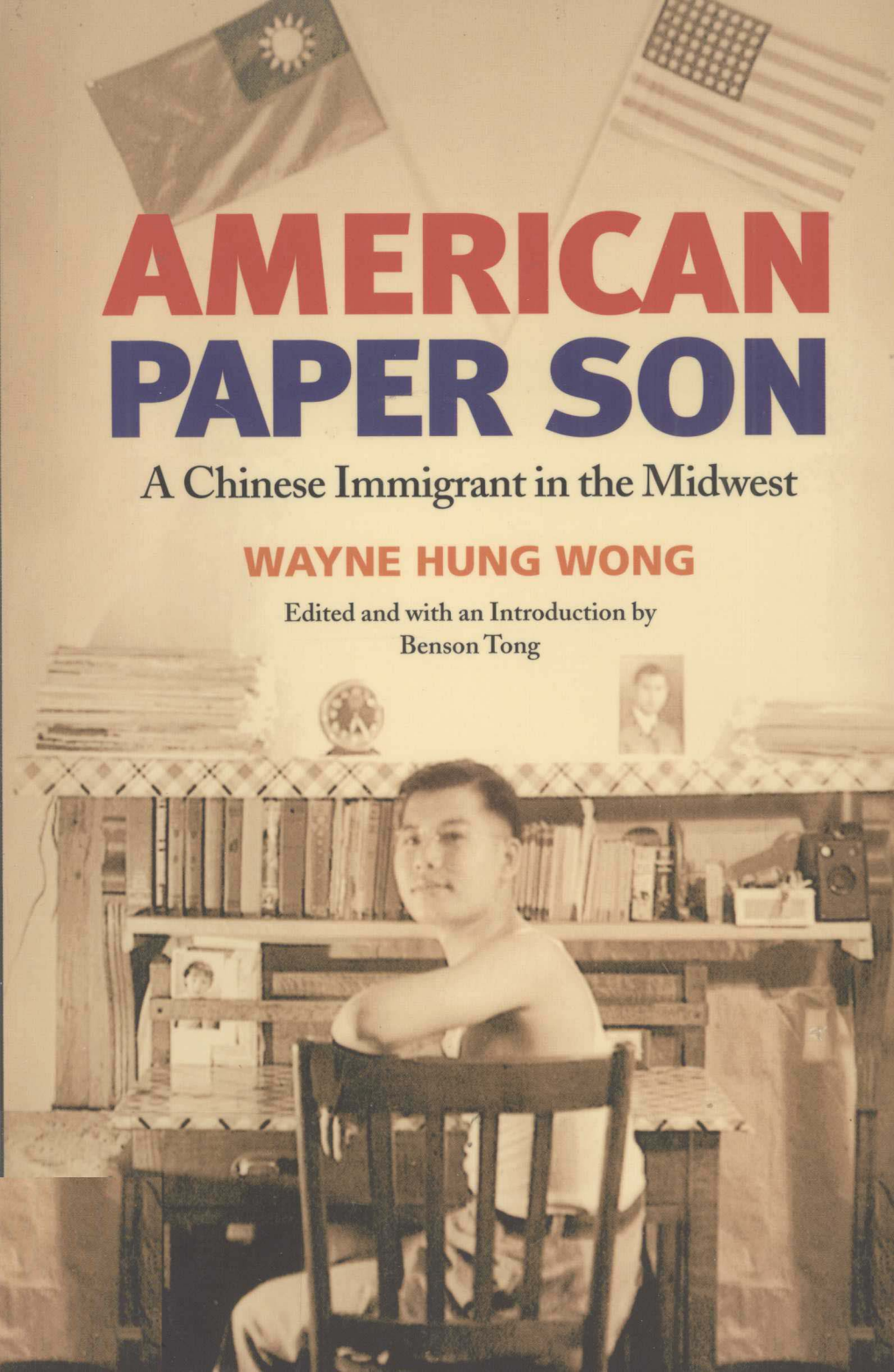

AMERICAN PAPER SON

A Chinese Immigrant in the Midwest

WAYNE HUNG WONG

Edited and with an Introduction by
Benson Tong

American Paper Son

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University of Illinois Press
Urbana and Chicago

Wayne Hung Wong:
For my children—Linda, David, Wilma, and Edward—
and grandchildren—Erik, Kimberly, and Kevin—
so that they may know who I am and where I came from

Benson Tong:
In respect of the intellectual companionship
of Michael Kelly and John Bigelow

Acknowledgments

A number of generous-spirited people have aided or supported the completion of this work. Barbara Hammond of the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum, Wichita, Kansas, introduced me to Wayne Hung Wong; she also graciously shared with me some of the notes she compiled on Chinese restaurants in early-twentieth-century Wichita. My former colleague at Wichita State University (WSU), Jay M. Price, shared with me his insights on various themes in public history. I have enjoyed over the years his spirited enthusiasm for and well-rounded knowledge of his subfield. Michael Kelly, former curator of special collections at WSU, offered unremitting emotional support and placed his department's resources at my disposal for an exhibit that served as the genesis for this project. His friendship and professional input have been priceless.

