

ARTICLE

# Paper Lives of Chinese Migrants and the History of the Undocumented

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*Historians know a great deal more about the laws and policies that first created unauthorized status than the people who had to live within these constraints. What if we tell the history of the undocumented as a history of a people, rather than a history of a state-constructed category? Scholars have noted that unauthorized status exerts broad effects on the conditions of migrants' everyday lives, but they have focused primarily on Latinx migrants in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The case of unauthorized migrants produced by the Chinese exclusion laws (1882–1943) demonstrates how the study of the undocumented must begin a century earlier. In order to denaturalize the conditions of the present, we must interrogate the shifting nature of undocumented life in the past.*

遊美因冇冊。	I roam America undocumented.
洋人多索勒。	White men blackmail me with many demands.
我講南時佢講北。	I say one thing, and they, another;
欲訴冤情又語塞。	I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue stutters.
口嚙嚙。	At a loss for words—
思量無計策。	I wrack my brain for a solution, to no avail.
被控牢籠飛不得。	Thrown into a prison cage, I cannot fly away.
汝話苛刻唔苛刻。	Don't you think this is cruel? Don't you think this is cruel?

—Anonymous Cantonese Rhyme (1911)<sup>1</sup>

Barely two weeks before he died, Lew Din Wing made a confession. Sitting in his San Francisco apartment in September 2002, Lew recounted his eighty-one years to me, his granddaughter, over the course of an hour. His oral history consisted of stock stories practiced to perfection over years of retelling, complete with dramatic pauses and punchlines. Thanks to a tape recorder, almost two decades later I can still hear his voice, his labored breathing, and his life story. Or at least I can hear the story he wanted to endure. Even near death, he was too fearful or ashamed to tell me the other story—the one that threatened his claim on the country—until I switched off the recorder.

Born in China, Lew came to the United States in 1930 at the age of nine in violation of the Chinese exclusion acts. His father, who had already entered the country unlawfully, bought him a one-way steamer ticket across the Pacific, and he simply climbed aboard.<sup>2</sup> My grandfather

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<sup>1</sup>As translated by Marlon K. Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (Berkeley, CA, 1987), 87. Alternate translations of “undocumented” include “without the documentation” or “without identity document.” Hom’s translation uses “white men,” but the more literal translation is “foreigners.”

<sup>2</sup>Lew Din Wing interview by author, Sept. 21, 2002.

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**Figure 1.** The author's grandfather, Lew Din Wing, attended kindergarten in Wyoming (circa 1930) after unlawfully entering the United States at the age of nine. Permission of the author.

struggled to describe his status in the country he called home for the previous seventy-two years. If he were alive today, we might call him an “undocumented immigrant.” But Lew did not live long enough to witness activists declare themselves “undocumented, unafraid, unapologetic,” or to lay claim to their newly formed collective identity (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Still, it seems possible that he holds a place in their history.

Scholars have written histories of Chinese immigrants like my grandfather and histories of policies that made his presence in the United States illegal. They have even written about the two together: unauthorized Chinese migrants navigating the law.<sup>4</sup> And yet, we are still missing the part of the story that Lew would not talk about on tape, the part that went unrecorded. My

<sup>3</sup>Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, “Undocumented, Unafraid and Unapologetic: Re-Articulatory Practices and Migrant Youth ‘Illegality,’” *Latino Studies* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 259–78.

<sup>4</sup>For Chinese migration and the process of exclusion, see Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 9–11; Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York, 2008); Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford, CT, 2000); Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014); Paul A. Kramer, “Imperial Openings: Civilization, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868–1910,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 3 (Jul. 2015): 317–47, here 322; Beth Lew-Williams, “Before Restriction Became Exclusion: America's Experiment in Diplomatic Immigration Control,” *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (Feb. 2014): 24–56; Kitty Calavita, “The Paradoxes of Race, Class, Identity, and ‘Passing’: Enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1882–1910,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 1–40; Claudia Sadowski-Smith, “Unskilled Labor Migration and the Illegality Spiral: Chinese, European, and Mexican Indocumentados in the United States, 1882–2007,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 779–804; Anna Pegler-Gordon, “Chinese Exclusion, Photography, and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Mar. 2006): 51–77; Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017), 95–123; and Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity* (Oakland, CA, 2018), 51–65.

grandfather spoke openly about his interrogation and detention upon arrival but stayed silent on how his unlawful entry continued to weigh on his heart and mind during the next seven decades. His silence is indicative of a larger historical absence. Historians know a great deal more about the laws and policies that created unauthorized status than the people who had to live within these constraints.

What if we de-center the state in the history of “illegal” immigration? The “illegal alien” may be an “impossible subject” from the perspective of the state.<sup>5</sup> But it was, and still is, an all too possible subjecthood and subjectivity for immigrants. Unauthorized status, that is, had broad effects on the conditions of immigrants’ everyday lives and the changing ways they defined themselves. This is a widely recognized feature of the present, as scholars in sociology, anthropology, and ethnic studies have noted, but it has been largely neglected in our study of the past.<sup>6</sup> Too often historical studies of unlawful migration rely on government-produced sources and focus on state attempts at border control. What if we tell the history of the undocumented as a history of a people, rather than a history of a state-constructed category?

For such a project, it makes sense to begin with Chinese migrants. The Chinese were the first cohort of unauthorized immigrants produced by federal law and, until the mid-twentieth century, the largest. Between 1882 and 1943, when Chinese Restriction and Exclusion Acts barred the vast majority of immigrants from China, government officials recorded more than 300,000 Chinese arrivals. The most conservative estimates hold that at least 25 percent of these entries were unauthorized. Contemporaries often believed the rate of subterfuge to be significantly higher; immigration inspectors at the most popular port of entry—Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay—put the figure as high as 90 percent, and Chinese Americans who lived through this period cited a similar number. In short, there were tens of thousands of undocumented Chinese during the Exclusion Era, and even more who faced assumptions of illegality based on their race alone.<sup>7</sup>

What did it mean for Chinese migrants, in the words of the poet quoted in the epigraph above, “to roam America undocumented?” Writing in 1911 using colloquial language, the poet describes how his status has made him vulnerable to blackmail and silenced by fear. In a few short lines, he evokes the cruelty of this form of legal precarity.<sup>8</sup> By focusing on the

<sup>5</sup>“Immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject*, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility—a subject barred from citizenship and without rights,” explains Mae Ngai. “The illegal alien is thus an ‘impossible subject,’ a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved.” Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 5.

<sup>6</sup>There is a large and growing literature on the lived experience of the undocumented in the contemporary United States, which takes as its central subject Mexican and Latinx migrants who arrived in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. I seek to build on this work by tracing an earlier history of undocumented life. For instance, see Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Oakland, CA, 2014); Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York, 2008); Nicholas De Genova, “The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant ‘Illegality,’” *Latino Studies* 2, no. 2 (Jul. 2004): 160–85, here 178; Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants’ Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2003); Angela S. García, *Legal Passing: Navigating Undocumented Life and Local Immigration Law* (Oakland, CA, 2019); and Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Adam McKeown, “Ritualization of Regulation: The Enforcement of Chinese Exclusion in the United States and China,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 2 (Apr. 2003): 377–403, here 378; Mae M. Ngai, “Legacies of Exclusion: Illegal Chinese Immigration during the Cold War Years,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 3–35, here 3; Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 12; Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, 2015), 95. Racial profiling of undocumented migrants continues to the present; see Brian R. Gallini and Elizabeth L. Young, “Car Stops, Borders, and Profiling: The Hunt for Undocumented (Illegal?) Immigrants in Border Towns,” *Nebraska Law Review* 89, no. 4 (2011): 709–38; and Leo R. Chavez, “The Condition of Illegality,” *International Migration* 45, no. 3 (Aug. 2007): 192–6.

<sup>8</sup>Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain*, 87.

lived experience of migrants like this unknown poet, rather than the laws and policies that made possible their condition, we can construct a more complete picture of past forms of undocumented life.

While the exclusion law seemed to draw a clear line dividing authorized immigrants and unauthorized, Chinese migrants' experiences reveal this to be a legal fiction. In their attempt to navigate the law, many Chinese migrants occupied an in-between space, which afforded them some of the privileges of documentation, but not all. Lew, for example, possessed real citizenship papers based on his father's false declaration. With those papers, he could live his life as a U.S. citizen. He could attend school, find work, vote, serve in the armed forces, receive veteran benefits, wed, open a cafeteria, buy property, and travel overseas. He did all of these things, however, with knowledge of his own illegality and uncertainty of what it meant. His experience bears relation to sociologist Cecilia Menjívar's concept of "liminal legality." She uses the term to describe the uncertain experience of migrants who are "not fully documented or undocumented but often straddl[e] both." Examining contemporary immigration, Menjívar and others have emphasized the role of U.S. law in producing legal liminality for Central American migrants, through programs like Temporary Protected Status, and Mexican migrants, through programs for guest workers and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.<sup>9</sup> Lew's liminal legality, however, was not the product of temporary relief through government policy. Instead, he and other Chinese migrants used fraud and subterfuge to forge their own liminality. The exclusion laws imagined hard borders between legality and illegality, but the state never managed to make it so.

