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How One Family Created Chinese America

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Hyphenated cultures seem to be a natural part of California’s landscape today, but it wasn’t always so. *The Lucky Ones* by Mae Ngai offers a fresh look at California history by reconstructing the lives of immigrant and second generation pioneers who lived between cultures when it was not such a common phenomenon. Ngai’s narrative brings Chinese Americans into a richer tradition of historical storytelling by humanizing an ambivalent, middle-class immigrant family, situating their lives within the more well-known histories of Chinese laborers and those who suffered from the 1882 Exclusion Act.

Ngai is a professor and immigration historian at Columbia University. She spent 10 years researching one family, the Tapes, and their lives as “in-betweens and go betweens” who “found in their bilingualism and biculturalism opportunities for economic and social advancement.” She explores the family using public and private records, filling in the blanks with what is known about Chinese Americans’ lives at the turn of the century.

The trials of the Tapes’ lives provide a compelling backdrop for the problems of immigration today. The Tape family begins with Jeu Dip, a houseboy turned wealthy self-made businessman, and Mary McGladery, a Chinese slave girl rescued, raised and renamed by Protestant missionaries in San Francisco. The couple met in 1875, had a six-month courtship — trading endearments in English — got married and renamed themselves Joseph and Mary Tape.

Their daughter, Mamie Tape, was the plaintiff in a well-known civil rights lawsuit which won Chinese Americans access to public schools. The case for inclusion was two-fold: Mamie’s lawyer argued for civil rights for Chinese Americans, but also argued that Mamie was assimilated enough, “white” enough, that she should be admitted to school. The Tapes lived on the edges of Chinese society and the San Francisco middle class, never truly accepted or comfortable in either world.

As the family move around San Francisco and ultimately to Berkeley — with forays around the country — Ngai offers captivating settings, particularly for readers who are familiar with the Bay Area. We travel with the Tapes and their extended family, visiting Sonoma and Oakland, witnessing a Chinatown quarantine and the devastation of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires. At one point the Tapes own five homes on Russell Street in Berkeley, and we imagine their neighborhood, seeing it echo in the Berkeley we know today. We observe, too, the Chinese Village at the St. Louis World’s Fair, an exhibit created by Chinese Americans that sold an exoticized vision of China, where Joseph
and Mary’s son Frank Tape finds opportunity as an interpreter and informant for U.S. Immigration Services.

The most compelling theme in *The Lucky Ones* is the irony of the Tapes’ lives. They both ascend and are held back because of Chinese exclusion laws. They gain access to middle class life by capitalizing on the laws that that render them second-class. It’s son Frank who most dramatically occupies this strange middle ground. His story takes on an almost cinematic quality as he strives to achieve social status as a Chinese American. In his career as an interpreter-informant, he is widely accused of blackmailing Chinese immigrants to gain income and respect from his white supervisors.

While the struggles and accomplishments of The Tapes are the products of injustices long ago, they resonate with immigrant experiences today, still marked by confusion and clashes over identity, assimilation, and acceptance.

Angilee Shah is a freelance journalist who writes about globalization and politics. You can read more of her work at www.angileeshah.com.

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