I am deeply grateful to a good number of enthusiastic undergraduate and graduate students who played various roles in the research for this work. Paul Williams took time off to work alongside me in archives in the San Francisco Bay area; his work ethic inspired me. Heidie F. Colucci, John D. Hays, Joshua Yearout, Rana D. Razek, Williams, Isabella Marie Jensen, Theresa L. St. Romain, Teddie G. Barlow, Janice L. Rich, and Benjamin C. Matthaei interviewed Wong and several of his children; they also painstakingly transcribed the lengthy interviews. All of the aforesaid students also assisted in conducting research in local libraries and repositories; their collective efforts unearthed some of the information that serves as the historical context for this autobiography. I am also grateful to all of them for the numerous discussions we had about the autobiography itself. The almost twenty undergraduate students who took my spring 2002 course "Ethnic America in the Twentieth Century" probably never knew, until now, that their stupen-

dous work on an exhibit on race and ethnicity in Wichita allowed me to formulate preliminary ideas about Wong's writing and its place in historiography.

Roger Daniels and an anonymous reader reviewed an earlier version of this manuscript. Their reviews enabled me to sharpen the focus of my interpretive lens on this autobiography; I am indebted to their commitment to rigorous scholarship.

As usual, I am thankful to John for his willingness to amuse himself when I was too busy to pay much attention to him. I am also relieved that at long last I have published an accessible work that he can actually read. I should also point out that John served as my sounding board as I struggled to find a suitable title for this work; for that, I am again reminded of the deeper meaning of our enduring relationship.

Finally, my most heartfelt gratitude goes out to Wayne Hung Wong and his family. Wong's brother, Henjung; Wong's children, Wilma, Linda, and Edward; as well as Wong's wife, Kim Suey, welcomed my students into their lives. So did Wayne. I do not think I will ever meet another more vibrant, open-minded, and self-assured man than Wayne. His life story humbles me; I am in awe of how he triumphed in spite of all the adversities of the earlier years. I thank him for entrusting his memoir in my hands and for the privilege of working on it.

Contents

Introduction: A Paper Son in the Midwest

Benson Tong

Wayne Hung Wong's *American Paper Son* at first glance is a story of progress, one that reminds a reader of the effervescent "model minority" myth come true. Wong and his family seemingly overcame racial animosity, enjoy phenomenal economic mobility, and are upstanding citizens. So much more, however, lies beneath the surface of a rapid reading. This is in fact a midwestern story of a fraudulent family history, resilient Chinese paper sons,[1] a U.S. serviceman waging the "good war" in his ancestral land, a young war bride and the upbringing of Americanized children, the endless servile labor to reap fortunes in *Gum Saan* (Cantonese for "Gold Mountain"), and, through it all, the enduring transnational ties to the homeland. For sure, various autobiographies have covered one or several of these themes, but never all of them.

So much of Asian American history even until today remains a narrative devoid of names and human depth. Wong's story, however, humanizes what is often a faceless historical saga of invisible forces. Written in a descriptive, sometimes breezy style, the autobiography is replete with anecdotal accounts of both life in China and, more so, in the United States. Not only does it cover a critical period in history when U.S. laws severely limited Chinese immigration—known as the exclusion era—but also the period of family reunification that followed. Wong's memoir also broadens the scope of Chinese American history by shifting the focus away from the West Coast experience, on which much of the existing scholarship has been centered.

