A viewer’s guide to

Becoming AMERICAN
THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

a Bill Moyers presentation

PREMIERING ON PBS MARCH 25-27, 2003 (CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS)

Thomas Lennon, Series Producer  Ruby Yang, Series Editor
Becoming American: The Chinese Experience is a production of Public Affairs Television, Inc. in association with Thomas Lennon Films. Series Producer: Thomas Lennon; Series Editor: Ruby Yang; Program Producers: Joseph Angier, Steve Cheng, Mi Ling Tsui; Writers: Joseph Angier, Thomas Lennon, Bill Moyers and Mi Ling Tsui; Program II Co-Editor: Li-Shin Yu; Director of Film Sequences: Michael Chin; Producer of Film Sequences: Jessica Cohen; Series Development: Mi Ling Tsui; Production Manager: Alex Vlack; Associate Producers: Na Eng, Todd Leong, Sharon Owyang, Rob Rapley, Laurie Wen; Associate Producer for Development: Hilary Klotz; Senior Historical Advisers: Roger Daniels and Shih-Shan Henry Tsai; Director of Special Projects: Deborah Rubenstein; Executive Producers: Felice Firestone, Judy Doctoroff O’Neill; Executive Editors: Bill Moyers and Judith Davidson Moyers.

Facing History and Ourselves wishes to acknowledge Phyllis Goldstein, Karen Lempert, Tracy O’Brien, Marc Skvirsky, Jenifer Snow, Chris Stokes, and Margot Stern Strom.


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Films for the Humanities and Sciences
P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053
1-800-257-5126
cuserv@films.com
website: www.films.com

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A LETTER FROM BILL MOYERS

DEAR READER,

Becoming American: The Chinese Experience chronicles the history of Chinese immigrants and their ongoing struggle to become American. Theirs is a compelling tale of struggle and triumph, progress and setback, separation and assimilation, discrimination and achievement. It is a story of the collision of two cultures, and a saga that has largely been left out of history books.

It is a story I have wanted to tell for a long time now. I started getting interested in it way back in the sixties when I was a young White House assistant for President Lyndon Johnson. I worked on helping to pass the Immigration Act of 1965 and then flew with President Johnson to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor where he signed the bill into law on October 3rd, 1965. That act turned American immigration upside down. It opened the door for Asians to come here in record numbers, and it’s been fascinating to watch the face of America change over the last forty years.

A few years later, I met some young Chinese Americans in San Francisco who were challenging the city’s power brokers. The stories they told opened up whole chapters in the American epoch that were, at that time, all but unknown to me. Then over the years I interviewed scores of other Chinese Americans—poets, scientists, artists, entrepreneurs. I listened to them talk about their experiences of becoming American and I watched them wrestling with the issues that every immigrant group has faced over time. What does one give up to become American? What traditional values can be preserved?

Then one day, some five or six years ago, the thought hit me, PBS has told the story of the English in America, the Irish in America, the Jews in America, the Africans in America, but except for an occasional documentary, we have not told the story of the Chinese in America. I wanted to tell that story; I wanted to make it happen.

Together with my wife and partner, Judith Davidson Moyers, I put together a remarkable production team who have made this series their labor of love for the better part of the last two years. It’s a team as American in its diversity as the story itself. Thomas Lennon, who has created a number of extraordinary broadcasts including The Irish in America and Jefferson’s Blood, signed on as series producer. Ruby Yang joined us as series editor and did an incredible job editing not one, but all three films. Joseph Angier, Mi Ling Tsui, and Steve Cheng were producers for the three programs in the series. They have found the stories and the witnesses that make the history come to life.

But it’s not just a history we’re telling. It’s about now, today, our times. Our country is wrestling with issues of identity and democracy, how new arrivals fit in, what it takes to become American, how do we finally accept those who have demonstrated they ARE American. Although Becoming American is a series about Chinese Americans, it’s really about all of us.

-Bill Moyers
INTRODUCTION

We at Facing History and Ourselves engage adults and adolescents in a study of history and human behavior that focuses on the moral questions in the world today. For years, we have been using documentaries produced by Bill Moyers and his talented associates in our work. They help us confront the complexities of history in ways that promote critical and creative thinking about the challenges we face in preserving and expanding freedom and democracy.

In a democracy, ideas are tested through conversation, discussion and debate. Thoughtful participation requires what Judge Learned Hand once called “the spirit of liberty.” He defined it as the spirit “which is not too sure it is right,” the spirit “which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women” and “weighs their interests alongside one’s own without bias.” This viewer’s guide is designed to encourage such encounters in both private spaces and civic places—community centers, libraries, and religious institutions. It is a story to which each of us brings a unique perspective.

