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## Introduction

Louey Shuck was an American immigrant, but he did not immigrate to America. The son of merchant parents from south China, Louey was born in 1872 in the tiny gold mining town of Weaverville, California. His birth on American soil made him a US citizen, but his ancestry left him extremely vulnerable in his native land. During his youth, Congress barred Chinese aliens from naturalizing, while anti-Chinese violence surged across the western states. By the 1890s, Louey had joined the Chinese merchant elite of San Francisco, where he lived with his Chinese American wife and children. Though they were citizens, their legal status did not protect them from the egregious racial discrimination that limited the residential, social, educational, and economic choices of all ethnic Chinese in the United States. Having previously traveled to Asia, Louey Shuck knew that it offered opportunities unavailable to his family in America, so in 1907 the Loueys left the United States and settled in south China to build lives and careers far from the land of their birth.<sup>1</sup> The collapse of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a new republic in 1912 quickly complicated their plans, choices, and identities, however. By the early 1910s, Louey Shuck had gained prestige and prominence in Hong Kong and Guangzhou as a comprador (*maiban*), a foreign firm's senior Chinese employee and its go-between with Chinese officials, individuals, and businesses. After 1919, though, many Chinese patriots criticized compradors as disloyal tools of foreign imperialism, casting a shadow over Louey and others like him.<sup>2</sup> Soon after, the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang/GMD) targeted the Loueys as part of the newly suspect overseas Chinese merchant

class, despite the fact that Louey Shuck had supported the GMD after the 1911 revolution. While the Nationalists denigrated their patriotism to China, Louey Shuck and his family simultaneously fought to make US officials acknowledge their American citizenship and right to protection. Still, by the 1930s, most of the Loueys had retreated to Hong Kong or to the foreign-controlled areas of Shanghai; weary of Chinese politics and American racism, they sought homes in the few places that offered any space for their complex identities and affinities.

This is a book about the thousands of Chinese American citizens who, like the Loueys, moved to Asia in the early twentieth century for better lives and choices than they could expect in the United States. This exodus was largely a response to America's anti-Chinese movement, its white supremacist politics, and its Chinese exclusion laws. Pushed by powerful forces in the western states, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred the immigration of laborers from China for ten years and prohibited the naturalization of all Chinese aliens.<sup>3</sup> Congress extended the Act in 1892 and made it permanent in 1904, but the Supreme Court confirmed in its 1898 *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* decision that Chinese born on US soil were American citizens.<sup>4</sup> Chinese merchants could still legally enter the United States after 1882, meaning that the small Chinese American citizen population consisted mainly of merchants' offspring. Despite belonging to a comparatively privileged class of Chinese Americans, these citizens and their parents faced antagonistic immigration agents, racist legislators, and hostile police and neighbors. White Americans generally refused to hire people of Chinese ancestry, regardless of citizenship or education, for any work that was not menial labor.<sup>5</sup> In the early twentieth century, thousands of second-generation Chinese American citizens responded by emigrating to China and seeking a future in which race did not so completely limit their lives.

Federal attempts to quantify the effectiveness of Chinese exclusion inadvertently captured the size of Chinese American citizen emigration too. In 1880, when the ethnic Chinese population of the United States numbered around 104,500, only about 1,100 (or around 1 percent) of those people were American born. In 1900, almost two decades after the Exclusion Act's passage, the ethnic Chinese population of the American mainland dipped to 90,000 (an additional 30,000 Chinese lived in the new American territory of Hawaii), but the American-born part of that population grew to 9,000, or 10 percent of the whole (with an additional 4,000 in Hawaii). By 1910, when the ethnic

Chinese population of the mainland and Hawaii fell to around 94,000, the native-born population numbered 22,100, or about 23 percent of the whole.<sup>6</sup> Between 1900 and 1916, around 1,300 of these native-born Chinese Americans departed the United States each year, while only about 1,000 returned annually.<sup>7</sup> In other words, by 1916 close to 5,000 Chinese American citizens had moved to Asia—about one-quarter of the entire citizen population at that time. After a pause during World War I, the exodus resumed at an even faster clip. Census and immigration statistics for this period suggest that up to half of all native-born Chinese American citizens may have relocated to China between 1901 and World War II.