The narrative as a whole ties two chronological eras in Chinese American history that are typically studied separately: the pre-1965

period and the era after 1965, the latter year being the turning point for liberalization of U.S. immigration. Wong's expansive story reminds us that the earlier period of split households, immigration networks, an ethnic enclave economy, wartime service, and postwar reunification of families (including the war bride migration) laid a basis for change and continuity in the following era. The shadow cast by the exclusion era's legacy shaped the nature of Chinese American identity and family life in the late twentieth century. Wong's narrative belies the enduring nature of that legacy as he and his family attempted to represent themselves as "Americans" in a land where "American-ness" had been defined by "excluding and containing foreign-ness."[2]

A thought-provoking aspect of this autobiography is the tensions between history and personal memory, between truth and memorialization of the past. (See the appendix for the discussion on the difference between history and memory.) Unlike most Chinese Americans who have written autobiographies, Wong insists, in spite of contrary evidence in his own words, that he had experienced highly limited racial discrimination in his American hometown, Wichita, Kansas.[3] His claim seemingly flies in the face of the often-told tale of victimized Asian immigrants suffering the brunt of "Orientalism."

One of the readers of this manuscript implied that Wong's claim stemmed from his desire to subscribe to the power of the model minority narrative. The overall "progress"-oriented nature of this autobiography also suggests an acceptance of that narrative, one that has enabled marginalized Asian immigrants to find their niche in the dominant society, even though it was and is an ambivalent one. The narrative positions many Asian immigrants and their descendants as "acceptable" Others who will enjoy suitable rewards (educational achievements, economic mobility, and a secure place in society) as long as they continue to meet certain standards such as quiet self-sufficiency, mild-mannered behavior, and acceptance of the existing racialized status quo. By accepting and enacting such a narrative, Asian Americans have believed they could fulfill their "desire to strengthen their status and position in the United States society." In a sense such Asian Americans are trying to attain class ascendancy, which would simultaneously allow them to opt out of the racial hierarchy; their socioeconomic

triumph, to quote Ronald Takaki, "offers ideological affirmation of the American Dream."[4] In truth, the model minority narrative masks existing social and economic inequalities that cut across the ethnic line in Asian America.[5]

Because autobiographies are typically self-conscious narratives designed to represent the self from a particular perspective, Wong's claim of having enjoyed a life of relative equality in Wichita has to be considered in that light. Still, the argument that Wong structured his memoir to come across as a model minority member is countered somewhat by Wong's overall understanding of race relations in the United States. Wong never dismisses the discrimination that occurred outside Wichita or within it; throughout this narrative he offers numerous examples of racial prejudice experienced by either himself, family members, friends, or acquaintances. Wong is also well aware of the fact that the exclusion laws were racially motivated and that he was a victim of them. What he does take pains to emphasize is that, overall, his personal experiences *in* Wichita (and, by implication, in the Midwest) had been more positive than negative, which he believed would not have happened on the East or West Coast. Prompting this insistence on his part was perhaps a desire to find acceptance in a place he considered "home," a desire probably strengthened by the fact that he did experience in this city at least subtle hints of racial discrimination (for example, the tensions in the post–Pearl Harbor attack period), and several times a more overt form of rejection (the most notable being the postwar housing discrimination he endured). Perhaps there is also something to be said about the popular, mythical perception of the Midwest influencing Wong's worldview. One scholar argues that the "pastoral idealism" this region embodies metaphorically stands in for the values the republic idealizes, such as wholesomeness, integrity, and egalitarianism.[6]

Wong's understanding of his life mirrors to some degree that of the Korean American immigrant Easurk Emsen Charr in his autobiography *The Golden Mountain: The Autobiography of a Korean Immigrant, 1895–1960* (1996). Wayne Patterson, in his introductory essay to this autobiography, noted that Charr's "experience with racial discrimination is muted in this book," and ascribed that to the general pattern of stoicism in the face of racism exhibited by most first- and second-

generation Asian Americans. Patterson also implied that the positive experiences Charr encountered so "outweighed and overshadowed the negative" in the latter's mind that discrimination committed against him was suppressed in his consciousness.[7] Wong can be characterized as one who possesses a stoical mentality. The first version of this work also suggests that Wong's consciousness did block out unpleasant experiences, though there is little evidence of a *conscious* attempt to do so. (See the appendix for a longer discussion of this point.)