Neither did the state fully define how illegality conditioned migrants' lives. State-based categories, many of which have been adopted by scholars, tend to emphasize what people like my grandfather lacked. Describing migrants as *undocumented*, *unauthorized*, "*illegal*" *noncitizens*, we underscore the ways that U.S. law deprived them of standing and membership. Unauthorized status, however, could also generate new, often unintended, ways of life.<sup>10</sup> Seeking to make sense of how their legal status structured the content of their lives, unauthorized Chinese migrants forged a collective subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Decades before unauthorized immigrants defined themselves as "the undocumented," Chinese migrants self-identified as "paper sons" or, less frequently, "paper daughters."<sup>12</sup> This new identity rested on concepts of doubleness. To be a paper son was to possess multiple names and biographies at once, switch between them in daily life, and recognize others doing the same. U.S. immigration law was intended as a disciplining instrument of state power, but it also cleaved open a space for new identities and ways of life.

Under Chinese exclusion, the state apparatus of immigration control was concentrated at U.S. borders and many of our histories share this spatial frame. The effects of undocumented subjecthood could be felt long after the moment of crossing, however. Nicholas De Genova notes that today's migrants often feel a "palpable sense of deportability" and "protracted vulnerability," even far from the border. He calls this modern phenomenon "everyday illegality,"

<sup>9</sup>Cecilia Menjívar, "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (Jan. 2006): 999–1037; Jennifer M. Chacón, "Producing Liminal Legality," *Denver University Law Review* 92, no. 4 (2015): 709–67.

<sup>10</sup>Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Migrant Melancholia: Emergent Discourses of Mexican Migrant Traffic in Transnational Space," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 105, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 831–61, here 841.

<sup>11</sup>On subjectivity, see Jennifer Todd, "Social Transformation, Collective Categories, and Identity Change," *Theory and Society* 34, no. 4 (Aug. 2005): 429–63; Lauren Leve, "Identity," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (Aug. 2011): 513–35; Floya Anthias, "Where Do I Belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality," *Ethnicities* 2, no. 4 (Dec. 2002): 491–514; and Pierre de Vos, "The Constitution Made Us Queer: The Sexual Orientation Clause in the South African Constitution and the Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Identity," in *Law and Sexuality: The Global Arena*, eds. Carl Stychin and Didi Herman (Minneapolis, 2001), 194–207.

<sup>12</sup>The masculine term was dominant within the Chinese community. Luk, *The Life of Paper*, 65.

and he argues that it developed in response to the “increasingly militarized spectacle of apprehensions, detentions, and deportations” at the U.S.–Mexico border and “excessive and extraordinary forms of policing” within the nation’s interior.<sup>13</sup> But even in the period before mass deportation, widespread local–federal collaboration, and a sprawling enforcement bureaucracy, Chinese migrants could experience some effects of “everyday illegality.” Acting in anticipation of the law and with imperfect understandings of it, Chinese migrants adjusted aspects of their lives that the law did not directly touch. Some of the self-protective financial, social, and political choices they made parallel actions taken by current-day undocumented people. Other strategies were tied to the particularities of the exclusion laws. Paper sons, for example, not only doubled their identities, but they also doubled their family trees and, in the process, forged novel and enduring forms of kinship.

Traditionally, scholars date the Chinese Exclusion Era from 1882 to 1943, based on the passage and repeal of federal laws. Lived experience, however, offers an alternative periodization, because long after Chinese exclusion was repealed, paper sons and daughters lived on. The Immigration and Naturalization Service recognized this and, between 1957 and 1965, partnered with the State and Justice Departments to stamp out these multiple identities. In the name of unearthing communist spies, the state asked unauthorized Chinese to “confess” their “true” names and “true” families. But even the Confession Program did not end paper lives and double identities; instead it made their continued existence increasingly taboo. Paper sons, in other words, were both the predecessors of the undocumented Latinx community and, in the late twentieth century, their hidden contemporaries.

### Terms, Sources, and Methods

Constructing a long, multiracial history of undocumented peoples requires a shift in terminology. It means defining “the undocumented” broadly, as all people whose territorial presence within the nation has been criminalized by the state.<sup>14</sup> Using this definition, we can see how the membership, experiences, and identities of this social group have shifted over time. I use the term “undocumented” because it is the label of choice by present-day members of this community. It is important to note, however, that this term is anachronistic, since it was not deployed as a noun until the late twentieth century, and it should not be taken literally given that many unauthorized immigrants, past and present, possess some form of documentation. I suggest we use the term “undocumented” much like we use the term “Asian American.” As a phrase and concept, “Asian American” originated in the 1960s, but scholars have productively traced an Asian American history that stretches back into the nineteenth century.

Scholars have thoroughly examined the country’s gates and the numerous records produced by immigration laws and government surveillance. These histories of exclusion based in archives of nativism offer insight into the production of “illegality” as a socio-legal status. One could construct the history of the undocumented by reading these state sources against the grain. In this essay, however, I have chosen a different approach. I have focused my sights beyond the border and the federal archive, turning instead to undocumented lives within the nation and sources produced by Chinese migrants. My intent is to build on previous work

<sup>13</sup>De Genova, “The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant ‘Illegality,’” 161, 178; Nicholas De Genova, “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality,’” in *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, eds. Cecilia Menjivar and Daniel Kanstroom (New York, 2014), 37–62. While I emphasize the effect of unauthorized status on all aspects of life, I do not wish to suggest that “illegality” ever became totalizing for the Chinese. It was not the only way that Chinese migrants defined themselves, nor did it become the only force that determined their interaction with American society. Moreover, this identity and social condition did not become fixed, uniform, or coherent. David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, CA, 1995).

<sup>14</sup>Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 4; Schmidt Camacho, “Migrant Melancholia,” 832, 841.

by shifting our gaze from legal status to lived experience, from the border to the interior, and from state archives to alternative sources.<sup>15</sup>

Non-state records of Chinese lives are scarce and imperfect. Take first a working-class, transient, racially marginalized community and add the anxiety that comes with illegality: the result is a conspicuous silence in traditional historical records. Even Chinese-language newspapers, which became a mainstay in the community in the twentieth century, reported on laws and policies rather than the experience of paper lives.<sup>16</sup> The sources that attest to everyday illegality are a hodgepodge of ethnography, oral history, fiction, testimonials, poetry, and memoir. Some of these sources date back to the era of Chinese restriction and exclusion, including sociologist Paul Siu's fieldwork conducted in the 1930s for *The Chinese Laundryman: A Sociological Study of Isolation*. Many other Chinese sources were produced more recently. Particularly noteworthy are 165 oral histories conducted by the Southern California Chinese Historical Society (1979–1980), 52 oral histories conducted by the Angel Island Oral History Project (1975–1990), 72 personal testimonials submitted to the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (2010–present), and a pair of recent memoirs (2000, 2006).<sup>17</sup> With the exception of the testimonials, which were produced in the twenty-first century, the majority of these accounts were recorded in Cantonese and subsequently translated into English.

Using existing oral histories, rather than conducting my own, presents challenges. The researchers who conducted these projects had the advantages of closer proximity to events and a larger, younger community to interview. Yet these projects emerged from a particular time with specific aims in mind. The Southern California project was carried out over the course of a year in an effort to celebrate and commemorate the Los Angeles community, while the Angel Island project continued for more than a decade and sought to expose discriminatory practices at Angel Island Immigration Station. Reading these transcripts requires understanding the context of the interviews as well as the history they describe. Neither study imagined that Chinese exclusion could be ongoing, nor did they probe the meaning of everyday illegality.

Moreover, none of these sources, whether written or oral, whether in Chinese or English, offer an unfiltered Chinese “voice” or a transparent view of unauthorized life. I can momentarily set aside state records, but I cannot avoid the history of state domination and its archival consequences. Exclusion drove deliberate acts of immigration fraud, which now pervade state and non-state records. The resulting absences and fabrications are a feature of these sources, not a flaw. They too can be read.

<sup>15</sup>Similarly, I have purposefully avoided government records and making conclusions on the workings of the state.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, *Mei zhou hua qiao ri bao* [*China Daily News*] (New York, 1940–), Center for Research Libraries, Chicago, IL, and *Chung Sai Yat Po* (San Francisco, 1900–1953), AAS MICROFILM CA 20, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>17</sup>Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*, ed. John Kuo Wei Tchen (New York, 1987); Angel Island Oral History Project, MS 283, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA [hereafter AIOH, UC Santa Cruz]; Chinese Historical Society of Southern California Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project, collection 1688, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA [hereafter SCOH]; “Immigrant Voices,” Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, <https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/> (accessed Feb. 2021) [hereafter AIISF]; Tung Pok Chin with Winifred C. Chin, *Paper Son: One Man's Story* (Philadelphia, 2000); Wayne Hung Wong, *American Paper Son: A Chinese Immigrant in the Midwest*, ed. Benson Tong (Urbana, IL, 2006). See also Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, boxes 137–8, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL; Tung Pok Chin and Wing Fong Chin Papers and Photographs, TAM 235, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, NY; Wen-Hsien Chen, “Chinese Under Both Exclusion and Immigration Laws” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1940); and Ching Chao Wu, “Chinatowns: A Study of Symbiosis and Assimilation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1928).