The racism that these Chinese Americans encountered almost everywhere in the United States deeply shaped their ideas about the China to which they emigrated and Chinese identity in general. White supremacist politicians routinely used racial arguments to justify the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its subsequent renewals. US officials, journalists, and academics drew a stark line between the nation and the state and denied that people of Chinese ancestry could be real Americans, whatever their formal citizenship status. On the West Coast especially, critics took pains to portray all Chinese in the United States as uniquely undesirable, inassimilable, and odious.<sup>8</sup> San Francisco mayor James Phelan, who later served in the US Senate, scoffed that “of such stuff citizens fit for a republic cannot be made.”<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Sarah E. Simons called the Chinese a “servile class” and one of the “elements whose racial point of view is so utterly different from ours that our civilization has no effect on them.”<sup>10</sup> Such commentators treated the citizenship of American-born Chinese as a legal misfortune at odds with common sense. The racism and racialization with which Chinese Americans grappled in the United States thus encouraged them to view their Chineseness in primordial, biological ways, even as they rejected overt white supremacy. Meanwhile, China-born parents countered the prevailing racism by encouraging their American offspring to take pride in their Chinese ancestry and to identify with China. Exiled Chinese reformers and revolutionaries who raised money abroad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also praised the “overseas Chinese” and described them as part of a future Chinese nation.<sup>11</sup> In these ways, parents, Chinese political activists, and white supremacists alike convinced Chinese Americans that they were part of the Chinese nation, even as they claimed citizenship in the American state.

Chinese Americans’ complex feelings about belonging and citizenship put them at odds with the governments of both the United States and China,

where officials during this era worked to define citizenship in exclusive ways and their populations in strict racial and ethnic terms. The trend was most pronounced in the United States. Between 1906 and 1924, the American government barred all Asian immigrants from citizenship and, eventually, from entering the United States. Legislators also slapped harsh quotas on Southern and Eastern European immigrants, deeming them undesirable though not as racially distasteful as Asians or other people of color. Numerous eugenics activists supported the use of sterilization to “improve” the US population and succeeded in convincing scores of state legislators of this view. Others favored brutalizing southern blacks through Jim Crow laws and disfranchisement, applying literacy tests to voters in states across the country, and denying Asian immigrants the right to own land. The Naturalization Act of 1906 and the Expatriation Act of 1907 reaffirmed the racial basis of American citizenship and stripped a woman’s citizenship away if she married an alien.

China’s approach was less punitive but also rooted in ideas about race and blood as central to citizenship and belonging.<sup>12</sup> Despite prohibitions on leaving the empire, Chinese subjects had traveled to Southeast Asia for hundreds of years and to the Americas, Africa, and South and Northeast Asia since the nineteenth century. But the context of such population flows was changing, and not just because the Qing dynasty finally allowed emigration in 1868.<sup>13</sup> By the early twentieth century, the Qing sought to transform China into a modern nation as part of its attempt to maintain its sovereignty in the face of Western and Japanese imperialism. This effort required imperial jurists to define citizenship; in 1909 the Qing government issued its first nationality law, which declared all children of Chinese fathers to be Chinese subjects, wherever they were born.<sup>14</sup> The early republican governments and eventually the Nationalist regime continued to adhere to and build upon this idea.<sup>15</sup> The many Chinese Americans who felt tied to both the Chinese and American nations thus received little encouragement for their hybrid identities from either side.

Chinese Americans’ formal citizenship was divorced from membership in a racialized American nation to which they could never belong, but those who actually traveled to China often came to question just how Chinese they really were. The first generation of Western-educated Chinese American immigrants certainly appreciated the tremendous opportunities they received in China, even as they struggled to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers there. Still, by the 1920s Chinese Americans came to realize that numerous

Chinese politicians and leaders viewed the overseas Chinese with suspicion and disdain, seeing their habits, complicated identities, and experiences abroad as evidence of insufficient Chineseness and even of disloyalty. As scholar Soon Keong Ong asserts, overseas Chinese “were defined as Chinese while abroad and thus permanently tied to China, and yet deemed not Chinese enough to be allowed to fully reintegrate into Chinese society when they returned to China.”<sup>16</sup> Such treatment worsened over time and especially under the GMD.

Although fully welcome in neither China nor America, Chinese American citizen immigrants still helped shape Sino-American relations, the development of key economic sectors in China, the character of social life in its coastal cities, debates about the meaning of culture and “modernity” there, and the US government’s approach to citizenship and expatriation. Chinese Americans’ experiences with racism, imperialism, and conflicting Chinese regimes also pushed many second-generation people to reject the monogamous, exclusive view of citizenship popular with their China-born and white American contemporaries. Instead, they learned to question and at times avoid or resist the various Chinese regimes that claimed them, and they also demanded representation from a US government intent on abandoning them. In the process, many Chinese Americans came to understand that their economic and social opportunities and futures existed in between, rather than inside, these competing nations.

