From China to Gold Mountain

From the U.S. Civil War through the mid-20th century, Chinese immigrants in America helped mine the gold fields, lay track for the transcontinental railroad, reclaim swamp land, and perform farm labor—all for a meager wage. Early immigrants from China, most of them single men from the rural south, were drawn by the promise of *Gam Sann,* or "Gold Mountain," as America was called. The California Gold Rush attracted thousands of Chinese between 1848 and 1860. In the late 1860s, when legislation forced them out of mining, they laid track for the Central Pacific Railroad on the transcontinental line. Their willingness to work—and the low wages they received—made them targets of nativist anger and discrimination. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act severely limited immigration from China. This was the first U.S. immigration law aimed at a particular ethnic group.

This policy encouraged suffering, bureaucratic delay, and fraud. With immigration of Chinese nationals curtailed, only a small number were allowed in legally each year. Children of fathers from the "exempt" class—such as merchants and clergy who had already obtained U.S. citizenship—were spared these policies. Some who entered with papers were known as "paper sons" and "paper daughters." They purchased documentation identifying themselves as children of U.S. citizens, when in fact they were not.

Beginning in 1910, would-be Pacific immigrants, over 70% of them Chinese, were screened at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay (like Ying-ying St. Clair was in *The Joy Luck Club*). Known as "the Ellis Island of the West," Angel Island functioned as an interrogation center and detention facility for the federal immigration service. Over the course of 30 years, Angel Island processed 175,000 immigrants. Many were turned back. Unlike at Ellis Island, however, many Chinese were detained for weeks and months, and in several cases up to two years, before being permitted to join the American melting pot.

The Angel Island facility was closed in 1940; three years later the Chinese Exclusion Act and its corollaries were repealed. By this time China was an ally in the war against Japan, and legal discrimination was not tolerated. After immigration quotas were abandoned in 1965, the Chinese-American population in America nearly doubled over the next decade. The immigrant Chinese, who began as a cloistered community denied basic citizenship rights, had become, within a century, a largely urbanized and professionalized American success story.