The advantages of non-state sources are numerous, as studies of undocumented Mexican migrants in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have shown. As Ana Elizabeth Rosas notes, state sources tend toward “one-dimensional and episodic accounts and categories.” In the process of producing “a class of stateless subjects,” argues Alicia Schmidt Camacho, the United States and Mexico “collude” to discursively reduce the undocumented to “disposable labor” and legally reduce them to “criminal trespassers.” Although oral histories are “filtered through the lens of time and mediated by the interviewer,” Vicki L. Ruiz has shown that they “provid[e] spaces for people to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words and on their own terms.”<sup>18</sup> These authors and others have turned to oral histories, personal testimonials, and fiction to better capture undocumented life as it is lived, rather than as it is policed. I draw on similar methods to consider how the shape of undocumented life has shifted over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### Between Legal and Illegal

In 1934, Lai Bing Chan arrived in Boston Harbor and, after three days of interrogation “in a dingy little room in the Boston Immigration house,” entered the United States as a man named Tung Pok Chin. Along with his new name came a new identity purchased on “the Chinese black market.” In a memoir published decades later, he recalled spending months in China studying this new identity, memorizing “my paper name, my paper father’s name, my paper mother’s name, my age, their ages, my place of birth, their places of birth, their occupations, and so on.” Across the Pacific, the rigor of U.S. immigration interrogations was legendary. Questions could be so detailed that even “real” sons studied in advance to avoid forgetting the village layout. Paper sons and daughters, however, had more to learn and more to forget. “This was not easy,” Chin recalled, “I had to completely block out my real and immediate family: my parents who raised me and arranged a marriage for me at the age of thirteen, my wife, my two young sons, aged four and five....” Still, he managed to enter the immigration house with proper paperwork and answers to officials’ questions. In a matter of days, Lai, an excluded Chinese migrant, remade himself as Chin, the son of a native-born American.<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese Restriction Act (1882), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1888), and, above all, the Geary Act (1892) demanded that Chinese migrants provide documentary evidence that they had the right to enter the United States. These laws created a frenzied business in record production, first by the state and then by the Chinese. To their chagrin, federal officials lacked records of Chinese births, marriages, and deaths in the United States or China, which made it difficult, if not impossible, to discern the difference between an alien and a citizen. Officials, therefore, took it upon themselves to generate written records of these life events. Through extensive interrogations of Chinese migrants, the government worked relentlessly to produce, collect, and preserve records of Chinese lives in the vain hope that such documentation would slow migration.<sup>20</sup>

This meant that unauthorized Chinese who wished to appear legal donned “a choice of masks,” assuming the identity of a returning laborer, exempted merchant, minor child of a merchant, or unmarried child of a citizen.<sup>21</sup> The final category became the dominant means of fraudulent lawful entry at the turn of the twentieth century, due to the confluence of two

<sup>18</sup>For approaches to oral testimony, see Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 239–45; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY, 1991); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997), 10–2; and Schmidt Camacho, “Migrant Melancholia,” 832, 841.

<sup>19</sup>Chin, *Paper Son*, 12.

<sup>20</sup>McKeown, “Ritualization of Regulation,” 396. For the racism and nativism that led to Chinese Exclusion, see Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>Wu, “Chinatowns,” 96.

unrelated events. First, in 1898, the Supreme Court case *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* clarified that Chinese born in the United States held U.S. citizenship based on the Fourteenth Amendment. Then, in 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed the city's birth records. As a result, a male Chinese migrant could increasingly claim to have been born in the United States, and, once his U.S. citizenship was a matter of record, travel to China and bring back children who claimed derivative U.S. citizenship. Fraud could happen at either stage of this process: the father's original claim to citizenship or the relation between father and son (or, occasionally, daughter). These invented kinships fed a stream of unauthorized immigrants, whom Chinese migrants and U.S. officials called "paper sons" and "paper daughters," or *zhisheng-zai* (纸生仔).<sup>22</sup> By using false documentation, Chinese migrants were not disregarding American law. Instead, they were desperately attempting to find a way to be recognized as a legitimate state subject, and in so doing, they carved their own form of liminal legality.<sup>23</sup>

Given the current conception of undocumented status as an absence of paper, it is striking that this form of unauthorized life relied on the presence of documentation.<sup>24</sup> Immigration papers became revered within the Chinese community, according to sociologist Paul Siu. His subjects kept their papers "in a safety box or in trusted hands; it is among one's valuables—in fact, for some people it is the most important paper in his life. It means freedom from fear and freedom of movement." As Fae Myenne Ng, the daughter of a paper son, observed in her 1993 novel *Bone*, "In this country, paper is more precious than blood."<sup>25</sup> Mirroring the state fetishization of documents, Chinese migrants prized and preserved identification papers. Holding a *jia-zhi* (假纸), or "fake paper," became more than a criminalized action; it became a form of collective identity and way of life.

Lai Bing Chan's performance before Boston's immigration officials was an act of deception intended to elude the regulatory mechanisms of the state, but it was also an act of creation. Even as he worked to disassemble his previous identity, Chin was engaged in assembling a new one. Through this strange ritual of baptism-via-interrogation and rebirth-on-paper, Chin came to understand himself as a "paper son" and began to recognize a community of similarly positioned migrants. For many Chinese migrants, "paper" was a way to make sense of what followed. As they collected papers, many unauthorized Chinese also collected identities, performing double personas and claiming double kinships to live within American society. Although the moment of entry was especially salient in the self-fashioning of undocumented identities, it was not the sole episode that forged this collective subjectivity. The process began in the village, as migrants studied their paper identities, and continued long after they exited the immigration station. While government officials, Chinese migrants, and even historians tend to describe these personas as "true/real" or "false/fake," this binary belies the complexity of these identities.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Estelle T. Lau, *Paper Families: Identity, Immigration Administration, and Chinese Exclusion* (Durham, NC, 2006), 115–6, 132; Xiaojian Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community, 1940–1965* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), 30–5; Madeline Hsu, "Gold Mountain Dreams and Paper Son Schemes: Chinese Immigration under Exclusion," *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* 11 (1997): 46–61; Lee, *At America's Gates*, 189–220; Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, eds., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, 2nd ed. (Seattle, 2014); Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, UK, 2010).

<sup>23</sup>Schmidt Camacho, "Migrant Melancholia," 840; Menjivar, "Liminal Legality," 1000.

<sup>24</sup>In fact, both then and now, undocumented migrants often deploy papers to enter the country, find employment, and seek government services. Jana Sladkova, "Stratification of Undocumented Migrant Journeys: Honduran Case," *International Migration* 54, no. 1 (Feb. 2016): 84–99.

<sup>25</sup>Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone* (New York, 1993), 9; Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 197–8; Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, 74; Robert F. Lee interview by Bernice Sam, Aug. 4 and Aug. 20, 1980, recording in English and Chinese, no. 126, folder 2, box 15, SCOH.

<sup>26</sup>Hsu, "Gold Mountain Dreams and Paper Son Schemes," 46–51.



When Chin entered the United States in 1934, he quickly ceased to be Lai on paper, but he continued to navigate the complications of a double identity and live somewhere between legal and illegal. Under a new name, Chin found his first job, enlisted in the army during World War II, and married. At the same time, he maintained his old name when interacting with New York's Chinese immigrant community and as a writer for the *China Daily News*.<sup>27</sup> "For official purposes we always resorted to the information on paper," he explained in his memoir, "but in reality, no one could live a lie forever. How else would we know if a distant cousin arrived?" Among friends, family, and clan members, he "spoke the truth." "We all knew how most of us got here," he wrote. "We felt we were among family and we could be ourselves again, all sticking together in a foreign land."<sup>28</sup>

Many contemporary undocumented migrants deploy more than one identity, just as paper sons did before them. In his study of a Malian migrant in France, for example, Stefan Le Courant describes the proliferation of identities at the turn of the twenty-first century. The undocumented migrant "must ceaselessly plan and play with identities" to find work, housing, medical care, and a semblance of security. According to Le Courant, the typical migrant adopts a series of papers that defy binary concepts of authenticity: "A 'fake' residence permit, a 'real' passport under a 'fake' name, a 'real' provisional residence authorization obtained for fraudulent asylum, the use of a 'real' document belonging to another person, etc." For contemporary migrants, however, these alternate identities are usually multiple and temporary, adopted to cross a border, obtain work, or access social services. Most paper sons and daughters, in contrast, possessed only two identities—one from birth and one from entry—that remained stable over the course of their lives.<sup>29</sup>

For paper sons like Chin, name-switching became a daily practice, recognized by the Chinese migrant community. Another paper son, Chaney Wong, reported that he eventually grew accustomed to his paper name. "That's your name," he stated to the interviewer, "And you accept that. And that's your identity." The Chinese community's open recognition of paper sons helped smooth immigrants' adaptation to the habitus of a paper life.<sup>30</sup> The phenomenon was "so well known," explained Wong, that "people do talk about it. And most of them understand the position [you are in] so they accept whatever name you use." This understanding stretched beyond the ethnic enclaves of New York and San Francisco. Growing up in Wichita, Kansas, Wayne Hung Wong readily identified himself as a "paper son" and could easily recognize who among his high school friends shared his status. "Even today, there are people with names different from their real names," explained Harry Jung of Los Angeles in 1979. "The family that owns General Lee's are not really Lees."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Lam Lap, "Tung Pok Chin: A Paper Son Poet in New York," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 9, no. 4 (2015): 635–65.

