

From Mugshots to Masterpieces: Identities Revealed Through Immigration Portraits of the Chinese Exclusion Era

Matthew J. Yee | Boston University

The ratification of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 ignited an era of fraught social tension in the United States. With strides in photographic technology occurring alongside ever-increasing restrictions on immigration laws, Chinese immigrants found themselves subjugated under new policies of enforced portraiture. At the time, they were the only immigrant group in the United States required to maintain identifying documents with headshots for verification. In this paper, I present an analysis of the power dynamics behind such photographs using an autoethnographic approach. I argue that Chinese immigrants purposely modified their portraits to reflect American measures of respectability; by doing so, they successfully challenged the authenticity of their enforced documentation.

From drivers' licenses to passport books, identification documents are seemingly nondescript. Today, the photos on these documents are accepted as simple conventions of record-keeping, enforced for public accountability. These innocuous shots don't criminalize their subjects; rather, they convey identity. However, modern identification documents have a history fraught with racial and political complication. Even though today's certificates assert a person's identity and citizenship, immigration documents during the Chinese Exclusion Era functioned to mark a person's perpetually foreign status. Chinese immigrants' path wasn't easy. I wanted to learn about their triumph at the American border, and discover the techniques that allowed them to stay.

The Exclusion Era was unique in its scope but also in American history. When the Chinese arrived, they were met with

unforgiving laws regarding citizenship papers—laws never applied to any other ethnic group. Immigrants and their photos were inescapably conjoined, since newcomers were required to carry identification cards at all times.¹ Yet these portraits became influential tools; since officers often needed to sort through stacks of cards to locate suspicious travelers, a well-dressed individual would most likely pass such checks. Realizing this newfound security, immigrants began altering their portraits to sidestep barriers at the border. These portraits are an often overlooked part of the Exclusion Era and they provide striking insight into the motives of Chinese immigrants of the time. In this paper, I argue that Chinese immigrants were powerless in the face of government-issued photography requirements at the dawn of the Exclusion Era; however, Chinese immigrants subsequently altered their portraits to

influence Western perspectives—eventually reclaiming the narrative power of their enforced documentation.

Historical Background

Anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States that led to enforced documentation during the Exclusion Era traces its roots to Imperial China. With the impending decline of the Qing dynasty in the late eighteenth century, China was forced to open ports to foreign traders in Hong Kong² (Kent 3). However, what resulted was much more than a simple exchange of goods. Fueled by the allure of “the Orient,” missionaries and explorers selectively documented life in China with novel photographic technology. Their photos were far from complimentary. As art historian Sarah Fraser writes, “The continuous presence of devastating views of poor, displaced people from southern China contributed to the long-term traction of those photographs” (42). By sharing photos of exclusively poor areas, colonists portrayed China as a place in desperate need of westernization. As such, Americans began to view overseas Chinese immigrants as a societal and moral threat. Photography thus became a “tool” to “mark and distinguish” others, and was used extensively to maintain control at the border (Fraser 51) and closely monitor immigrants. These negative viewpoints translated to the Chinese Exclusion Act as the American public decried increases in Chinese immigration to shores.³

In response to the influx of immigrants, by the 1880s the government demanded the use of identification portraits to monitor the Chinese people. This monitoring was necessary because the Chinese Exclusion Act couldn’t be implemented as an absolute purge. As federal courts conceded, Chinese-

American citizens were constitutionally entitled to remain (Berger 1225). But in response, immigration officers held such citizens under even greater scrutiny. Historian Anna Pegler-Gordon examines this trend in her analysis of the Exclusion Era, noting that Chinese-American citizens were the first group of Americans mandated to carry identification cards with photographs (53). Being used to “mark and distinguish” citizens, these early pictures were not unlike criminal mugshots of the time. In many early portraits, immigrants could be seen holding placards with identifying numbers (Luibhéid 57). With height charts behind them and serial numbers in front, they were seemingly in jail. However, such portraits weren’t consistently controlled. Over time, ports relaxed their policies—and immigrants discovered a variety of loopholes. These loopholes can be seen in the various modifications that immigrants made to their photographs, and this paper will discuss the evidence of their techniques.