Becoming American: The Chinese Experience describes the ways the first arrivals from China in the 1840s, their descendants, and recent immigrants have “become American.” It is a saga of struggle and triumph, progress and setbacks, separation and assimilation, discrimination and achievement. It is also a story about identity and belonging that will resonate with all Americans. In every generation, Americans have asked:
Who may live among us?
Who may become an American?
What does it mean to be an American?

The way we have answered those questions at various times in history is central to an understanding of the nation’s past. The choices we make about one another as individuals and as a nation define identities, create communities, and ultimately forge a nation. Those choices build on the work of earlier generations and leave a legacy for those to come.

The stories told in Becoming American reveal the importance of the beliefs embodied in our most cherished documents in extending citizenship to many more individuals, both immigrant and native-born. That expansion did not happen by chance. It has been the work of brave men and women in every generation—individuals and groups who demanded that the nation live up to its ideals. The goal of the viewer’s guide is explore universal themes in a very particular history. Throughout the guide, primary sources, essays, and questions encourage viewers to relate the story of the Chinese in America to their own history and to the history of the nation as a whole.

The guide, like the documentary, is divided into three parts, each with a focus on a particular time in history. Program 1 focuses on the first arrivals from China from the early 1800s to 1882, the year Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. Program 2, which details the years of exclusion and the way they shaped and mis-shaped Chinese American life, opens in 1882 and ends soon after Congress repealed the Exclusion Act in 1943. Program 3 examines life during the Cold War, in the wake of immigration reform in 1965, through the years of the Civil Rights Movement and up to the present—years of new opportunities and new challenges for Chinese Americans.

-Margot Stern Strom
Facing History and Ourselves
**SUMMARY**

Program 1 begins in the mid-1800s—a time of civil war and famine in southern China, a time when many young men left their villages to seek their fortune in other parts of the world. When the news of a gold rush in California reached China in 1849, thousands headed for the United States. Like their counterparts from Europe and the Americas, few got rich, but many remained in the United States to take advantage of other opportunities in the American West.

Some Chinese helped build the first transcontinental railroad in the late 1860s. Others used their skills as merchants, miners, fishermen, and farmers to build lives in a new land. Still others improvised new jobs and acquired new skills. In China, as in the United States, cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes were considered women’s work. In the American West, they were often the only jobs open to Chinese men.

Initial praise for the Chinese as hard workers soon became mixed with hostility as competition for precious metals, land, and jobs increased. Like immigrants from other nations, they responded by banding together with others from their village or district for mutual protection. By 1862, those associations were uniting to represent the interests of all Chinese in the United States. In the long process of becoming American, one of the first steps was to become Chinese.

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**Timeline: 1847–1882**

- **1847** Yung Wing and two other Chinese students arrive in US for schooling.
- **1849** Chinese arrive in California in response to the discovery of gold in 1848.
- **1850** Chinese population in US is about 4,000 out of a population of 23.2 million. Chinese in California form associations for mutual protection.
- **1852** California targets Chinese miners by imposing special taxes on them.
- **1853** California Supreme Court rules that Chinese cannot testify against whites.
- **1862** Six district associations in San Francisco unite to represent Chinese interests.
- **1865** Central Pacific recruits Chinese workers to build a transcontinental railroad.
- **1867** 2000 Chinese railroad workers strike for a week.
- **1868** Treaty recognizes mutual right of Chinese and Americans to migrate to one another’s country.
- **1869** The first transcontinental railroad is completed.
- **1870** Naturalization law allows only whites and “persons of African descent” to become citizens.
- **1875** The Page Act bars entry of Chinese, Japanese, and “Mongolian” prostitutes, felons, and contract laborers.
- **1877** Denis Kearney forms the Workingmen’s Party with the aim of forcing out the Chinese.
- **1878** The US Supreme Court affirms that Chinese cannot become naturalized citizens.
- **1880** Chinese population in US is 105,465 out of a total population of 50.1 million. US and China sign a treaty allowing the US to limit Chinese immigration.
- **1882** Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act.
A Matter of “Race”

California became part of the United States in 1848—the year gold was discovered there. Many Americans at the time saw new territory as proof of what was then called the nation’s “manifest destiny.” As one congressman explained, “This continent was intended by Providence as a vast theatre on which to work out the grand experiment of republican government under the auspices of the Anglo-Saxon race.” That notion was central to the way most Americans viewed the West. It both shaped and reflected the way they regarded foreigners, including foreigners from China.

In the mid-1800s, many white Americans firmly believed that they belonged to a superior race. Scholars today regard “race” as a meaningless scientific concept; human beings, regardless of their so-called race, are more genetically alike than different. In the mid-1800s, however, racist ideas were taught in colleges and universities, preached from pulpits, and sensationalized in popular magazines and newspapers. These ideas prevailed well into the 20th century and still survive today.