<sup>28</sup>Chin, *Paper Son*, 71.

<sup>29</sup>Stefan Le Courant, "Imposture at the Border: Law and the Construction of Identities among Undocumented Migrants," *Social Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (Aug. 2019): 472–85, here 473, 475; Cetta Mainwaring and Noelle Brigden, "Beyond the Border: Clandestine Migration Journeys," *Geopolitics* 21, no. 2 (Apr. 2016): 243–62; García, *Legal Passing*, 138–9; Dennis Broeders and Godfried Engbersen, "The Fight Against Illegal Migration: Identification Policies and Immigrants' Counterstrategies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 12 (Aug. 2007): 1592–1609; Kamal Sadiq, *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries* (New York, 2009). There are exceptions to this general pattern, because paper sons could take on more than two identities in the course of their lifetimes. For example, they sometimes chose to switch from being a paper merchant to being a paper citizen, and vice versa. Mrs. Chew interview by Judy Yung (in Chinese), c. 1977, transcript (English translation), folder 5, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz, 1.

<sup>30</sup>Mr. [Chaney] Wong interview by Felicia Lowe, Apr. 11, 1984, transcript, folder 47, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz.

<sup>31</sup>Wong, *American Paper Son*, 40; Harry Jung, summary of interview, Apr. 25, 1979, no. 12, folder 5, box 2, SCOH, 15. See also Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 198.

Although the existence of paper sons and daughters was an open secret within Chinese American communities, most undocumented Chinese shielded their double identities from outsiders. “In [San Francisco] Chinatown in those days, most of the people that I ran around with were immigrants, and so we all know we’re all phonies,” Hop Jeong remembered. Negotiating his dual identity became complicated when he entered the multiracial space of elementary school and encountered both co-ethnic peers and white school officials. According to his academic records, Jeong attended school with his “cousin.” But his “cousin” was, in fact, his biological brother. “Everybody, all [my] friends referred to [him as] my brother,” said Jeong. “But when we come to the principal or the school administration, then we have to say, no, that’s my cousin I’m living with.”<sup>32</sup>

Divisions between private and public names were rarely neat and tidy. Among family in the privacy of his own apartment, Jeong still felt pressured to perform his paper identity. While his peers acknowledged his original name, his grandfather insisted that all the children in the family refer to one another by their paper names. If the children spoke the “truth” at home, what was to keep them from making a mistake when out in the world? To please his grandfather, Jeong complied, although he did not fully understand the reasons behind this double speak. “I just thought that was the way of life,” he recalled.

While intimately familiar with this daily performance, Jeong spent most of his life ignorant of the Chinese Exclusion Act. In a 2006 interview, he reported, “until twenty or twenty-five years ago, [I] was not aware of this so-called Chinese Exclusion Act.” Mr. Dea described a similar state of ignorance: “Well, at that time, we didn’t understand American laws. We just knew we had to go through Angel Island.” In fact, the index of the Southern California Oral History Project (1979–1980) suggests that two of the 165 interviewees mentioned the term “exclusion.” Even among the forty-six interviews of Chinese migrants collected by the Angel Island Oral History Project (1975–1990), which focused on immigration detention, only one interviewee (the researcher’s father) used the word “exclusion.” In contrast, all five Angel Island officials and translators interviewed made use of the term. “Exclusion” was hardly mentioned in Chinese interviews and testimonials until historians began to publicize the history of Angel Island in the documentary *Carved in Silence* (1987), in the two textbooks *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989) and *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991), and with the poetry collection *Island* (1991). These historical works, which used terminology favored by immigration officials and state records, emphasized the Exclusion Act. Earlier accounts from paper sons, however, make clear that the law was less significant than the habitus it helped to create.<sup>33</sup>

Federal immigration law, and the scholars who have written its history, define undocumented Chinese primarily in negative terms, focusing on what they lacked. Chinese migrants, however, often described their collective experience in more affirmative ways that reflected collective subjectivity and communal belonging based on paper identities. Although their status was imposed by the state, they eventually invested in this social position, recognized themselves within it, and defined it in their own terms. For many, their identity as paper sons and daughters became more salient than the policy of exclusion or, for that matter, the very idea of illegality.

<sup>32</sup>Hop Jeong, interview by Ian Durfee, Mar. 22, 2006, transcript, folder 21, box 1, Angel Island Oral History Project, University of California, Davis, CA, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7w48z3s9> (accessed Feb. 19, 2021).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. See also Mr. Dea interview by Him Mark Lai and Judy Yung (in Chinese), Mar. 24, 1976, transcript (English translation), folder 44, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz. As Susan Bibler Coutin has observed, “The practices that render the unauthorized illicit produce legal subjectivities, strategies, and discourses that differ from those that are operative in formal legal proceedings such as deportation hearings.” Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 49.

### Navigating Illegality in the Era before Mass Deportation

Huie Yuk Shone did not have the resources to buy a paper name and, with it, entry into the United States. Instead, he borrowed money under his father's name and bought a ticket to a country rumored to be "New America." He sailed from Hong Kong to San Francisco, where he was processed as an immigrant "in transit," and continued by rail to Mexicali, Mexico. He did not like what he found there: backbreaking work in the cotton fields and local workers who resented Chinese newcomers and "assaulted [us] with clods of dirt."<sup>34</sup> Unable to find permanent employment and desperate to escape the heat, Huie turned his sights north in 1929. "I figured I would never have the documents to enter the United States legally," he recalled. "There was no other way except to sneak across the border." He hired a driver for 450 dollars and crossed into the United States, lying low in the bottom of a car. Within twenty-four hours, he arrived at the Huie Family Association in San Francisco.<sup>35</sup>

Crossing the border was hardly the end of his troubles. Undocumented Chinese like Huie carried their lack of status with them into American society where it continued to shape their social interactions and economic decisions. Illegality could have a broad effect on a migrant's occupation, education, health, identity, and family structure, as it does today. It is striking, however, that these effects emerged in the absence of mass deportation policies. Between 1921 and 1964, 11,317 Chinese faced formal deportation (257 annually, on average); Chinese migrants made up 2.4 percent of all deportees during this period.<sup>36</sup> While deportation remained an unlikely event for undocumented Chinese, the threat of it could still inform their actions.

Upon entering the United States, Huie set off to find work. "I was a stranger in a strange city and I was not familiar with the job market," he remembered. "Besides, I did not speak English and I did not have any legal documents. I dared not venture out on my own. It was like living in prison."<sup>37</sup> Even after Huie acquired a job, basic English phrases, and a place to stay, he felt that his status restricted his movement and behavior. He spent most of his time working, because his schedule at the laundry was all consuming and because socializing posed significant risks. "Except for joining my family association, I didn't have time to do anything else. Besides, I was in a vulnerable position [*as an illegal alien*] and I couldn't afford to get into any trouble," he told an interviewer in 1987. "If I even made one wrong friend, someone could report me to Immigration. I didn't dare talk politics, didn't even dare insult anyone." Facing ever-present anxieties about deportation, he hesitated to form friendships, and when he did, he continued to guard his words.<sup>38</sup> Another Chinese migrant, Spencer Chan, described men like Huie as "Chinese wetbacks" in his oral history in 1979. He remembered visiting Riverside, California, in the 1920s, where he saw a ranch owner who "held the paper of some illegal Chinese, so they would work for him." Chan recalled, "The workers did not have anything to start with, and end[ed] up [in] slavery."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Huie Yuk Shone, "Life Is Like a Dream: Confessions of an Illegal Alien," ed. Judy Yung, trans. Marlon Hom, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 3 (1989): 87–110. On anti-Chinese racism in Mexico, see Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880–1940* (Urbana, IL, 2017).

<sup>35</sup>Huie, "Life Is Like a Dream," 87–110.

<sup>36</sup>Cecilia Menjivar and Leisy J. Abrego, "Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 5 (Mar. 2012): 1380–1421; Adam Goodman correspondence with author, May 14, 2020; Adam Goodman, *Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton, NJ, 2020). These statistics include deportations, rather than exclusions.