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This realization helps explain the disappearance of Chinese American citizen immigrants from the histories of both China and the United States. Narratives of the US past are particularly silent about these people, whose decision to emigrate calls into question the popular mythology about immigration to America during this era.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of Chinese American citizens moved to Asia in the very same years in which millions of Europeans poured into US ports. Both groups shared the same goals—better economic opportunities and, often, happier and freer lives in a new country—but racial discrimination meant that only the Europeans could realistically achieve these aspirations in the United States. Of these two parallel movements, then, the massive European influx alone made an impact on the national consciousness, feeding a self-congratulatory and still potent narrative of America as a magnetic land of unequalled opportunity.<sup>18</sup> Common terminology has inadvertently shored up that narrative. Historians know that around one-third of the Europeans

who arrived in America between the 1890s and 1924 eventually returned to their homelands or traveled back and forth across the Atlantic multiple times, yet scholars routinely label both those who stayed and those who left “immigrants”—a term that implies the intent to reside permanently and assumes America’s status as the preferred final destination.<sup>19</sup> Chinese American citizens who intended to reside permanently in China, even though their plans sometimes changed, were certainly immigrants as well. But their immigration stories undermine rather than reaffirm American mythology.

The realities of Chinese American citizen emigration also challenge scholars’ assumptions about the link between immigration and socioeconomic mobility in the twentieth-century United States. Historians typically assert that immigrants who chose to stay in America were almost uniformly able to give their children better lives and opportunities there than in the “old country.”<sup>20</sup> The underlying message is that immigrants’ sacrifices were worthwhile, at least for their offspring, who had every incentive to stay in the United States and did so. This powerful and appealing narrative of opportunity and a rooted and rising second generation has also inadvertently obscured the Chinese American exodus. In the United States, our national self-esteem seems to demand recognition of an American exceptionalism that includes limitless upward mobility, unending political progress, and rewards for immigrant effort. Yet the backgrounds of many Chinese Americans who emigrated during these years contradict such ideas.

The citizen emigrants were frequently the offspring of economically successful China-born people who could not imagine a similarly bright future for their children in the United States. Grinding discrimination and the continual extension of Chinese exclusion instead convinced many parents, like the China-born entrepreneur Wong Fee Lee, that their children would struggle to achieve wealth or status in America. Wong arrived in Deadwood, South Dakota, during the 1870s Black Hills gold rush, worked in mining, opened a dry goods store in the town, and eventually prospered as a businessman and property owner. But in 1902, after Congress voted to extend Chinese exclusion for another ten years, all eight of his children applied for documents to travel to China.<sup>21</sup> Other parents desired to give their children the kinds of educational opportunities denied them in America. In San Francisco, home to the largest Chinese American population in the United States, Chinese parents for many years had little choice but to send their children to the segregated Oriental Public School; it offered no organized classes for students

above grade 5, and its teachers often refused to issue certificates of promotion to Chinese Americans who wished to proceed to high school.<sup>22</sup> Disgusted, in 1912 the San Francisco-born merchant Lee Yuk Sue took his five American citizen children to China, where they studied in academies in Hong Kong and Guangdong.<sup>23</sup> Many China-born people believed that if their American children emigrated to China, they would enjoy the kind of social mobility their parents never achieved in America.<sup>24</sup> When the successful China-born ticket merchant Hong Sling retired, he took his Chicago-born children Willie, Harry, and Jenny to Hong Kong, where they attended exclusive schools and became part of the colony's business and social elite.<sup>25</sup> For Chinese American citizens, especially merchants' children, remaining in the United States meant experiencing almost certain downward social and economic mobility in the land of their birth. Strivers like Hong Sling, Lee Yuk Sue, and Wong Fee Lee refused to accept such a future for their offspring.