“Race” and Citizenship

In 1790, Congress limited naturalization to “free white persons.” The law’s apparent intent was to keep Africans and indentured servants from becoming citizens. Later, when the Chinese arrived, most Americans assumed that the restriction applied to them as well. There were exceptions, however.

When Yung Wing, whose story is told in Program 1, applied for citizenship in Connecticut in 1852, nobody stopped him. Three years later, a man named Chan Yong applied for citizenship in San Francisco only to be turned away because of his “race.” Why did the courts allow some Chinese to become citizens and not others? The answer lies in the way judges defined “whiteness.”

After the Civil War, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts suggested that Congress remove the word white from all laws, including naturalization laws. Western senators vigorously objected. In the end, Congress kept the word white and added to those eligible for citizenship “persons of the African race or of African descent.” In 1878, a Chinese immigrant named Ah Yup formally asked the US Supreme Court whether he, as a person of the “Mongolian race,” qualified as a “white person.” The justices ruled that he did not qualify, because neither ordinary Americans nor scholars believed Asians were “white.”

Newcomers from China

Who were these people from China that many Americans viewed as permanent aliens, ineligible for naturalization? In the late 1800s, the vast majority were young men from Guangdong, a province in southern China that was home to several peoples, each with its own customs, traditions, and dialect. Poverty was rampant, as catastrophes racked the region. Wars, floods, and typhoons devastated fields and drove thousands to seek their fortune elsewhere. One migrant recalled:

“There were four in our family, my mother, my father, my sister and me. . . . How can we live on six baskets of rice which were paid twice a
year for my father’s duty as a night watchman? Sometimes the peasants have a poor crop then we go hungry. . . . Sometimes we went hungry for days. My mother and me would go over the harvested rice fields of the peasants to pick the grains they dropped. . . . We had only salt and water to eat with the rice. ¹

The decision to emigrate is rarely an easy one. For Chinese emigrants, it was complicated by their own cultural traditions. An ideal Chinese family in the mid-1800s was made up of several generations living and working together as a unit. Grandparents, parents, sons, the sons’ wives and children, and all unmarried daughters lived together in one large house or a series of smaller houses joined together. Although only rich families could afford the ideal, the model reinforced the belief that individual desires are less important than the needs of the family as a whole. The old were responsible for the care and teaching of the young. The young, in turn, were expected to honor and respect their elders. This obligation extended past death. Men in each generation were expected to be buried beside their ancestors, and their graves were to be cared for by succeeding generations.

Immigration upset this traditional framework of obligations. Men who left home could still support their families by earning money abroad and sending it home. They generally viewed their stay overseas as temporary. To fully meet their obligations, they would have to return home.

The role of women in Chinese society was such that few were free to emigrate. According to a popular saying, men were the masters of external affairs, women the mistresses of domestic affairs. “In other words,” writes historian Judy Yung, “men ruled the country, while women stayed home to manage the household and raise the children.” Education was thus important for sons but not for daughters. . . . And because it was the son—

not the daughter—who stayed within the family, worked for its honor and prosperity, continued the family lineage, and fulfilled the duties of ancestral worship, so it was that daughters—rarely sons—were sold, abandoned, or drowned during desperate times.

Neither men nor women had a choice in the selection of their spouses, but women were further disadvantaged in that they had no right to divorce or remarry should the arranged marriage prove unhappy or the husband die. Men, but not women, were also permitted to commit adultery, divorce, remarry, practice polygamy, and discipline their spouses as they saw fit. Widows without sons could not inherit property, and women could not participate in politics or public activities. Their proper place was in the home, where their sexuality could be regulated and controlled. Further, the practice of foot binding ensured that women did not “wander” too far outside the household gate, let alone go abroad. In fact, until 1911 the emigration of women was illegal according to Chinese law. ²

With few exceptions, most Chinese women, writes Yung, “remained at home, attended to their children and in-laws, and awaited the return of their husbands.” ³ Thus, for many Chinese immigrants, the upheavals of immigration were compounded by separation from their families. This had a profound effect on their experiences in the United States. So did the color of their skin.

From the Chinese Point of View
When the first groups of young men from China arrived in California, they felt welcome. At the celebrations of California’s admission to the Union in 1850, they were urged to “tell their friends in China that in coming to this country they will find welcome and protection.” Justice Nathaniel Bennett told the crowd, “Born and reared under different Governments and speaking different tongues, we nevertheless meet here today as brothers. . . . Henceforth we have one country, one hope, one destiny.” ⁴ Yet even as Bennett spoke, a different view of foreigners, including the
Chinese, was emerging in the gold fields where American miners increasingly resented competition from outsiders.