<sup>37</sup>Huie, "Life Is Like a Dream," 97.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 102. (The parenthetical clarification appeared in the original.) For a similar phenomenon among undocumented Mexicans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, see Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 222; De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality,'" 160–85; and Karina Fortuny, Randy Capps, and Jeffrey S. Passel, "The Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in California, Los Angeles County, and the United States" (Washington, DC, 2007), [http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411425\\_characteristics\\_immigrants.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411425_characteristics_immigrants.pdf) (accessed Feb. 19, 2021).

<sup>39</sup>Spencer Chan, summary of interview by Suellen Chan, Apr. 7 and Apr. 26, 1983, no. 154, folder 5, box 24, SCOH, 6.

Desperation to see his wife and children, who remained in China, also made Huie vulnerable to exploitation and deportation. Hearing rumors that a lawyer could get him a “re-entry passport,” Huie paid a hefty fee, hoping he could temporarily visit Hong Kong and return to the United States. As he arranged his trip, however, he read in the newspaper that Chinese immigrants had been detained by immigration control upon their return. “Frightened by this development, I gave up any hope of going home,” Huie stated, “Not only did I take a six-hundred-dollar loss, but I was investigated by the State Department!” For months, investigators visited the restaurant where he worked, but they never managed to locate him. After this close call, Huie resigned himself to staying in the United States: “I had to make do with life here.” Fear of exclusion kept Huie separated from his wife until 1956.<sup>40</sup>

Ironically, many paper sons constructed an American identity to facilitate their return to China. Chinese migrants regularly made claims of U.S. citizenship, but this did not mean that they identified as U.S. citizens or viewed membership in American society as their ultimate goal. They recognized that they could never fully belong to the country’s racially stratified society. “Everyone planned to return [to China],” explained Mr. Lai, who arrived at Angel Island as a paper son. “Like myself, when I first came, I thought I would only stay a few years and then go back.” Siu found that most undocumented Chinese viewed American citizenship as a matter of “expediency,” since it could guarantee “greater freedom of movement between this country and China.”<sup>41</sup>

While unauthorized status discouraged movement between the United States and China, it could encourage transiency within the United States.<sup>42</sup> Siu told the story of Chin Ming-yuen, who had been in the country since 1921 and became eligible for a status adjustment in the 1950s. But any adjustment required documentary proof that he was a long-term resident in the United States, which he found impossible to provide. “Chin has been moving from place to place every few years,” reported Siu. He was not listed on any census or police list, and lost track of earlier acquaintances who might have been able to testify to his presence. Deeply discouraged, Chin told a social worker that he preferred to “buy a paper” rather than apply for adjustment.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese who lacked any form of documentation faced acute and inescapable risks, but even those with documents lived in danger of deportation and exploitation.<sup>44</sup> According to Tung Pok Chin, who entered Boston in 1934, the anxiety of a paper identity permeated his life beyond his momentary interactions with immigration control. He found that being a paper

<sup>40</sup>Huie, “Life Is Like a Dream,” 102. See also Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 201. For separation due to papers, see Mr. Yip interview by Genny Lim and Judy Yung (in Chinese), Aug. 29, 1976, transcript (English translation), folder 22, box 1, AIOH, 7. For separation leading to divorce, see Mr. Chan interview by Judy Yung (in Chinese and “some English”), June 6, 1990, transcript (English translation), folder 26, box 1, AIOH, 3.

<sup>41</sup>Mr. Lai (anonymized) interview by Judy Yung (in Chinese), June 30–July 1, 1989, transcript (English translation), folder 29, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz. See also Him Mark Lai, *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004), 23; Lood Ting Tom interview, May 22, 1979, transcript (English translation), no. 57, folder 6, box 27, SCOH; James W. Gin interview, Aug. 30, 1979, transcript (English translation), no. 45, folder 5, box 27, SCOH; and Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 204. Over time, however, the adoption of paper citizenship could accelerate Americanization. The successful deployment of paper names allowed undocumented Chinese to operate in American society as citizens, and the fear of unmasking encouraged them to act the part. Sociologist Angela S. García has described similar behaviors as “legal passing.” “Sustained over time and under pressure,” García writes, “legal passing results in transformative alterations to the self that unexpectedly deepen aspects of sociocultural assimilation.” Paper sons’ performance of U.S. citizenship, which tended to be more absolute and effective than legal passing today, may have accelerated this process. García, *Legal Passing*, 6, 134.

<sup>42</sup>On transiency, see Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley, CA, 2011), 6.

<sup>43</sup>Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 204.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

son had significant financial ramifications. Seven years after arriving in the United States, Chin had paid off only half the cost of his travel and papers, which meant putting off plans to attend college.<sup>45</sup> Paper status also jeopardized inheritance. After serving in the navy during World War II, Chin was entitled to a \$10,000 life insurance policy, but since the beneficiary was his paper mother, he declined the benefit. The insurance officer called him “a damn fool.” “He was absolutely right,” wrote Chin years later, “but who was he to know the secrets of the Chinese paper son? I had to swallow my bitterness in silence.”<sup>46</sup>

Anxiety engendered by unauthorized migration could seep into the next generation, touching the lives of American-born children in the 1950s and 1960s, despite their U.S. citizenship. “I remember being at the age of about thirteen or fourteen when my mother told me that Daddy might get deported,” Shelia Morris explained to an interviewer. “Mom told me that I think for her own fear. I think she had to talk to somebody.”<sup>47</sup> John Jung also remembered his mother disclosing his father’s paper status. “I was upset, angry, and surprised,” he wrote many years later. “I was torn between feelings of shame for being ‘illegal’ and fear that someday my parents would be apprehended and deported.”<sup>48</sup> For Fae Myenne Ng, “deport” was her first English word: “As my father huddled with his friends, I listened to him pronounce *daay bort*, proclaiming the word ‘deport’ by breaking it into syllables that creaked like a door opening and shutting.” She was trained at a young age to avoid implicating him. “When asked his name, I would answer, ‘I call him Father.’”<sup>49</sup> As they came to understand their parents’ status, the second generation could not help but imagine their future marred by forced separation.

Many of the familial, economic, and social ramifications of unauthorized status present clear antecedents to contemporary undocumented subjecthood. Chinese exclusion laws, however, also had distinct effects on this earlier generation of undocumented migrants. The stability of Chinese paper names, for example, set them apart from recent forms of invented identity. In contrast to the temporary selling, loaning, renting, and gifting of identity papers among undocumented migrants today, Chinese migrants understood paper families to be permanent constructions and expected to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining them for a lifetime. Once bound by paper relationships, migrants became mutually dependent on one another. Over time these invented kinships had the power to transform Chinese American families and the very notion of family within the community.<sup>50</sup>

Some historians have portrayed the formation of paper families as straightforward financial transactions, in which a paper son or daughter bought a “slot” from another family.<sup>51</sup> Using middlemen helped depersonalize and routinize the production of paper families, which

<sup>45</sup>Chin, *Paper Son*, 41. For the effect of undocumented status on higher education in the twenty-first century, see Leisy Janet Abrego, “I Can’t Go to College Because I Don’t Have Papers’: Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth,” *Latino Studies* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 212–31. For paper son debt, see Thin Lee and Emma Yee, “Love at First Sight’ Life Together,” AIISE.

<sup>46</sup>Chin, *Paper Son*, 47. For the impact on enfranchisement, see Spencer Chan interview, 7.

<sup>47</sup>Sheila Chin Morris interview by Sherri Gebert-Fuller, Oct. 2, 2002, transcript, Minnesota Chinese Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display.php?irn=10447449> (accessed Feb. 19, 2021); Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, eds., *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley, CA, 2006), 277–8.

<sup>48</sup>John Jung, “Forming a Chinese Identity When Everyone Else Is Black or White,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 21 (2007): 129–32. For contemporary parallels, see Jacqueline Hagan, Karl Eschbach, and Nestor Rodriguez, “U.S. Deportation Policy, Family Separation, and Circular Migration,” *International Migration Review* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 64–88.

<sup>49</sup>Fae Myenne Ng, “Orphan Bachelors: Exclusion and Confession, the two slamming doors of America,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Feb. 2019. <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/02/orphan-bachelors-chinese-exclusion-act/>

<sup>50</sup>Luk, *The Life of Paper*, 51–65; Lau, *Paper Families*, 115–6, 132. Contemporary immigration policies also have the power to transform families, but the nature of this transformation is distinct. See Joanna Dreby, *Everyday Illegal: When Policies Undermine Immigrant Families* (Oakland, CA, 2015); and Joanna Dreby, *Divided by Borders: Mexican Migrants and Their Children* (Berkeley, CA, 2010).