Research Methods

My first challenge was deciding what types of records I should seek—the textual documents of casefiles or the photographs. Because Chinese immigrants had no power over their interview questions and no option to voice personal statements in their litigation, their textual files are unreliable. These files instead represent what interrogators wanted to hear (Chung 5). But, officers couldn’t possibly control photographs in the same way. The clothing that people wore alongside stylistic choices in their presentations made portraiture a more independent medium. For this reason, I focused on photographs—the only genuine articulation of freedom that immigrants had.

Due to the limitations of current records,

I chose to incorporate my family's photos and records into the research. Currently, most secondary sources rely on public records for their analysis. These records are mostly from the archives of famous pioneers such as Wong Kim Ark. However, these pioneers made their cases possible through their distinct wealth and ensuing social status, so they represent a distorted subset of Chinese immigrants of the time. For most, this level of free expression was unreachable.

Tackling the extensive casefile records kept by the National Archives was my next challenge. In particular, this challenge meant identifying representative immigrants who would be considered everyday people in the Exclusion Era. I chose to focus on immigrants arriving from the Sze Yap (四邑) prefecture of China, particularly those arriving from the Hoy Ping (開平) region. Most Exclusion Era immigrants arrived from Hoy Ping (Pegler-Gordon 76), which was experiencing significant economic turmoil in the early 1900s. Settlers from this area therefore embody a representative population of Chinese immigrants in the Exclusion Era, unlike Wong Kim Ark. To control for high-status or unusually wealthy immigrants, I purposely avoided casefiles with rapid approval from Angel Island. All photos in this paper came from cases where the interrogation period lasted at least three months, which was considered an average timeframe (Chung 5).

To gather a variety of sources, I used some of my family's portraits (the Wong Family), alongside portraits, from the National Archives, of Leong Shee and the Low Family. Gathering the Wong Family portraits was a cumbersome task, but possible because I could prove my relation through birth and death certificates to

bypass archival privacy restrictions. By submitting requests to the Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), I could obtain my ancestors' files. I was only able to locate four photos from these files; all of these photos are featured in this paper. In comparison, Leong Shee's portrait was simple to find. Her portrait is the oldest featured in this paper, and was publicly available because its limitations of privacy had expired. Finally, the Low Family's portrait was from a museum exhibit in New York—alongside the casefile made available by the family.

My work affirms the validity of current discussion on Exclusion Era power dynamics, which relies upon a class-based subset of records for analysis. In the following discussion, I first focus on two types of adjustments that Chinese immigrants made to their photos: ostentatious displays of wealth and clear indications of westernization. In these alterations, immigrants mainly hoped to appease their American immigration officers. I then shift focus to how Chinese immigrants challenged the power dynamics of such photos by incorporating them in family settings, using the portraits to create family portraits and treasured family mementos. In these new alterations, they reclaimed the photos for themselves.

Discussion

To discuss the major findings in my research, I have organized four sections each focusing on a distinct aspect of Exclusion Era photography. Photos are intended to illustrate the major concepts defined by the text, and so only a limited number are presented. I explain recurring themes through secondary sources on the topic, as well as details from

the photographs' source. For my family records, I uncovered the historical background through interviews with several of my family members (Wong 18).

Constructions of Wealth

With changing policies on the regulations for portrait-taking, Chinese immigrants discovered an unprecedented opportunity to display overt wealth in their photos and construct new identities. In turn, this illusion helped to assert their individualistic identity and undermine the immigration process. While early photos were highly regulated, taking portraits on-site quickly became a mounting financial struggle for ports. Immigrants then became responsible for procuring their own photos—they were permitted to bring portraits to their entry interrogations. Selecting a picture would be crucial, as physical presentation could determine an immigrant's fate. Historian Erika

Lee summarizes this trend, noting that officers always admitted more merchants over general laborers (86). The merchants, officers reasoned, would likely seek out Chinese consumers. In this way, they would not interfere with the American workforce. Since merchants were usually well-dressed and finely decorated, officers were quite confident in their abilities to distinguish them from laborers. Chinese immigrants recognized this mindset and in turn altered their photographs. Thus, the photographs became “tools” for constructing identity. One such portrait is below (Figure 1).