While the Chinese American citizen exodus upends both scholarly and popular myths about the universality of social mobility and opportunities for immigrants and their children in the United States, it simultaneously challenges China's own nationalist narratives. Political leaders and scholars in both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC) have frequently celebrated the overseas Chinese who "returned to the nation" in the early twentieth century, and they have strongly criticized the racial discrimination and exclusion that Chinese migrants faced overseas.<sup>26</sup> But like their American counterparts, Chinese scholars and officials largely ignore the sizable Chinese American citizen immigration of the prewar era. They do so because few Chinese Americans who left the United States for Asia chose to remain there after 1949, at least in the ROC or the PRC. Even before World War II, most found opportunities and a sense of legitimacy in Chinese contexts but outside of the Chinese nation-state itself, whether in foreign-controlled concession areas in China, European colonies such as Hong Kong and Macao, or warlord-run provinces in the south. Furthermore, Chinese American immigrants often expressed hostility to the Chinese Communist Party while also depending on family- and place-based networks that operated largely outside the Chinese Nationalist state, and sometimes in opposition to it. These networks spanned the globe, linking the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong to Shanghai, New York, Honolulu, Saigon, Singapore, Lima, Sydney, Cape Town, Malacca, and numerous points in between.<sup>27</sup> However, the central node in such networks was not China itself but the British colony of Hong Kong.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Chinese American citizen immigrants have largely disappeared from both Chinese and American history because their choices and identities defied government objectives in the prewar and wartime years and subverted nationalist narratives in the postwar era. The existence in republican China of a group of people with dual citizenship, complicated affinities, and relative mobility frustrated two generations of American consuls and Chinese authorities. After 1945 and especially 1949, the history of Chinese American citizen immigration called into question the nationalist narratives of the PRC, the ROC, and the United States, whose Cold War strategies involved proclaiming the superiority of their governmental systems and ways of life.<sup>29</sup> The United States government in particular promoted in its Cold War propaganda the idea of America as a nation where freedom, opportunity, and a democratic, capitalist system attracted people from every nation and allowed them to prosper. The country's actual history of both emigration and racist immigration laws contradicted this comforting narrative, which officials and many community leaders hoped would help thwart communist propaganda about the existence of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination in America.<sup>30</sup>

While Chinese American citizen emigration is a forgotten chapter in US history, it is one with significant parallels in other American communities. Most famously, the small but persistent Back to Africa movement reflected black frustration with the brutality of the post-Reconstruction South and the racism of the early-twentieth-century North.<sup>31</sup> Less obviously, the Immigration Act of 1917 confirmed a larger, ongoing exodus of Americans when it mandated that the government collect statistics about native-born and naturalized citizens permanently departing the country.<sup>32</sup> The intent of the clause in the act is unclear, and to make matters even more confusing, the data collected often mixed different types of people together: citizens starting new lives abroad, missionaries, American-born children accompanying foreign-born parents home, and businesspeople and their families moving abroad for work, just to name a few. Still, the resulting numbers are eye opening. In 1921, when around 800,000 people immigrated to the United States, more than 64,000 native-born American citizens reported that they were permanently departing.<sup>33</sup> After temporary and then permanent immigration restrictions went into effect between 1921 and 1924, the number of native-born Americans permanently departing varied annually between 10 and 25 percent of the number of immigrants arriving in the United States. Americans of all ages

and professions reported plans to move to every part of the world, from Austria to Australia to Canada, India, and the West Indies. Some were the young children of immigrants returning to Europe, but even more were adults when they chose to depart.<sup>34</sup> The peak years of the Chinese American exodus also paralleled those of the Great Migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South to the urban North, which blacks often called “the promised land” and which seemed almost like another country to many of them. Both groups left their native homes for the same reasons: to escape racism, gain access to educational opportunities, and enjoy better job opportunities. About fifteen percent of the entire black population of the South migrated to the North between 1915 and 1930 alone.<sup>35</sup> An even larger percentage of Chinese American citizens emigrated to China in the same years.

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*American Exodus* examines the transnational lives that these Chinese American citizens led in China, which they believed would be their own promised land. It also explores the complex sense of identity and nationalism they developed in response to the nation-building goals of the two countries they claimed. The book discusses Chinese American citizens across China but looks mainly at the two areas that attracted more of these immigrants than anywhere else: the city of Shanghai and the relatively compact triangle of the Pearl River Delta bounded roughly by Guangzhou to the north, Hong Kong to the southeast, and Toisan (Taishan) to the southwest.

The book also focuses on two distinct groups of Chinese American immigrants. The first consisted of US-born children and adults who sought educational and business opportunities mainly in Hong Kong and Guangdong Province, moving there through the same Cantonese migrant networks that brought their parents to America. The second, whom I call the “modernizers,” were Chinese American graduates of US colleges and technical schools who imagined themselves transforming their parents’ homeland with their skills and training while gaining acceptance there as “real” Chinese. As the book explains, these categories broke down somewhat by the 1920s and 1930s but never fully lost their meaning. In structure, this study moves forward in a roughly chronological fashion as it discusses how changes in the Chinese American population, China’s own government, and American government and business practices propelled and shaped the Chinese American Great Migration.

