

Introduction

Long before Chinese stepped foot on American shores, Americans desired Chinese goods. After the Revolutionary War, the newly independent nation hoped that trade with China could alleviate wartime debt and generate needed revenue. In 1784, Americans sent their first ship to China, the *Empress of China*. The ship returned the following year laden with silks, porcelains, and teas, earning investors a hefty profit and starting a robust China trade. The exhibit includes a sea-letter written by the Continental Congress in hopes of ensuring the ship's safe passage, along with a fan depicting the *Empress* that was given to the ship's captain by authorities in Canton



CLASS GROUP ASSIGNMENT

WHILE YOU ARE ENJOYING THE COMPLETE EXHIBIT, I WOULD LIKE EACH OF YOUR FOUR CLASS GROUPS (WHITE, BLUE, YELLOW, AND ORANGE) TO FOCUS ON ONE OF THE FOUR MAIN PARTS OF THE EXHIBIT.

YOUR CLASS ASSIGNMENT IS TO PREPARE (AS A GROUP) A SHORT SUMMARY OF THE EXHIBITION – WITH THE FOCUS ON YOUR SPECIFIC PART. YOU WILL MAKE YOUR PRESENTATION ON SATURDAY FEBRUARY 21.

WHITE GROUP Part I: United States and China: 1783-1905

BLUE GROUP Part II: Machinery of Exclusion: 1882-1943

YELLOW GROUP Part III: Journeys in America: 1882-Today

ORANGE GROUP Part IV: What Makes an American?

WHITE GROUP

Part I: United States and China: 1783-1905



The first part of the exhibit explores the early interactions between the United States and China as the two nations considered questions about trade policies, mutual rights, and migration. With the development of a thriving China trade, Chinese migrants soon began arriving in the United States, first coming as sailors aboard trading ships. From the 1850s to the 1870s, approximately 35,000 Chinese migrants mined for gold and silver, shrimped and fished, labored on railroads, drained agricultural fields, and worked in manufacturing.

Although relations between Chinese and Americans began with some promise, they soon deteriorated in the social strife of the 1870s and 1880s. White workers anxious to protect their status in an industrializing economy identified Chinese migrants as a threat to their livelihoods. Anti-Chinese activists branded Chinese as racially inferior and unfit to be part of American society. Chinese and others who supported their presence fought back against such perceptions. However, fear and envy of the Chinese grew to become a national issue—the “Chinese Question.”

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, preventing Chinese laborers from immigrating while exempting merchants, students, teachers, and diplomats in order to permit trade. This was the first time the United States restricted immigration based on race and class. The act also banned all Chinese immigrants from naturalizing as American citizens. In the decades that followed, Exclusion was hardened and restrictive immigration policies expanded to include others.

BLUE GROUP

Part II: Machinery of Exclusion: 1882-1943



Certificate of identity, 1914. National Archives at San Francisco

The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. It required that all Chinese entering or re-entering the country had to prove their identity and eligibility or risk being denied entry. Such high stakes encounters occurred daily at places like Angel Island in San Francisco Bay (1910-1940). Despite Exclusion, Chinese continued to seek entry to the United States. Identity documents first came into widespread use in the US with efforts to enforce Chinese Exclusion. In 1909, all Chinese entering or residing in the US had to carry Certificates of Identity, even babies and movie stars like Anna May Wong. The creation of America's immigration system unfolds in the stories of individual immigrants and documents from the National Archives.



Immigration Interview on Angel Island, 1923. National Archives at College Park, MD.

YELLOW GROUP

Part III: Journeys in America: 1882-Today



Chin family portrait. Courtesy of the family of Linda and Pang F. Chin.

Chinese Americans challenged Exclusion and discrimination even while they struggled within its limits to build lives for themselves in the US and support relatives in China. This third part of the exhibit follows the Chin family of New York, whose family saga sheds light on many Chinese American journeys. The exhibit also explores momentous national and world events that affected Chinese Americans, including the repeal of Exclusion in 1943.

Large, illustrated story panels relay the story of the Chins of New York, as told to us by Amy Chin, a Bronx-born New Yorker who has researched and preserved her family history. Many family items, including the sign from the family's laundry and the personal effects of a Chin who served in World War II, are incorporated into the displays.

ORANGE GROUP

Part IV: What Makes an American?



One of the oldest Chinese American artifacts—the majestic head of a ceremonial dragon from the 1880s, belonging to the former gold rush town of Marysville, CA—is displayed here to commemorate the long presence of Chinese Americans. The dragon, Moo Lung, also honors the longstanding efforts of Chinese Americans to stake their claim for a place in America. Throughout the years of Exclusion, the dragon traveled the nation by rail, performing in cities and towns around the nation. It visited New York in 1911, performing in the July 4 parade.

A media installation, *American Stories*, scored by noted composer Jason Hwang, captures important events from the 1960s to today that continue the themes of equality and belonging explored in this exhibition.

Nine New Yorkers

The mini-exhibit *Nine New Yorkers* supplements the main exhibition by presenting brief portraits of nine distinguished Chinese Americans: Arnold Chang, Margaret Chin, Rachael Chong, Tarry Hum, Charles Lai, I.M. Pei, Betty Lee Sung, Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai, and Jeff Yang. Each has offered a vision, made an impact, broken barriers. All believe in the power of individuals to contribute to a better world.

Each portrait includes a life-size photograph, brief bio, and evocative object or sound piece, for example, Kelly Tsai's wonderful spoken word performance, "Black, White, Whatever..."