Rather than include a standard headshot with her affidavit, Leong Shee attached a full portrait. The photo could barely fit on the page; it almost blocked the obligatory signatures. Wearing elaborate clothing, Leong Shee sits next to a table with a book-stand, vase, and flowers.⁴ In her hand she holds a book, signifying her education. But,

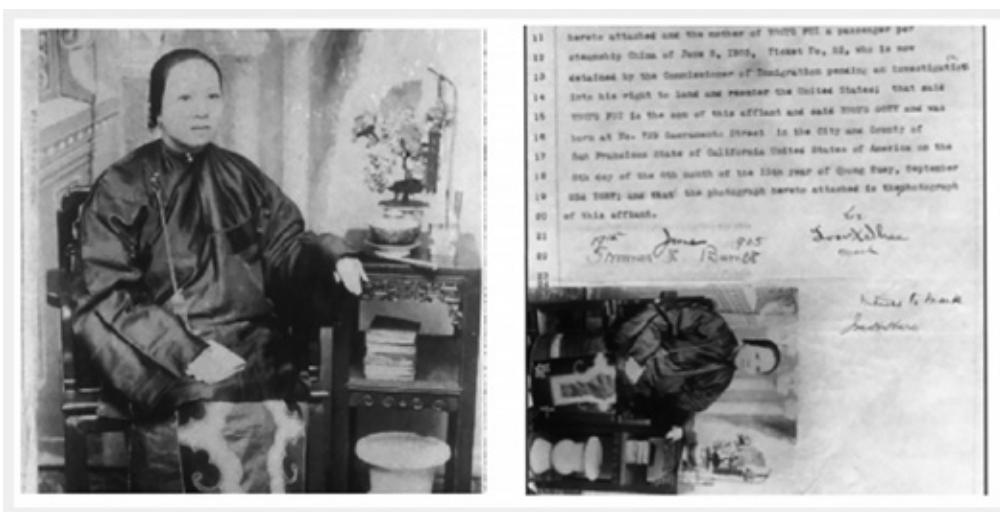


Figure 1
Leong Shee's portrait and Immigration Record from 1905.

those statements of wealth aren't simply meant to help with her identification. Instead of including a photo of procedure, Leong Shee included a portrait of status. Author Eithne Luibhéid identifies this common phenomenon, writing that Chinese women needed to appear sophisticated in their photos since the American public commonly viewed them as morally corrupt (46). If officials deemed an individual non-reputable, that individual wouldn't be permitted entry. To overcome this hurdle, Chinese immigrants wore their best clothes and created elaborate displays for their portraits. By doing so, they created more respectable identities for themselves. The photos shifted in purpose from identifying markers to messages of prestige.

Displays of Westernization

While Leong Shee and others asserted prestige and individuality through their

heritage-rich portraits, others used their photos to demonstrate westernization. Since Chinese immigrants were often seen as a threat to the integrity of American culture, those who had assimilated were more likely to be admitted. Consequently, many immigrants hid signs of Chinese culture in their official portraits. An example of this effort is shown below (Figure 2).

On the leftmost side is Wong Jang,⁵ who had moved to Boston in the 1930s. Hoping that his son might join him, Wong had his son's portrait taken and forwarded to the embassy. The two photos in Fig. 2. are from the same file, and taken a few years apart. However, only the photo on the right was forwarded to the embassy. By appealing to American standards through using western garments, Wong strengthened his son's application. After all, immigration officers were wary of young children, as they would often be placed in local schools to integrate