Chapter 1 introduces the entrepreneurs and students who, beginning in the 1890s, moved to China and Hong Kong for business or to seek a “Chinese education.” Compared to the modernizers, these students and merchants seemed the far more “traditional” group as they traveled back through the well-worn Cantonese migration circuit and adapted to Asia as it was, rather than trying to change it. But China was changing, and the rapidly shifting political situation, particularly in Guangdong, influenced and often transformed these immigrants’ original plans. Chapter 2 examines the golden era of the modernizers as well as their limited vision of what “modernizing” China involved. Encouraged by the Qing dynasty’s “New Policies,” hundreds of college-educated Chinese Americans began to emigrate to China after 1901, and they continued to move there in the early republican years. Their bilingual skills and Western educations enabled them to enjoy meteoric careers, but they struggled to understand the massive cultural and political upheavals that the New Culture and May Fourth Movements set in motion.

Chapter 3 focuses on the years between 1923 and 1928, when Chinese Americans grappled with the fallout from anti-imperialist nationalism and the relative success of the Guomindang’s attempts to unite the country. American-born merchants and students in the south became increasingly alienated from Sun Yat-sen’s Guomindang regime once it allied with the Soviet Union; many left Guangdong for Hong Kong or Shanghai as the political climate worsened and the Guomindang began to criticize overseas Chinese as agents of imperialism. And as the GMD moved north from its base in Guangdong to unify much of China and establish Nanjing as the new national capital, the party began a lengthy wrangle with the United States and other Western countries over the citizenship status of ethnic Chinese. This led to the formalization of the US government’s policy of refusing to protect Chinese American citizens in China.

Chapter 4 explores the “Nanjing Decade” and the souring relationship between Chinese American citizen immigrants and the new Nationalist state. Because of racial discrimination and the Great Depression, Chinese American job seekers continued to arrive in China as late as 1940, while many cash-strapped Chinese parents in the United States sent their children to Guangdong for school. Chinese American émigrés often felt the presence of the GMD regime in repressive ways that reinforced their sense of themselves as outsiders, treaty port Chinese, overseas Chinese, or “returned students”—anything but ordinary Chinese citizens. Chapter 5 examines the dilemmas

that such people faced during the Japanese invasion and occupation of China. Most initially identified as loyal Chinese who supported the Nationalist regime, but as the conflict dragged on, they faced difficult choices, especially once American officials essentially ordered US citizens to leave China. Many stayed on, unwilling to desert China-born spouses whom American immigration laws barred, or to abandon careers they could never have built in the United States. After Pearl Harbor, they found themselves cut off from any American protection and under pressure to collaborate with Japanese occupation forces. The book's conclusion and epilogue examine the aftermath of the war, when hundreds of Chinese American youths poured out of the Pearl River Delta and mid-career adults returned to an America that often had no place for them or their skills.

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At the heart of this book is a specific contradiction: the coexistence in the United States of a powerful, institutionalized racial nationalism and a legal system that grudgingly recognized the formal citizenship status of ethnic Chinese born on American soil.<sup>36</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, US officials, especially in the State Department, attempted to eliminate this contradiction by acknowledging and protecting only membership in the imagined racial nation rather than in the formal American state. They never fully succeeded, but neither did the lawmakers whose far more salutary repeal of Chinese exclusion in 1943 and national origins quotas in 1965 changed the racial basis of US immigration policy.

Instead, the contradiction between formal state and imagined racial nation continues to shape the politics of immigration and citizenship in the United States today, as the recent and alarming resurgence of open white nationalism in American civic life demonstrates. In the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of Chinese American citizens traveled to China for work because their race and ancestry supposedly made them “inassimilable” and undesirable in America. Such people usually spoke, read, and wrote English better than they did Chinese. Most were far more familiar with American cultural and social norms than with Chinese ones. A significant number were Christians, and scores possessed degrees from the finest universities in the United States. Most ached to belong somewhere, whether to China or the United States. While they were often more comfortable in the latter, they knew they could never truly “assimilate” in America. The San Francisco journalist Gilbert Woo

once explained why this was, when he argued that in the minds of many white Americans, the only satisfactory method for a Chinese American to achieve assimilation would be “to go to a plastic surgeon and get a face lift and a nose job and have one’s eyes turned blue.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, when white Americans complained about another group’s culture—or legal status, language, or religion—what they really complained about was racial difference, and what they really meant was that only white people could ever be “real” Americans. A century later, this cancerous fiction remains politically potent.