<sup>51</sup>Lai, *Becoming Chinese American*, 24. See also Luk, *The Life of Paper*, 58.

theoretically reduced the process to a financial matter.<sup>52</sup> And yet when observing Chinese laundrymen, Siu found that sharing papers could forge intimate bonds. Some paper families became “very good friends” over time, while others maintained “communication not so much for friendship’s sake as for a safeguard or protection of each other’s immigration status.”<sup>53</sup> Paper families relied on one another, not only when “relatives” entered or exited the United States but also as they went about arranging their economic lives, opening bank accounts, acquiring property, and arranging an inheritance. The ties that bound paper families were enmeshed in webs of obligation, dependency, and mutual aid that lasted a lifetime. False papers, in other words, could occasionally produce real forms of kinship.<sup>54</sup>

Although some paper families were formed by professional brokers, others were based in established community networks. For Mar Ying Wing (alias Wayne Hung Wong), the promise of papers dated back before his birth. According to family legend, his father, Mar Tung Jing, and the man who would become his paper father, Mar Moy Jing, stood at a temple in Changlong village in 1922, praying to the gods for sons and arranging to swap identities. The two fathers were third cousins who had grown up in neighboring villages in Guangdong, and would eventually meet up again in Wichita, Kansas, where they opened restaurants.<sup>55</sup> Money changed hands in 1935 during the Great Depression, when wealthy Tung Jing paid impoverished Moy Jing \$1,200, so that the rich man’s first son could take the slot of the poor man’s second.

The two families, long joined by distant blood relations, now shared paper relations as well. To outwit immigration control, Ying Wing set sail with his paper older brother, faced interrogation alongside him, and then the two men rode the rails together to Kansas. Relations did not end there. By the 1940s, the two families were in business together. “My number four uncle, Sai Jing Mar, and Wing Lock, my paper father, were now working in my father’s restaurant,” recalled Ying Wing.<sup>56</sup> The relationship lasted decades and through multiple generations; at the turn of the twenty-first century, Ying Wing’s grown daughters still visited his paper brother in a nursing home.<sup>57</sup>

Phillip Chow of Los Angeles also noted that his paper relations blended financial and familial ties. Chow first arrived in the United States in 1939 as a “Wong,” and used this paper name throughout his education and military service. “I befriended my so-called, my paper father, Mr. Wong. And he, he liked me tremendously and I have a certain affection for him. And we became pretty close, friendship.” When he was furloughed during World War II, it was Mr. Wong that Chow would go visit. After the war ended and Chinese Exclusion was repealed, Chow went to Wong for help to bring his brother to the United States in 1951. “I talk to him about selling the paper for my brother. He didn’t have a son. He had the slot. He able to sell. That’s how the Chinese came over anyway.” Through the purchase, Wong and Chow further bound together their families.<sup>58</sup>

At times, paper relations resembled adoptive relations. In fact, the two methods of family formation could overlap. J. H. Chin, for example, first came to the United States in 1924 after buying a slot from the son of a native, Chin K. W., but he was unable to bring his wife

<sup>52</sup>Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 199.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>As Madeline Hsu has shown, exclusion also transformed family structures through prolonged separation. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, 90–123.

<sup>55</sup>Wong, *American Paper Son*, 19. See also Jeanie Dere, “A Wei Min Sister Remembers,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 23 (2009): 64–94.

<sup>56</sup>Wong, *American Paper Son*, 47.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>58</sup>Phillip Chow, summary of interview by Beverly Chan and Gordon Chow, June 22 and June 29, 1980, no. 107, folder 6, box 23, SCOH. See also Lena and Polly Fong, “How Jiu’s Amazing Angel Island Immigration Experience,” AIISE.

with him. Separated from each other by the exclusion laws, the Chins adopted an infant son, Y. P. Their son grew up in China with his adoptive mother and came to join his adoptive father as an adult. When he arrived, Y.P. found himself part of an extended paper family made up of his adoptive father's paper brothers. "It seems like Chin K. W. may have sold many paper son certificates. The buyers of the certificate decided to construct a family," explains M. Chen, Y. P.'s daughter. For a long time, M. didn't know that her great uncles were paper relations or that her father was adopted. "When I was growing up it was like we were family. 'That's your uncle.' 'That's your Aunt.' It was not close, but we acted like family. They spent money as if everything was real." M. Chen found it difficult to disentangle the paper and adoptive relations that made up her family tree, but the lived reality was simple: "It was just like having a real family."<sup>59</sup>

Although paper relationships involved financial transactions, they could also operate according to a moral economy. Tung Pok Chin recounted the story of his cousin-in-law, an adolescent he cautiously refers to as "B7." Fifteen-year-old B7 was a city boy who grew up in Hong Kong, but he bought papers from the Hom family, farming people who spoke a rural Cantonese dialect. B7 was unable to convince U.S. immigration officials of his paper identity, but managed to win parole while he awaited an appeal. He came to Chin in tears, expressing an earnest desire to confess and be sent home. Confession, however, would mean endangering his paper father and six paper uncles, as well as violating the moral standards of the immigrant community. "In confession you will totally destroy not only [your paper father's] livelihood by exposing his paper status, but you will destroy the lives of your other 'uncles' as well," explained Chin. "They have done you absolutely no wrong." With Chin's counsel, B7 became "determined to act for the common good, and so he jumped bail and ran—like an outlaw." For two years, B7 "went into hiding and worked 'under the table,' and for the lowest wages," wrote Chin. "It was pitiful. He was exploited to the fullest." But he had fulfilled "a paper son's duty."<sup>60</sup> Chinese families had long been governed by norms of filial piety and, at times, Chinese American paper families followed suit.

Over the course of the twentieth century, undocumented immigrants' perceptions of their own precarity waxed and waned as individual circumstances and enforcement patterns shifted. At moments of heightened anxiety like the 1950s Red Scare, unauthorized status could deeply affect daily life, informing decisions that seem, on the surface, to have little to do with immigration law. Fear, however, was not the only byproduct of illegality. As much as Chinese exclusion took away from migrants, it also produced something new. It gave rise to novel forms of fictive kinship and, with them, new ties that bound together the Chinese American community.

### The Endurance of Undocumented Lives

Traditionally, historians point to 1943 as the end of the Chinese Exclusion Era. That year, when the United States had China as a wartime ally, Congress terminated the Exclusion Act and began admitting 105 immigrants from China annually. More than a decade later, when the United States feared Communist China, the Immigration and Naturalization Service opened a pathway to citizenship known as the "Confession Program." In return for the possibility of adjusted status, the INS asked undocumented Chinese to "confess" their unlawful entry and implicate friends and family. Confession required immigrants to fill out a standardized form that was intended to divide their double identities along a true-false binary. "I desire to confess

<sup>59</sup>M. Chen interview by author, May 19, 2020. Names have been anonymized by request. For the overlapping practices of adoption and paper relations, see Lincoln Chin and May Gin Woon, "Immigration Story of an American Citizen," AIISF; Lincoln Chin, "The Story of My Paper Brother, Chin Young Dock," AIISF; Spencer Chan interview, 5; Mrs. Woo interview by Him Mark Lai and Judy Yung (in Chinese), June 19, 1977, transcript (English translation), folder 13, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz.

<sup>60</sup>Chin, *Paper Son*, 63–7.

my true identity,” the boilerplate read; there were places to insert: “true name,” “true father’s name,” “true citizenship,” and “assumed identities.” Between 1957 and 1965, 11,336 Chinese migrants made confessions to the state, implicating another 19,124 in the process, and closing 5,800 slots for future paper sons and daughters.<sup>61</sup> From the perspective of the state, this brought an end to Chinese exclusion.

From the perspective of the undocumented, however, neither the repeal of the Exclusion Act nor the implementation of the Confession Program eliminated the lived experience of illegality. Immigration reform provided legal avenues into the country for a lucky few; others continued to take a paper path into the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. And while the Confession Program convinced some Chinese to come out of the shadows and regularize their status, others decided that the price of participation was too high. While the policy of exclusion came to an end in 1943, paper sons and daughters outlived the law. In the process, they became hidden contemporaries of new waves of undocumented migrants from Mexico and Latin America.

Those who participated in the Confession Program believed they could put Chinese exclusion behind them, and some succeeded. When William Mock arrived in the United States in 1937 at the age of eighteen, he “did not feel that his false paper would be a problem.” It was not until he started hearing stories of paper sons being unmasked and deported amid the 1950s Red Scare that he became concerned. He entered the Confession Program at the urging of his paper brother in 1964, successfully adjusted his status, and reclaimed his original name. “Now we are being truthful and honest. I felt very ... very ... good about the confession,” he explained. “Before I was always worried about some immigration officer will come to my house and start to ask me questions.”<sup>62</sup> Mock experienced regularization as a welcome relief.

The Confession Program, however, did not always have straightforward results, as the experiences of Him Mark and Laura Lai demonstrate. Both husband and wife were intimately familiar with the paper son system. Him Mark’s father, Maak Yuk Bing, adopted the paper name “Lai” to enter the United States. “Father was always fearful that immigration officers would discover he had entered the country as a paper son,” remembered Him Mark. “He taught us a concocted story about him being adopted in order to explain the discrepancy in our surnames, should someone ask.” Maak chose not to participate in the Confession Program, but “fortunately,” recalled Him Mark, “Father’s immigration status was never questioned by the authorities up to the day he died” in 1976.<sup>63</sup> Although Him Mark bore the name of a paper family, he was born in San Francisco and therefore was a U.S. citizen by birth.