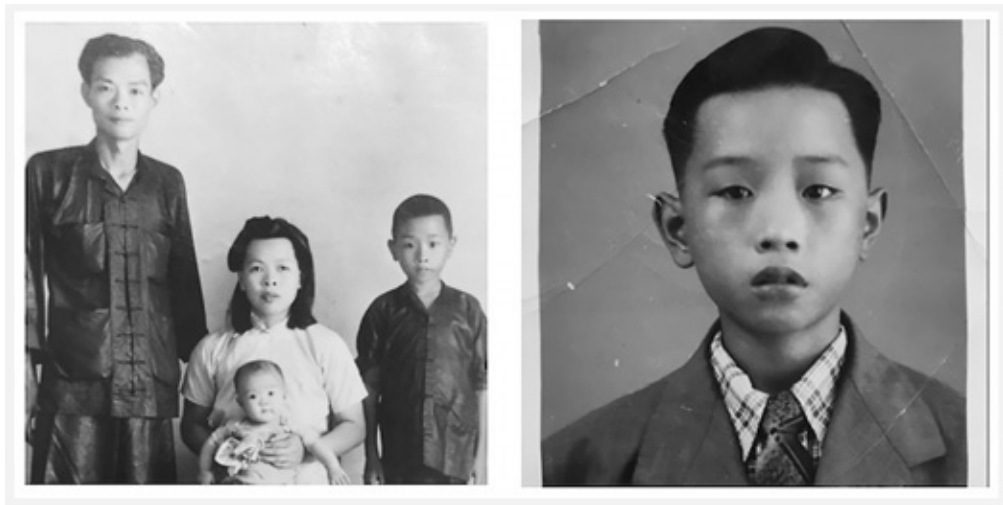


Figure 2

Wong family portraits from Hoy Ping taken in 1946 and 1952.

with American society. By hiding culture, an immigrant could sway border officers. In this way, stereotypes unwittingly “became embedded in state policy ... and the definition of American class” (Lee 103).

In addition to clothing, other immigrants altered their grooming styles to become more westernized with the hopes of improving their cases during interrogations. Wong Kim Ark,⁶ a native-born American citizen, notably won his case against the Supreme Court to assert his citizenship status. As legal scholar Bethany Berger outlines, Wong Kim Ark’s photographs all display his partially shaved scalp, indicating the presence of a queue hairstyle (1228). However, in both his front and side profile portraits, the queue is hidden. By concealing that sign of foreign identity, Wong Kim Ark improved his image for the court.

Both Wong Jang and Wong Kim Ark may appear to have capitulated to standards of westernization, but the context of their photos actually reveals a strengthening of individualistic identity. Even though the young boy’s western portrait was sent to the embassy, his photo in traditional clothing occupied a prominent place in the family album. Similarly, Wong Kim Ark hid his queue without cutting it off. Despite outward appearances, the two kept their true cultural identities intact. Both individuals subverted the purpose of realistic photography to “mark and distinguish” themselves, and instead used the photographs as “tools” to improve their immigration cases. Thus, this duality of image represents an enhancement of individualistic identity—complete with expressions of both American and Chinese customs. Just as Leong Shee’s photo functioned as more than simple identification, these portraits had changed from

identifying markers to impressions of individuality.

Messages of Family Unity

In addition to reinforcing individualistic expression, immigration photos were often repurposed to maintain family cohesion despite geographic separation. Family connection was one of the most important facets of social identity in China, and this translated to overseas family dynamics as well (He 3). Because the Exclusion Act’s policies included strict penalties for even the slightest discrepancies in testimony, Chinese-American citizens often failed in the sponsorship process for their relatives. In the hopes of preserving their family memories, these citizens repurposed their failed applications to create impossible scenes of unity. Some examples are shown in Figure 3.

The photo on the left with two siblings is from Kwangtung. While the young girl was in the studio when the portrait was taken, her brother was not. A few years earlier he had moved to the US. Because of his laborer status, he was not granted a passport, and thus wouldn’t be allowed to travel between countries (Wong 18). With better work prospects in America, he stayed. Close viewers will note that his head appears unusually large and his body quite androgynous. In fact, he wasn’t there at all—he simply sent back his voided passport application to be included. An aunt sat in his place, imitating what was missing from the headshot (Wong 18).