The American miners’ views were reflected in a state law that targeted all foreign miners but was almost exclusively enforced against Chinese workers. Local ordinances, especially in San Francisco, also discriminated against Chinese. By the 1870s, journalists and politicians who had once welcomed the Chinese were stereotyping them as deceitful, disloyal, servile, and incapable of assimilation. Huie Kin, whose story is told in Program 1, witnessed the effects of the anti-Chinese campaign in California. He later wrote:

The sudden change of public sentiment towards our people in those days was an interesting illustration of mob psychology. . . . The useful and steady Chinese worker became overnight the mysterious Chinaman, an object of unknown dread. When I landed [in 1868], the trouble was already brewing, but the climax did not come until 1876–1877.

I understand that several causes contributed to the anti-Chinese riots. It was a period of general economic depression in the Western states, brought about by drought, crop failures, and a presidential campaign. . . . There were long processions at night, with big torchlights and lanterns, carrying the slogan “The Chinese Must Go,” and mass meetings where fiery-tongues flayed the Chinese. . . . Those were the days of

Many Chinese were undeterred by anti-Chinese sentiment. In 1878, a man named Kwang Chang Ling bluntly addressed the negative stereotypes in a letter to the San Francisco Argonaut. He told Americans:

You are continually objecting to [the] morality of the Chinese. Your travelers say he is depraved; your missioners call him ungodly; your commissioners call him unclean. . . . Yet your housewives permit him to wait upon them at table; they admit him to their bedchambers; they confide to him their garments and jewels; and even trust their lives to him by awarding him supreme control over their kitchens and the preparation of their food. There is a glaring contradiction here. . . .

The slender fare of rice and the other economical habits of the peasant class [of China], which are so objectionable to your lower orders and the demagogues who trumpet their clamors, are not the result of choice to Chinamen; they follow poverty. The hard-working, patient servants that you have about you today love good fare as well
as other men, but they are engaged in a work far higher than the gratification of self-indulgence; they are working to liberate their parents in China [from poverty]. . . . When this emancipation is complete, you will find the Chinaman as prone as any human creature to fill his belly and cover his back with good things.6

As anti-Chinese feelings increased, those already in the United States tried to prepare newcomers for the realities of American life, particularly in the West. In 1875, Wong Sam and his assistants created An English-Chinese Phrase Book that was distributed for free at Wells Fargo offices in cities throughout the West. It provided readers with such phrases as:

They were lying in ambush. He came to his death by homicide. He was murdered by a thief. He committed suicide. He was choked to death with a lasso by a robber. He was strangled to death by a man.
CONNECTIONS

1. How did notions of “race” and racial superiority in the late 1800s shape relations between the Chinese and their American neighbors? What other factors affected those relationships? What factors shape relations between immigrants and their American neighbors today? What similarities do you notice between past and present? How do you account for differences?

2. Program 1 examines the various stereotypes associated with the Chinese in the mid-1800s—“ancient and wise,” “debased and cunning,” “slave-like and submissive,” and “disloyal and inassimilable.” How do the stories told in Program 1 challenge those stereotypes? How did writers quoted in this essay challenge them in the late 1800s? Why do you think their efforts had little impact on the way many Americans viewed the Chinese? In your experience, what is the best way to counter a stereotype? Challenge a myth? Expose a lie?

3. Huie Kin believed that attitudes toward Chinese workers changed suddenly. Historians note that anti-Chinese feelings were there from the start. Why do you think Kin felt it was sudden? What do his comments suggest about the vulnerability of minorities in times of crisis?

4. In Program 1 Connie Young Yu says of her great-grandfather who worked on the railroad:

   He was one of those people called “Gum Saam Hok” which means “guest of the gold mountain,” a sojourner. And that was the term the Chinese used. In other words, “you’re a guest and you’ll go home.” When my great-grandfather sent for his wife, that was a big, big leap. . . . Women did not leave the village and she did. And I think . . . my great-grandfather felt there was a future in America and it was a place to have children.

   Why do you think Yu sees the moment her great-grandfather sent for his wife as a “big, big leap”? What effect do you think the arrival of families had on the process of becoming American? To what extent has the arrival of families had a similar effect on other immigrant groups?

5. What do the phrases from An English-Chinese Phrase Book suggest about the dangers the West posed for the Chinese in the late 1800s? How do they explain why Shawn Wong views the Phrase Book “as the very first history of Chinese life in America from the Chinese point of view”? How do the selections from the Phrase Book reprinted on these pages complicate that understanding?

