946 War Brides Act, which allowed Chinese American veterans to bring over wives and children as non-

quota exceptions.) The Page Act prefigured the near-total ban on Chinese immigration to the U.S. seven years later, with the Exclusion Act of 1882—the country's first federal law to restrict a group on the basis of race. These laws maintained a gender imbalance of Chinese immigrants for more than a century, and their aftereffects persist to this day. The legacy of Chinese exclusion lies in the absence—the lost generations or broken bloodlines—of families that might otherwise have been. It's impossible to calculate the full consequences of these laws. We can't know how many bachelor men did eventually have children, especially after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and subsequent fire destroyed local public birth records. But an absence of archives, of course, doesn't entail an absence of history.

As exclusion laws intensified during the late nineteenth century, Chinese migrants adopted increasingly sophisticated strategies to circumvent them. One ingenious technique involved forged identity papers that claimed that such migrants were the children of Chinese American citizens, and therefore eligible for citizenship. Men who immigrated this way were known as "paper sons"—sons in writing rather than in blood. Some papers were passed along by Chinese American citizens to members of their extended families back in China. Many were purchased through brokers who bought identity papers and resold them at a much higher price. Given the clandestine nature of the process, the true number of fictitious sons who arrived during exclusion will never be known. It is estimated that, by the mid-twentieth century, at least a quarter of Chinese people in the U.S. had entered the country using false papers.

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One such person was the father of the writer Fae Myenne Ng. As a teen-ager, Ng's father left China as Ng Gim Yim. He arrived at San Francisco's Angel Island as You Thin Toy, in 1940, during its final year as an immigration-detention center. Like many who had come to the island before him, Ng's father waited more than a month to be interrogated by an official, and was denied entry to the country on his first attempt, when his answers to his immigration interview were deemed incorrect. He was held on the island until his sister managed to hire an immigration lawyer.

Ng tells the story of her father's crossing in her memoir, "Orphan Bachelors," a title drawn from her father's term for Chinese men who came to the U.S. during the age of exclusion. His phrase underscores the heightened loneliness of these figures, who were effectively abandoned twice over—severed from their families back in China and unable to start their own in the United States.

Upon arriving in San Francisco, Ng's father "had a bachelor's life, living in a room at Waverly Place, having breakfast at Uncle's Café, selling the *Chinese Times* at the Square, working those first few years in restaurants in Chinatown," she writes. Despite living among bachelor men, he's saved from their fate by Ng's mother, whom he

marries in 1948. Though their union is more the product of passivity than of love ("He didn't say no, and she didn't say yes, and this would become the family template, indirectness"), Ng, the first of their four children, is born eight years later.

Ng writes of growing up among these bachelors, who spend their days drifting around the crowded tenements of Chinatown. Many live nearly their entire lives in the U.S. without any family nearby, unmarried, and alone until death. "By the time my sister and I met them," Ng recalls, "they were defeated men without descendants, as pitiful as the deformed eunuchs of the Shang dynasty." Her father teaches Ng to call each orphan bachelor "Grandfather." He would often describe exclusion as a brilliant piece of legislation, because it was "bloodless." "America didn't have to kill any Chinese; her law assured none would be born." Ng's book is at once an investigation into the afterlife of exclusion in her family and an attempt to memorialize the missing generations of Chinese Americans—the children these men never had—on paper.

One challenge of narrating Chinese American history is that little is documented and what records do exist are often unreliable. Ng's father is reticent about his immigration story. Ng derives details about his crossing from his limited official records and haphazard archives, which she's left to sort through after his death, in 2015. She learns that her father's older sister purchased his identity papers from "a man with American citizenship selling a slot for a paper son that was compatible to my father's age" for four thousand dollars (the equivalent of almost ninety thousand dollars today). A "coaching book" was sent to him in China that contained the answers his paper

father had given in his immigration interview when he entered the United States. Ng's father studied "the genealogy of his paper family" and "the map of his paper village." He called the coaching book his "Book of Lies." "Through rote memorization, he becomes another man's son," Ng writes. "He committed these lies to memory till he believed they were his own truth."

Her father's fictions shape Ng's practice as a novelist. She learns her craft by training her eyes on her father's selective tales of immigration. "As a child, I believed his stories," she explains. "As a writer, I write his lies." When her father took on his paper name, he "learned lies to become the lie." Ng goes on, "Those lies made my father fit; and those lies would make my becoming a writer, my fit. I knew then that I would write those truths to make his life real."