The same could not be said of his wife, Laura Lai (née Jung), who entered the United States as a paper daughter. During the Confession Program, she was involuntarily implicated as the pressure of state interrogations broke down the moral economy of the paper family system. “My father came over as a paper son, and I came over as his legal daughter. As long as he was safe, I was safe,” remembered Laura. But her father, Mr. Jung, also had two paper brothers, and an immigration officer targeted the eldest one. “[The officer] tricked him by saying that his brothers had already confessed, so he should just tell the truth,” she recalled. “So, the brother told the officer everything, and afterwards he called my father, but by then it was too late. Everything was out.”

Laura lost her U.S. citizenship and only managed to regain it ten years later. It looked like Laura’s father would also lose his citizenship and, apparently fearing a paper-less life in the United States, Jung fled to Hong Kong in 1961. He left behind his elderly wife, who had

<sup>61</sup>Ngai, “Legacies of Exclusion,” 22. Many confessors resisted implicating others and therefore disclaimed any knowledge about their paper relatives. For an example form, see Yee Chuck Moon, “Personal History Statement,” Sept. 19, 1966, no. 25/490, box 174, Chinese Exclusion Act Folders, RG55, National Archives at New York City, New York.

<sup>62</sup>William Mock interview by Judy Yung, Apr. 9, 1984, folder 42, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz, 16–7. See also Steve Kwok, “My Father Was a Paper Son,” AIISF.

<sup>63</sup>Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 220.



immigration papers and wished to remain in the United States because she suffered from diabetes. After one year of separation, she insisted on joining her husband in Hong Kong, despite the inferior medical care available there. Laura's mother only lasted a few weeks on the island and passed away in January 1963.<sup>64</sup>

Family tragedy did not end there. Months after losing his wife, Laura's father managed to return to the United States. As soon as he deplaned, Laura saw that "he was very sick. His eyes were yellow and his appearance was very bad." She took him to the doctor right away and discovered that he had liver cancer, which went untreated in Hong Kong. "So less than a hundred days after my mother died, my father died. He came back to the United States and never left the hospital." The complications of a paper family continued even after death as the family dealt with matters of inheritance. Although Jung was outed by the Confession Program, it appeared that he still had a paper son he wished to protect. Instead of dividing his property among his four "true" children and leaving nothing to his one paper son—which could have raised suspicion—Jung left everything to his eldest son, hoping that the eldest would care for the rest. Fortunately, his wishes were honored.<sup>65</sup>

The Confession Program, as the Lai–Jung family shows, meant increased enforcement of past Chinese exclusion laws, resulting in cascading and unpredictable effects. Confession could be a moment of relief and acceptance, or terror and exclusion. It produced unrestricted mobility for some; it resulted in forced migration for others. It rid many migrants of their paper lives even as it made others undocumented for the first time. Moreover, the Cold War origins of the program escalated paper sons' fears that revelations of undocumented status would bring accusations of communist sympathies. Red baiting did not only come from the government. Right-wing Chinese Americans could intimidate left-leaning paper sons by threatening to reveal their legal status. If paper ties had the power to bind the community together, in other words, their forcible unmasking had the potential to tear the community apart. In the aftermath of the Confession Program, Chinese American families grappled with the consequences of divisive decisions. "Every family knew the dissent, the feuding, and the confusion of trying to make a unanimous decision," remembers Fae Myenne Ng. "Exclusion and Confession worked in concert to cultivate suspicion within the community and ruin loyalty within families."<sup>66</sup>

As a result, the Confession Program drove the remaining paper sons and daughters further underground. My grandfather, for example, must have known about the Confession Program, and, as a U.S. veteran, he would have been a prime candidate for regularization. But instead he remained silent. He was not the only one. Acknowledging paper status became increasingly taboo after the Confession Program ended in 1965. Gone were the days when the Chinese American community readily recognized paper sons and daughters (Figure 2).

Secrecy within the community increased in the late twentieth century, with some paper sons and daughters choosing to keep their own children in ignorance. "Throughout our youth, we were warned never to violate any laws and to avoid 'trouble.' There were vague hints that we could be deported if we got into 'trouble,'" remembered Edward Wong. "Little did we know that my father was an illegal immigrant, who had entered the U.S. falsely as the son of an American-born Chinese." Without knowing it, Wong lived in the shadow of his father's paper status, but he lacked the knowledge or language to make sense of his experience at the time. "Even the disparaging name assigned to us children," Wong explained, "*who gee doy/who gee new*, which literally means 'got paper boy/got paper girl,' should have been a

<sup>64</sup>Jean Dere, "Born Lucky: The Story of Laura Lai," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 25 (2011): 29–35. Loss of citizenship could have disparate effects on Chinese migrants. While Jung chose to flee to Hong Kong, paper daughter Ann Chinn chose to remain in the United States and avoid traveling overseas. Ann Chinn, summary of interview, Oct. 26, 1979, no. 5, folder 2, box 21, SCOH, 4.

<sup>65</sup>Dere, "Born Lucky," 29–35.

<sup>66</sup>Ng, "Orphan Bachelors"; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 127–66, 202–24.



**Figure 2.** Lew Din Wing pictured in 1963 during the Confession Program. He chose not to confess his status and seek regularization. Permission of the author.

clue, but we had no idea what ‘papers’ meant.”<sup>67</sup> The increased silence around the paper son system coincided with expanded policing of undocumented Mexicans in the United States. It is possible that the two phenomena were linked; perhaps growing public condemnation of “illegal immigration” from Mexico drove undocumented Chinese further underground. The silence within the Chinese community, however, makes it difficult to know.

Divided families, lingering fears, and personal shame fed a communal act of forgetting after 1965, as well as a public embrace of the politics of racial liberalism. Both can be seen in the Southern California Oral History Project. Rarely did the interviewers (many were second-generation volunteers) ask their 165 subjects (mostly first-generation elders) about their immigration status. In fact, none of their thirty-nine standard questions addressed exclusion, paper sons, or legal status. Reflecting back on her experience as a research assistant on the project, Suellen Cheng believed this silence arose from interviewers’ desires to make their subjects comfortable and interviewees’ propensity to tell stories of successful assimilation. Speaking in 1979 and 1980, her subjects were eager to believe that the experience of racial discrimination was behind them. They may have felt pressure to prove they were “model minorities” who did not require assistance now that the federal government had dismantled the legal structures of exclusion. “Confession Era fear” also played a role, Cheng acknowledged: “They were brought up to say nothing.”<sup>68</sup> Persistent anxiety, which outlived the danger of deportation, fed this silence, but so too did Chinese Americans’ bids for inclusion within American society.

<sup>67</sup>Edward Wong, “Eat More Potatoes and Go Back to China: The Life of Moon Tung Wong,” AIISF.

<sup>68</sup>Suellen Cheng interview by author, Aug. 4, 2018; Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ, 2014).

It also appears some interviewers were not themselves aware of the Exclusion Act or the paper son system.<sup>69</sup> With interviewers silent on the subject, interviewees faced a choice of whether to raise it themselves. Some paper sons and daughters chose to reveal their status to interviewers through defiant “coming out” declarations; others offered fearful informal confessions. The former bears relation to the politics of the “undocumented, unapologetic, unafraid” movement of today; the latter shows how internalized notions of illegality can persist to damaging effect.<sup>70</sup>

Some interviewees in the Southern California Project sought to educate their interviewers by coming out as paper sons and daughters. “[I]n the past, Chinese were forced to come here by buying papers,” volunteered James W. Gin who entered the United States in 1917. “You young people wouldn’t know about it.”<sup>71</sup> A woman, anonymized as Mrs. Tom, felt a similar impulse to explain the paper system. After completing a conversation with Mrs. Tom’s husband, an interviewer turned to Mrs. Tom to ask if her husband had “missed anything.” Mrs. Tom paused for a moment and then answered simply, “His father got him over here with a piece of paper.”<sup>72</sup> Her straightforward declaration of his undocumented status appears to have gone unnoticed by the interviewer, who quickly wrapped up the conversation.

For husband and wife Wah Lieu and S. Moy Lieu, his informal confession provoked a disagreement mid-interview in 1979. When Wah Lieu mentioned, in an off-handed way, blood tests conducted by immigration officials during the Exclusion Era, his interviewer reacted with interest and his wife with fear:

- [Interviewer]: Why did they need to examine the blood?  
 [Mr. Wah Lieu]: Why because [the immigration] translator said, “Examine the blood is the best....”  
 [Mrs. Moy Lieu]: You talk about immigration laws, she doesn’t know about it. No use talking about this. How does she know about it?...  
 [Interviewer]: When the immigrants came to Los Angeles, they still had to have their blood examined?  
 [Mrs. Moy Lieu]: They had to have their blood examined—that’s the idea. She doesn’t know about the immigrants.  
 [Interviewer]: Yes, I do know.

While Mr. Lieu wished to explain blood testing (a rare, invasive state strategy to police paper sons), his wife interrupted, insisting on his silence. After the conversation about fraud continued, despite her protests, Mrs. Lieu remained anxious to exonerate her husband. “He didn’t go out and do much of anything else ... nothing illegal,” she told the interviewer. “He was a cook and never did anything.”<sup>73</sup> Although the interviewer claimed knowledge of the paper son system, her husband’s indirect confession still made Mrs. Lieu apprehensive. Perhaps she simply feared the interviewer’s judgment, or she harbored more profound fears of speaking on the record.