6. The Phrase Book was designed to help newcomers deal with people whose customs and laws differ from their own. The Chinese were not the only immigrants who had to learn a new language and figure out how to deal with people whose customs and laws differed from their own. What stories are told in your family about the process of becoming American? What stories are told about the challenges of adjusting to life in a new land? How are those stories similar to the ones told in Becoming American: The Chinese Experience? How do you account for differences?

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3 Ibid., 20.
6 Letter. San Francisco Argonaut, August, 10, 1878.
SUMMARY

The Chinese Exclusion Act that Congress passed in 1882 was renewed in 1892 with a new restriction—every Chinese in the nation now had to carry a certificate of identity issued by the US government. In 1902, the law was renewed again and in 1904, made permanent. The stories featured in Program 2 explore the impact of those laws on families kept apart and lives distorted by countless restrictions. Program 2 begins with the violence that followed passage of the first exclusion act. In town after town in the West, Chinese were driven out and their houses burned to the ground. Many headed for the safety of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Yet even there, they were not secure. From the start, many Chinese understood that to become American they would have to wage a long campaign both in the courts and in their private lives. That struggle is the focus of Program 2. The repeal of the Exclusion Act in 1943 ended the exclusion years. The repeal of anti-Chinese laws and the end of World War II marked the beginning of the end of “bachelor society,” which had been the defining feature of the Chinese immigrant experience for nearly a century.

Timeline: 1882–1943

1882 Congress passes the first Chinese Exclusion Act.
1884 Chinese who leave the US must have a certificate to reenter the country.
1885 Anti-Chinese violence in Rock Springs, Wyoming and other Western towns.
1888 Scott Act revokes all reentry certificates.
1890 Chinese population in U.S. is 107,488 out of a total population of 62.9 million.
1892 Geary Act renews exclusion and requires that Chinese register with the government.
1893 In Fong Yue Ting v. US, the US Supreme Court upholds the Geary Act.
1898 In Wong Kim Ark v. US, the Supreme Court confirms that anyone born in US is a citizen.
1906 Earthquake and subsequent fire destroy all immigration records in San Francisco.
1907 Expatriation Act removes citizenship from American women who marry foreigners.
1910 Angel Island Immigration Station opens to process potential Asian immigrants.
1911 The Chinese overthrow their emperor and establish a republic.
1913 California and subsequently other states prohibit Asians from buying or leasing land.
1922 Cable Act removes citizenship from American women only if they marry aliens ineligible for citizenship.
1924 US denies entry to almost all Asians, including the Chinese wives of US citizens.
1930 Chinese population in US is 102,159 out of a total population of 123.2 million.
1931 Cable Act amendment declares that no American-born woman married to an alien ineligible for citizenship can later be denied the right of naturalization.
1936 All revocations of citizenship on account of marriage are abolished.
1940 Chinese population in US is 106,334 out of a total population of 132.2 million.
1941 US declares war after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. China is now an ally of US.
1943 Congress repeals exclusion laws, grants Chinese the right to become citizens.
Laying Claim to America

During the exclusion years, both immigrant and native-born Chinese were viewed as permanent aliens, perpetual foreigners. The pictures on this page show a few of the ways the federal government documented their movements during those years. Without proof of identity, Chinese Americans were subject to deportation.

Challenging Discrimination

Chinese Americans challenged the constitutionality of each new law, each new indignity, in the only venue open to them—the nation’s courts. In the late 19th century, they brought 10,000 habeas corpus cases to federal courts in California alone. Although they lost more often than they won, their victories had far-reaching consequences. Frank H. Wu, a professor of law at Howard University, believes that there are important lessons in those victories:

All of us who care about our civil rights should realize that we owe a measure of our shared equality to an individual named Wong Kim Ark. A century ago in California, Wong took on the federal government in an effort to win his right to remain in his homeland.

His legal case ended up in the Supreme Court. His victory shows how, despite recurring racial prejudice, our country can remain true to its ideals. It is worthwhile to reflect on our history, not to condemn the
past by contemporary standards, but to understand how we came to where we are now. There are valuable lessons in these forgotten episodes.

Wong Kim Ark had sued to be re-admitted to his birthplace, after taking a trip to China. He argued that by virtue of his birth on its soil he was a citizen of the United States, even though his parents were racially barred from achieving that status.

In opposing Wong, the federal government argued in its court briefs, “There certainly should be some honor and dignity in American citizenship that would be sacrificed from the foul and corrupting taint of a debasing alienage.”

Rejecting these racial arguments, the Court based its ruling on the Fourteenth Amendment. That provision of the Constitution is familiar as the source of “equal protection of the laws.”