Similarly, the photo on the right demonstrates a composite scene; albeit more roughly so. Outwardly, this portrait from New York celebrates a family in unity. But on closer examination, the couple in the

back and their children in the front row are crudely pasted in. As noted by the New York Museum of Chinese in America, that couple had attempted to immigrate from Hong Kong to America, but due to a small mistake on an application form their petition was denied (Low 61). With no choice but to remain in Hong Kong, they sent their family's application portraits to New York, where they were added to the family shot. Both sets of alterations can hardly be recognized as passport photos; the adjustments created a new meaning. Thus, this process helped to assert a stronger "identity during [that] period of intense upheaval" (Kent 1). In the portraits, the family could be one.

Creating New Definitions

To the opposite effect, some immigration photos were instead used to emphasize the power of an individual figure in a family setting. In Kwangtung, a common funerary tradition involved hanging memorial portraits in the home (Lee 92). For stylistic reasons, immigration portraits were commonly used. After all, immigration portraits were often the finest representations of their subjects. Immigrants rarely, if ever, needed to imitate that level of material wealth after their arrival. Other times, these portraits were the only chronicle of their subjects—photography was a considerable expense in the 1930s. An example of this reclaiming is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 3
Family collages: the Chow family in 1926 and the Low family in 1961.

Wong Yick's portrait appears in two places: an entry record and Wong's grandson's house. On the immigration permit, an officer had scribbled a signature and stamped over the shot, demonstrating its lack of value. The portrait is roughly overexposed—further reflecting its unimportance. However, the same photo appears quite differently in a family setting. In the house, the photo wasn't part of a document, but instead a commemorative family item. Pegler-Gordon comments on this practice, arguing that such reclaimed presentations “changed the purpose of the photograph from the identification of an unknown [worker] to the intimate recognition of a familiar face” (74). By extracting the photo from its document source, family members reconstructed its presence. No longer a criminal snapshot to “mark and distinguish” (Fraser 51), the portrait became a strong indicator of family unity.

Conclusion

Today, identification cards are commonplace. An obvious and reassuring aspect of modern society, these documents offer transparent ways to identify people and verify their history. However, the portraits on these documents are historically complicated. Photographic identification was first introduced in America during the Exclusion Era, and it effectively criminalized the Chinese people. Chinese immigrants subsequently took control of their photographs, using them as a tool of self-expression. To improve their chances of admission to the US, immigrants arranged their portraits to reflect a more idealized persona. They also manipulated their immigration portraits to serve a familial purpose. Photography was indeed a tool used by officers to control newcomers on American soil. But, photography also formed a powerful channel for personal expression. Chinese immigrants



Figure 4
1933 portrait of Wong Yick⁷ in different locations.

undermined the power of their enforced documentation; in using their photos, they prevailed. As author Roland Barthes reflects in *Camera Lucida*, “the photograph itself is in no way animated ... but it animates me” (20). In the same way, Chinese immigration portraits represented a pure illusion—but one powerful enough to alter reality.

Notes

1. Required under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. All photos in this paper are from the time period when that law was in effect, 1882-1965.
2. Hong Kong is immediately adjacent to Kwangtung/Sze Yap in the southernmost part of China.
3. One such increase in immigration occurred in the wake of the Great San Francisco Earthquake in 1906. A majority of San Francisco city records were destroyed in subsequent fires, including birth records. Following this, a majority of Chinese immigrants immediately registered as citizens by birth. With no choice but to accept their claims, ports accepted these early immigrants. Many sponsored their relatives to America using their newfound “citizen” status.
4. Leong Shee’s portrait likely exaggerated her wealth. In her affidavit, she noted that her homeland was in Kwangtung/Sze Yap, China. Given the economic turmoil of the time, such a level of wealth would have been exceedingly rare (and impossible to maintain).
5. From Figure 2, Wong Jang is the author’s great-grandfather. Some information from oral interviews (Wong 18).
6. Wong Kim Ark is of no relation to the author.
7. From Figure 4, Wong Yick is the author’s great-great-grandfather. Some information from oral interviews (Wong 18).

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