<sup>69</sup>David Der interview by Eric and Tiffany Chen, June 17, 2007, transcript, Oakland Chinatown Oral History Project, 19.

<sup>70</sup>Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire, UK, 2014); Jean-Michel Landry, “Confession, Obedience, and Subjectivity: Michel Foucault’s Unpublished Lectures *On the Government of the Living*,” *Telos* 146 (Spring 2009): 111–23; Rose Cuisson Villazor, “The Undocumented Closet,” *North Carolina Law Review* 92, no. 1 (Dec. 2013): 1–74, here 50–2.

<sup>71</sup>Gin interview, 9.

<sup>72</sup>Yook Tom interview, May 15, 1980, transcript (English translation), no. 100, folder 17, box 27, SCOH.

<sup>73</sup>Wah Lieu interview, June 17, 1982, transcript (English translation), no. 161, folder 24, box 27, SCOH.

The former seems to be the case for Robert F. Lee. Through the first half of his interview, Lee concealed his life as a paper son; he told his interviewer that he arrived in the United States in 1934 “because my father citizen here. We need to find a way to survive.” While he avoided mentioning his immigration status, Lee was forthright about his forty-five-day confinement on Angel Island and its effect on his mental state. Lee explained to the interviewer that some detained Chinese committed suicide and that he could understand why. “I felt the same way if I could not fulfill my object. I think of suicide,” he stated. The prospect of being forced to return to China was deeply distressing: “If you’re deported, you go back to the Chinese village. You’d be shamed. You’d be depressed.”

As the interview proceeded, Lee repeatedly asserted his own legality and relegated any discussion of illegality to hypothetical scenarios. This changed when the interviewer raised the topic of paper sons:

- Q. Some people came over 用一张假纸 [using a fake paper].  
 A. Well you have to. I have a 假纸 [fake paper] too. What can you do with that. Ninety-five percent are the 假纸 [fake paper]. You have to have the 假纸 [fake paper] to come over. I have to learn how to cheat them.  
 Q. Cheat? What do you mean by that?  
 A. I have to remember how the village being pictured by my so-called grandfather. 就是这个样子 [It’s just like that.] You probably came a different way. But in old day if you want to come you have to come the same way as I do. It’s terrible.<sup>74</sup>

After confessing to his paper status, Lee grew increasingly defensive. Burdened by a sense of wrongdoing, he appeared to fear the judgment of the next generation.

While the Southern California project largely avoided the topic of exclusion, researchers for the Angel Island Oral History Project focused on the process of immigration, detention, and interrogation. Their questions were framed to encourage reluctant elders to talk about U.S. discriminatory immigration practices at the moment of entry. Tony C. Leung recalled how his parents were “close-mouthed” about their immigration experience:

I remember how tentative and suspicious my mother was at first in answering [interviewer] Judy Yung’s questions about her experience on the Island. But as she became more relaxed about answering them, she was surprisingly forthcoming with her answers. It was like the burden of being on the Island and the secrets both she and my father kept from us all those years had finally been lifted off her shoulders.<sup>75</sup>

Through questions designed to acknowledge state discrimination, the researchers built trust with their subjects and received more forthright answers.

Some interviewees still shied away from discussing the effects of exclusion. Take, for example, this interaction between interviewer Felicia Lowe and interviewee Chaney Wong in 1984:

- Q. Do you think that experience [those years of discrimination and exclusion] colored your life in any way?  
 A. Ah, yes, but not much. Um, I think that a lot of the things that I like to forget is [w]hat I remember.

<sup>74</sup>Lee interview.

<sup>75</sup>Tony C. Leung, Jr., “The Journeys of C. Tony Leung and May Chung Leung to America via Angel Island,” AIISE.

- Q. Why is that? So many of the people want to forget it. Why?
- A. Uh, it's not the most happiest time in your life. You live through it, you bear with it, and after it's gone, so you don't just like anyone else, you don't want to remember. You only want to remember happy things.

At first, Chaney Wong denies that his experience had “much” impact on his life, but then he seems to reverse his position. He complains that “a lot of the things that I like to forget is [w]hat I remember,” implying that the experience did have a lasting impact, more than he would care to discuss.<sup>76</sup> Other interviewees spoke only on the condition of anonymity. For example, Mr. Chan explained that he wished to keep his 1989 interview anonymous because he was able to buy property in 1927 with the help of white neighbors who believed he was a U.S. citizen. Even though he had since confessed and regularized his status, he continued to fear repercussions from the revelation.<sup>77</sup> Paper sons' efforts at concealment have long obscured the enduring effect of undocumented status on their lives, but read carefully, their silence can also become a testament to its broad impact.

Judy Yung, one of the project directors of the Angel Island Oral History Project, knew the effects of generational silence firsthand. “For a long time, I had wanted to know more about my family history and how my father, Tom Yip Jing, immigrated in 1921,” recalled the librarian turned academic. “But each time I asked my father, I was rebuffed with ‘Children should not know too much.’” Wishing to know more about her family's history, Judy Yung asked her father to participate in the project. He agreed under the condition of anonymity. Tom spoke with Him Mark Lai in an interview in 1977, as Yung sat in the background listening. It was then that she learned how her father came to adopt his paper name, navigate Angel Island Immigration Station, and enter the United States.<sup>78</sup>

Tom Yip Jing's interview, like all of the Angel Island interviews, focuses on his experience of migration, arrival, detention, and interrogation. Researchers did not ask him or other interviewees to describe how paper status affected daily life within the United States in the years that followed. As a result, the project's archival collection, and the works of history it has inspired, can inadvertently offer the impression that paper status only impacted the experiences of entry and confession.

In Judy Yung's subsequent writings about her own family, the fallacy of this impression becomes clear. Yung explains that hearing her father's oral history of Angel Island shifted her understanding of his entire life: “For the next fifty years [after his arrival], my father struggled to make a living to support his family of six children while living in the shadows of society, always fearful of being detected and deported,” she recalled. Her mother labored in a sweatshop in San Francisco Chinatown; her father spent most of his life as a janitor. Yung explained, “So distrustful was he of the U.S. government that he chose not to ‘confess’ and adjust his immigration status.” His time at Angel Island was formative, but it was one episode among many in his decades as a paper son.

It was not until his death in 1987 that Tom felt free to make a public confession of sorts. In accordance with his wishes, his gravestone was inscribed with both his birth name, Tom Yip Jing, and his paper name, Yung Hin Sen. Quite literally, he took his double identity to the grave.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Wong interview.

<sup>77</sup>Mr. Chan interview by Judy Yung (in Chinese), Oct. 4, 1989, transcript (English translation), folder 18, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz, 1. See also Helen Fong, “A Life's Adventure of a Paper Daughter: Fong Hong May (Helen Fong),” AIISF.

<sup>78</sup>Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 221–9; Mr. Tom interview by Him Mark Lai and Judy Yung (in Chinese), Apr. 17, 1977, transcript (English translation), folder 24, box 1, AIOH, UC Santa Cruz.

<sup>79</sup>Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 221–9. For double identities on gravestones, see also Lincoln Chin, “Alice Gin's Father: The Story of Two Brothers Who Shared the Same Name,” AIISF.

Many scholars have observed that the legacies of Chinese exclusion can still be seen in American structures of immigration law, border control, and state power. But these are not the law's only remnants. The undocumented themselves also lay among the debris.

While the thousands of formal confessions extracted by the state in the 1950s and 1960s imply that paper lives ceased at that time, this was hardly the case. Informal confessions and declarations—whether in the form of oral testimony, memoir, or etchings in stone—remind us of what cannot be seen in the state archive. Undocumented lives that began in the Exclusion Era extended into the twenty-first century and consisted of much more than a series of momentary interactions with the state. Although laws and policies first constructed the undocumented Chinese, their experiences cannot be reduced to a history of border regulation and migrant evasion.

Once the structures of federal border control became strong enough to make credible the threat of deportation, these laws and policies could give rise to the undocumented as a collective identity and social condition. The Chinese are but one early example of this phenomenon. The ranks of the undocumented swelled throughout the twentieth century, as other immigrants became targets of exclusionary laws in the United States and, increasingly, around the world.<sup>80</sup>

With this proliferation of undocumented peoples comes urgency to look for their history beyond the space of the border and the sphere of the state. A long, multiracial history of the undocumented must account for their lives within the domestic interior as well as the interiority of their lives. It must consider how criminalization of territorial presence has long generated subjectivities, subjecthoods, and habitus. It must recognize that the lived experience of illegality has never been fully proscribed by the state. And it must denaturalize the conditions of the present by interrogating the shifting nature of undocumented life in the past.

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<sup>80</sup>For instance, see Libby Garland, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921–1965* (Chicago, 2014); McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 12–3; and David Scott FitzGerald and David Cook-Martín, *Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).