The Court gave a literal interpretation to its opening lines, that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”

By doing so, the Supreme Court united racial minority groups. For the Fourteenth Amendment had been passed to overturn the notorious 1857 Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case, which declared that blacks were not citizens.

Thus, because African Americans were citizens, Asian immigrants could be citizens as well—and vice versa.

One Family’s Perspective

In Program 2, Connie Young Yu tells how her father’s parents were affected by the Exclusion Act. The law also affected her mother’s family. Yu’s paternal grandfather was born in the United States and was, therefore, a citizen. So were his children, including Yu’s mother. Yu’s grandmother was born in China. She arrived in the United States as a bride at the age of sixteen. Yu writes:

Once in San Francisco Grandmother lived a life of confinement, as did her mother-in-law before her. When she went out, even in Chinatown, she was ridiculed for her bound feet. People called out mockingly to her, “Jhat!” meaning bound. She tried to unbind her feet by soaking them every night and putting a heavy weight on each foot. But she was already a grown woman, and her feet were permanently stunted, the arches bent and the toes crippled. It was hard for her to stand for long periods of time, and she frequently had to sit on the floor to do her chores.

[Her] first child was a girl, and on the morning of her month-old “red eggs and ginger party” the earth shook 8.3 on the Richter scale.

Everyone in San Francisco, even Chinese women, poured out into the streets. My grandmother, babe in arms, managed to get a ride to Golden Gate Park on a horse-drawn wagon. Two other Chinese women who survived the earthquake recall the shock of suddenly being out in the street milling with thousands of people.

That devastating natural disaster forced some modernity on the San Francisco Chinese community. Women had to adjust to the emergency and makeshift living conditions and had to work right alongside the men. Life in America, my grandmother found, was indeed rugged and unpredictable.

As the city began to rebuild itself, she proceeded to raise a large family, bearing four more children. The only school in San Francisco admitting Chinese was the Oriental school in Chinatown. But her husband felt, as did most men of his class, that the only way his children could get a good education was for the family to return to China. So they lived in China and my grandfather traveled back and forth to the United States for his trade business. Then suddenly, at the age of forty-three, he died of an illness on board a ship returning to China. After a long and painful mourning, Grandmother decided to return to America with her brood of now seven children.

Although the children were quickly admitted to the country as US citizens, Yu’s grandmother was held at Angel Island. She had filariasis, a non-contagious, curable ailment that health inspectors often used as an excuse to deport Asian immigrants. Yu writes:
The year my grandmother was detained on Angel Island [1924], a law had just taken effect that forbade all aliens ineligible for citizenship from landing in America. This constituted a virtual ban on the immigration of all Chinese, including Chinese wives of US citizens. . . .

After fifteen months [of letter-writing by the attorney she hired] the case was finally won. Grandmother was easily cured of filariasis and allowed—with nine months probation—to join her children in San Francisco. The legal fees amounted to $782.50, a fortune in those days.

My most vivid memory of Grandmother Lee is when she was in her seventies and studying for citizenship. She had asked me to test her on the three branches of government and how to pronounce them correctly. I was a sophomore in high school and had entered the “What American Democracy Means to Me” speech contest of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. I looked directly at my grandmother in the audience. She didn’t smile, and afterwards, didn’t comment on my patriotic words. She had never told me about being on Angel Island or about her friends losing their citizenship. It wasn’t in the textbooks either. I may have thought she wanted to be a citizen because her sons and sons-in-law had fought for this country, and we lived in a land of freedom and opportunity, but my guess now is that she wanted to avoid any possible confrontation—even at her age—with immigration authorities. The bad laws had been repealed, but she wasn’t taking any chances.9

CONNECTIONS

1. According to Frank Wu, what is the moral of Wong Kim Ark’s story? What lessons do you think the story teaches? How does it deepen your understanding of civil rights? Of the importance of the rights guaranteed in the US Constitution?

2. What is the moral of the stories Connie Young Yu tells about both sets of grandparents? How do those stories deepen your understanding of the rights guaranteed in the US Constitution? How do they complicate your understanding of the long campaign that Chinese American women faced to become American?

3. In 1893, in the case of Fong Yue Ting v. US, the US Supreme Court justices ruled that immigration officials had the right to deport Chinese immigrants without providing evidence of fraud or even holding a trial. In a dissenting opinion, Justice David Brewer observed that the power of the government was being directed against a people many Americans found “obnoxious.” But, he warned, “Who shall say it will not be exercised tomorrow against other classes and other people?” How would you answer his question? How was it answered during World War II?

4. What does the story of Connie Young Yu’s grandmother reveal about why the experiences of the Chinese in America has been called a story of lives shaped and mis-shaped by Chinese customs as well as US law?