Because so much of her father's life, and the lives of men like him, is lost to history, Ng uses the techniques of storytelling to reimagine his past. She moves between fact and fiction, embellishing, hyperbolizing, frequently falling into a mock-heroic tone. The memoir's structure is winkingly experimental—Ng jumps back and forth in time, expanding or compressing the events of her childhood, returning again and again to the same primal scenes. "This book has no simple timeline," she announces early on. "I've left our fissures in because what can't be known or forgiven is part of our history."

In unsettling the division between truth and lies, "Orphan Bachelor" remains faithful to a tradition of Asian American literature that stretches back to Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior," from 1976. Kingston's book, a radical scrambling of folktale, myth, and autobiography, is largely fiction but was initially received as a

straightforward memoir—exactly the kind of stereotypical immigrant story Kingston had tried to avoid.

In a 2023 Literary Hub essay, Ng writes that she feared her first book, a work of fiction titled "Bone," would be read autobiographically. The novel, which drew on her personal experience, is set in San Francisco's Chinatown, and follows a Chinese American immigrant family who work in a garment shop. Ng especially worried that her parents, and their Chinatown community, might read too much into the character of Ona, the Chinese daughter who dies by suicide.

Ng's apprehensions turned out to be unfounded. "Bone," published in 1993, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and soon became a central text of an emerging Asian American literary canon. Though "Orphan Bachelors" was published three decades after "Bone," the memoir reads in many ways like the novel's prequel—an attempt to give context to Ng's earlier work and to Chinese American history itself.

The Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, though the number of Chinese immigrants allowed to enter the country under the quota system remained extremely low. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the United States enacted the Chinese Confession Program, which sought so-called confessions from Chinese residents who had immigrated through illicit means. Ng describes herself as a "Confession baby" because she was born in 1956, the same year President Dwight D. Eisenhower instituted the program. (She also gives this name to her brother Tim, who was born in 1966, when it was officially dismantled.) Confession was framed as an amnesty initiative, but it also put those who confessed at a greater risk of

deportation. The process of disclosure involved providing the names of both one's real and paper families, subjecting them all to state scrutiny. About fourteen thousand people came forward during the decade in which the program was in place, implicating thousands of others. As a result, many lost not only their citizenship but their ability to pass it on to family members.

Ng's father entered the Confession Program in its final year, at her mother's request. She had hoped to bring her own mother over from China and saw Confession as a means to establish a "clear paper path" for her entry to the U.S. But the cost for Ng's father was high: he immediately lost his citizenship and was not naturalized under his real name until 2001, fourteen years before his death. Even after he surrendered his paper name, he refused to give it up in practice, writing both his American and his Chinese names on every surface he could.

Confession further fractured Ng's family. Her father struggled to forgive her mother for the sacrifice she demanded of him. During the fallout, Ng and her sister took back their father's original name. Her brothers, however, kept using their father's paper name, likely as an act of allegiance to their mother. Only years later would they begin to repair the rift.

Ng writes that she has inherited a family "gene of secrecy"—a predisposition to reclusiveness which she traces back to her maternal great-grandfather, who left behind two sons in China for the U.S., finding work in abandoned gold mines and as a farm laborer before eventually making his way to San Francisco's Chinatown. By the time he met his granddaughter, Ng's mother, in 1953, he had been, as Ng

puts it, “an Orphan Bachelor for over sixty years.” He died by suicide in 1963 for reasons that remain opaque to Ng’s family.

As a girl, Ng admired Mei Oi, the wanton heroine of Louis Chu’s 1961 novel, “Eat a Bowl of Tea,” for her embrace of sexual abundance —a revenge of sorts on the pleasureless lives of so many solitary immigrants. But Ng herself sides with the solitary. “The Orphan Bachelors’ never-born progeny have always haunted me. The sons and daughters they couldn’t have, I chose not to have,” she writes. “Exclusion killed my desire for progeny, for entry into that community of delusional immortality.” Her legacy has instead come through writing. Eighty years after the repeal of the Exclusion Act, Ng continues to parse the consequences and contradictions of its demands: to live as a family man in China and a bachelor abroad; to tell the truth by memorizing a Book of Lies; to be the living descendant of those whose progeny were never intended to be born; to commemorate that which was designed to be forgotten. Perhaps those whose pasts have been erased must first learn the rules of believable lies—the art of fiction—before they are able to write the bones of truth. ♦

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Jane Hu is an assistant professor of English at the University of Southern California.

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