

AT AMERICA'S GATES

CHINESE IMMIGRATION DURING
THE EXCLUSION ERA, 1882-1943

ERIKA LEE

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AT AMERICA

CHINESE IMMIGRATION DURING

The University of North Carolina Press CHAPEL HILL AND LONDON

In memory of my grandparents,

Ben Huie (Hui Bing Gee) and Gladys Huie (Moy Sau Bik)

and

Wallace Lee (Lee Chi Yet) and Mary Lee (Wong Lan Fong)



AT AMERICA'S GATES



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INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE THOUSANDS of gold seekers who flocked to California in the mid-nineteenth century was Moy Dong Kee, my maternal great-great-great-grandfather.¹ A twenty-year-old farmer from Sun Jock Mee village in the Pearl River delta of southern China, he arrived in California in 1854 with big dreams of *Gum Saan*, or Gold Mountain, as the Chinese called the United States. Like many other immigrants, he came as a sojourner intending to work in America for a short time and then return home to his family and village. Instead, his initial trip to San Francisco stretched into a fifty-two-year stay that took him all across the United States. The opportunities in America were plentiful, and Moy found that he could provide much more for his wife and three children by staying in the United States. Eventually, he earned enough money to move to New York City and he opened Kwong Wah Tai & Co., a small Chinese goods store in the heart of Chinatown. He was also able to make at least three trips to visit his wife and children, who remained in China. This was not unusual. Chinese—and other immigrants—were customarily “transnational,” maintaining families and socioeconomic, political, and cultural ties across international borders. Moy’s son, my great-great-grandfather Moy Shai Quong, eventually

came to America in 1873. Together, father and son opened up two more stores in Philadelphia, and both learned to speak, read, and write a little English. In 1906, Moy Dong Kee returned to China to retire at the age of seventy-two. Moy Shai Quong remained in the United States and eventually brought his own son, my great-grandfather Moy Wah Chung, to join him in 1907. Finally, my grandmother Moy Sau Bik, the fourth generation (and the first woman) of her family to immigrate to the United States, arrived in 1933 with my grandfather Huie Bing Gee and my aunt Mai Ling.²

Sixty-four years after Moy Dong Kee first sailed into the port of San Francisco, my paternal grandfather, Lee Chi Yet, came to the United States in 1918. Orphaned at a young age in Poon Lung Cheung village in Toisan, Grandfather quit school early and worked as a farmer in the village and then as a day laborer in the city of Toisan. For him and many others, the belief that the United States was a land of wealth and opportunity remained a strong and compelling reason to migrate abroad. Economic, social, and political instability in the Pearl River delta worsened during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The situation in Grandfather's village became particularly desperate. Coming to the United States was nothing less than a means of survival. As he recounted years afterward, "My eye just looking for a way to get out. I want to live, so I come to the United States."³

In the intervening years between Moy Dong Kee's first arrival in the United States in 1854 and Lee Chi Yet's landing in San Francisco in 1918, Chinese immigration to the United States had changed dramatically. Entry into the country in 1854 was relatively uncomplicated, because immigration to the United States was generally free and unrestricted. America welcomed immigrants from around the world to "settle" the land and provide the labor for its newly industrializing economy. Although some states regulated migration across their borders, federal policies—for the most part—promoted and encouraged immigration. Moy Dong Kee thus probably packed his bags, said good-bye to his wife in China, booked passage on a ship in Hong Kong, arrived in San Francisco, and simply disembarked. No gates barred his entry; no gatekeepers demanded immigration documents or subjected him to rigorous interrogations.

By the time Lee Chi Yet arrived in San Francisco, however, new laws had severely limited Chinese immigration into the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, barred all Chinese laborers from entering the country for ten years and prohibited Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. It expressly allowed only a few specific classes of Chinese to