7 “Born in the USA” by Frank H. Wu. © 2001, IMDiversity. Inc.
9 Ibid., 39–41.
SUMMARY

Program 3 focuses on the Chinese experience in the United States from the end of World War II through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to the present. In 1965, the last legal barrier to Chinese immigrants fell with the signing of a new law that ended immigration quotas based on race. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the story of the Chinese in America was primarily a legal drama, played out on the nation’s borders and in its courts. After the new immigration law went into effect, it became a personal story told one individual, one family at a time. Many new arrivals still struggle to survive. Too often Chinese Americans still encounter suspicion and hostility. Nevertheless, Chinese Americans have achieved great success and now, like so many others, they are stitching together a new American identity. As Michelle Ling, a young Chinese American, tells Bill Moyers in Program 3, “I get to compose my life one piece at a time, however I feel like it. Not to say that it’s not difficult and . . . that there isn’t challenge all the time, but, more than material wealth, you get to choose what you are, who you are.”

Timeline: 1945–2000

1945 | World War II ends with atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.
1947 | Chinese American veterans are allowed to bring their wives to the US without reference to a quota.
1949 | US refuses to recognize the newly formed People’s Republic of China.
1950 | US grants 5,000 educated Chinese stranded in US resident alien status.
1950-53 | Chinese population in US is 150,005 out of 151.3 million.
1950-55 | United States supports South Korea, and the People’s Republic of China supports North Korea during the Korean Conflict.
1952 | Fear of communist infiltration in the US leads the State Department, the FBI, and immigration officials to keep a close watch on Chinese Americans.
1954-70 | New immigration law removes all references to “race” in regard to naturalization.
1959 | The Civil Rights Movement led by African Americans ends many forms of discrimination.
1959 | Hawaii becomes the 50th state. Hiram L. Fong of Hawaii becomes the first Chinese American to serve in the US Senate.
1965 | A new immigration act abolishes national quotas.
1975 | China launches the Cultural Revolution to remove all opposition to Communism.
1979 | US resumes diplomatic relations with China.
1982 | Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, is murdered by two white Americans who think he is Japanese. Chin’s murderers receive a token punishment.
1990 | New immigration law reorganizes preferences.
2000 | Chinese population of the US is 2,879,636 out of 281.4 million.
Signs of Progress and of Continuing Challenges

Bill Moyers introduces Program 3 by telling the story of Maya Lin. In 1981, at the age of 21, she created the winning design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The selection process was anonymous, so her plan was designated with a number, not her name. When Lin’s work was chosen and her name revealed, there was a sudden outcry.

Moyers explains, “She was born in the US. She was a teenager when Saigon [the capital of South Vietnam] fell. . . . but suddenly she got caught among old demons—ones that ran deep in the American mind.” Moyers asks, “Was this a terrible tale of racism? Or the opposite—since, after all, her plans got built to much acclaim. Maybe, it was both. And it struck me, her story is a bit like the modern story of Chinese America as a whole: it shows how powerful race is in this country—and how powerless when matched against human will.”

A Turning Point

A year after Lin’s design won the competition, two white workers in Detroit murdered Vincent Chin, a Chinese American. According to court records, the two thought he was Japanese and therefore to blame for economic problems in the auto industry. The judge explained why he gave the pair a light sentence—three years probation and a $3,780 fine, “These aren’t the kind of people you send to jail. You fit the punishment to the criminal, not the crime.”

In Program 3, Helen Zia, then a journalist in Detroit, describes the verdict as a turning point in her life. She turned her anger into activism. She says, “Speaking up about this had everything to do with my experiences and the cumulative insults, all of the things that had built up, all of the things I had seen my parents subjected to, all of the bitterness that my father carried with him. All of those things came to me.” Zia was not alone. Chinese Americans joined with other Asian American groups in a public campaign to redress the wrong. For the first time, many in Asian American communities participated in rallies and marches. That activism united groups that until Chin’s death had not often been united. The result was one of the first federal prosecutions of a civil rights case on behalf of an Asian American.

Chin’s senseless death and the inadequacy of the judicial response still resonate today. In death, he became a rallying cry, an emblem of both Chinese American and Asian American identity.

Even as Chinese Americans were organizing politically, other forces were making unity hard to achieve. From the 1970s on, the sheer numbers of new Chinese immigrants and their extraordinary diversity defy a single Chinese American identity. For newcomers, the scars of the exclusion years and old battles over civil rights were not part of a personal family memory but rather something learned in newspapers and books. Chinatown was no longer the geographic and social center it once was. Many educated and affluent immigrants bypass it entirely.

Since the 1980s, Chinese Americans have been playing an increasingly important role in American public life. Six Chinese Americans have been awarded Nobel Prizes for their work in medicine, physics, and other sciences. Chinese American engineers and entrepreneurs have been central to the growth of computer technologies, including the Internet. Historians, educators, and sociologists argue over the causes of this success but few dispute it as a phenomenon. Many Chinese Americans worry that this new prominence could lead to a revival of old myths and stereotypes.
Defining a New American Identity
Like all Americans, Chinese Americans must decide how to incorporate their past into their lives. How does one’s heritage influence an American identity? How does one’s history shape values and beliefs? Eric Liu and Ha Jin, two Chinese American writers, explore the question from two different perspectives. Liu writes:

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that “conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone, you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone, you leave it to a torrent of change.” I may have been born a Chinese baby, but it would have taken unremitting reinforcement, by my parents and by myself, for me to remain Chinese. Instead we left things alone. And a torrent of change washed over me.

This, we must remember, has been an act of creation as much as destruction. Something new is emerging from the torrent, in my case and the many millions like it. Something undeveloped, speaking the unformed tongue of an unformed nation. Something not white, and probably more Chinese than I know. Whatever it is that I am becoming, is it any less authentic for being an amalgam? Is it intrinsically less meaningful than what I might otherwise have been? In every assimilation, there is a mutiny against history—but there is also a destiny, which is to redefine history. What it means to be American—in spirit, in blood—is something far more borrowed and commingled than anything previous generations ever knew. Alongside the pain of migration, then, and the possibility, there is truth: America is white no longer, and it will never be white again.10

Ha Jin explores how people struggle with the very idea of their history in his poem “The Past”:

I have supposed my past is a part of myself. As my shadow appears whenever I’m in the sun the past cannot be thrown off and its weight must be borne, or I will become another man.

But I saw someone wall his past into a garden whose produce is always in fashion. If you enter his property without permission he will welcome you with a watchdog or a gun.

I saw someone set up his past as a harbor. Wherever it sails, his boat is safe—if a storm comes, he can always head for home. His voyage is the adventure of a kite.

I saw someone drop his past like trash. He buried it and shed it altogether. He has shown me that without the past one can also move ahead and get somewhere.

Like a shroud my past surrounds me, but I will cut it and stitch it, to make good shoes with it, shoes that fit my feet.11
CONNECTIONS

1. Bill Moyers says that Maya Lin’s story is “a bit like the modern story of Chinese America as a whole: it shows how powerful race is in this country—and how powerless when matched against human will.” How do his words apply to the other stories told in Program 3? To the series as a whole?

2. It has been said that a stereotype is a script that someone else expects you to follow. Program 3 describes a new stereotype—the model minority. How have the Chinese Americans featured in the documentary challenged that stereotype by trying to compose their own lives? How important is that process for all Americans?

3. In Program 3 Michelle Ling tells Bill Moyers, “I am an American, but I have to become an American to everybody else.” How does one “become an American” to everyone else?

4. What does Ha Jin mean when he writes “the past cannot be thrown off and its weight must be borne, or I will become another man”? How does he challenge that idea in his poem? Why do you think he decides to “stitch” his past into “good shoes,” “shoes that fit my feet”? How does the past shape your identity? To what extent have you been able to “stitch” your past into “shoes that fit your feet”?

5. In the 1960s, Corky Lee’s history textbook included a photograph taken at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869 to mark the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Lee noticed that there were no Chinese workers in the photo even though thousands had worked on that railroad. Since the 1970s, Lee has devoted himself to making Chinese and other Asian Americans visible by taking photographs of them. What do his photos suggest about how one debunks a lie? Challenges a stereotype? Exposes a myth?

Over 130 years after the transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory Point, Utah, Corky Lee’s 2002 photograph places Chinese Americans into the picture.

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FOR FURTHER READING


BECOMING AMERICAN: THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

was made possible by the generous support of:

Walter and Shirley Wang

and by

The Henry Luce Foundation; The Family of Hsien Hsien and Bae Pao Lu Chow; the Family of Kenneth and Mary Wang; the Herb Alpert Foundation; Sit Investment Associates; Sit Investment Foundation; the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; The Starr Foundation; The Kelvin Foundation (Albert Yu and Mary Bechmann); The Tang Fund; Gina and David Chu–Nautica International; Mark and Anla Cheng Kingdon Foundation; Intel Corporation; and Sybase, Inc.

ONGOING SUPPORT FOR Public Affairs Television is provided by Mutual of America Life Insurance Company.

SPECIAL THANKS TO Henry Tang, Eugene Sit, Lulu Chow Wang and Duncan and Anthony Wang for their early and enduring faith in our efforts.