Wong's emigration from China to the United States in 1935, at the formative age of thirteen, and the circumstances of that emigration make the story a compelling one. China in the 1920s and 1930s suffered from imperialism, warlordism, a corrupt regime, and socioeconomic turmoil. In this context some Chinese, such as Wong's grandfather, Mar Bong Shui, found a niche in this era of expanding Western influence and sociopolitical change. His import-export business—which most likely had ties to Chinese in the United States—provided him the monetary resources to sponsor the emigration of his son, and indirectly that of his grandson. Unlike the typical portrayal of impoverished peasants desperate to flee socioeconomic upheavals—one that historians of U.S. immigration have described in numerous monographs—Wong's, as well as that of his father's, departure from China reminds readers that some immigrants came from privileged backgrounds and sought either to maintain or improve their standard of living.[8] The Wong family's immigration pattern echoes that of Chinese immigrants described in recent revisionist works by Asian American historians such as Madeline K. Hsu, Yong Chen, and Erika Lee.[9]

Wong's immigration to the United States was also atypical in another respect: he left at the tender age of thirteen to join his father, who needed his labor and probably his companionship. Even though the immigration laws were stacked against family formation and reunification, specifically proscribing the entry of most Chinese women, Chinese American men found other ways to establish some semblance of family life, no matter how distorted it might have been.[10] Typically the men, such as was the case with Wong's paper father, Wong Wing Lock, and several of his male relatives, claimed the birth of a son each time they returned to China for a visit. Over time that enabled them to

bring in real sons and also open slots for other kinfolk. Such a "paper son" scheme, as it came to be known, allowed these men to establish and expand the Chinese American community during the exclusion era.[11]

Exposed to the Western world by way of transnational ties forged via family immigration networks, immigrants such as Wong and his relatives were attuned to the concept of immigration. Because Wong's province—Guangdong—had over the centuries been linked to seafaring trade routes, the worldview of the people of this subregion suggested a precapitalist mentality that oriented them toward the outside world.[12] That Wong's grandfather was involved in a business in the British colony of Hong Kong suggests such a mentality.

Such converging conditions explain why some 90 to 95 percent of the Chinese in the United States before 1965 could trace their roots to that province. Perhaps 50 percent of the first-generation Chinese in America hailed from one district alone: Taishan, the same one Wong was born and raised in.[13]

In Taishan the emigration process was facilitated by the assistance of relatives and clanspeople who loaned money and expended time and effort. Wong's (as well as his paper and biological fathers') immigration depended on clanspeople willing to take the risk of jeopardizing their own legal status in the United States, as well as accepting the fate of living under the shadow of a complex scheme.

Wong's clanspeople had to be mindful of their status because it was ambivalent and precarious. The race- and class-based Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and subsequent legislation proscribed the entry of Chinese into the United States, except for the exempt classes (merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and visitors). Such laws were the outcomes of long-held prejudices against "Orientals," rabid nativism in the 1870s that was grounded in labor competition, and the jostling for power in state and national politics. These laws were not repealed until 1943. Even then, for years afterward, a tiny yearly quota of 105 kept many Chinese away, although much larger numbers of persons entered legally as brides or other family members of U.S. citizens.

To qualify for admission, most prospective Chinese immigrants found themselves in a dilemma: either they become complicit in a scheme to

violate U.S. immigration law or they abandon any hope of legally landing in the country. Over time, at least thirty thousand Chinese, and probably many more than that, chose the former.[14] The paper son scheme involved a complex network of overlapping family, clan, friendship, and even business ties that stretched across the Pacific Ocean. Clanspeople who resided in the United States offered "slots" (it was almost always "sons" that they claimed to U.S. authorities) for entry as well as jobs or business opportunities—as demonstrated both in Wong's and Jee See Wing's (Wong's real father) cases. Kinfolk in their Chinese villages offered information, money, and coaching so that potential immigrants could succeed in their duplicity.[15] Wong clearly was a recipient of such assistance; in return, his father promised to aid the immigration of the son of Wong's paper father, who was a distant cousin.

The scheme Wong and his relatives participated in was not flawless. United States immigration authorities, well aware of the duplicity, were relentless in their efforts to ferret out the "paper sons." How they carried out these efforts exhibited deeply entrenched institutionalized racism reflected in their attitudes toward the Chinese, the system established to process such new arrivals, and the treatment of those detained for interrogations. New immigrants also encountered other pressures: the officials "mistrusted the entire register of documentary evidence" even as they imposed an "upward spiral of evidentiary requirements upon Chinese immigrants."[16]

Although Wong and See Wing succeeded in passing the immigration-clearance process, at least one of See Wing's paper brothers was denied entry and forced to return to China.[17] With the threat of deportation heavy on their minds, new arrivals suffered the emotional pressure of having to discard their real identities and assume new ones. Detained in a confined space in the sparsely furnished and often overcrowded wooden barracks of the Angel Island Immigration Station (established in 1910 and closed down in 1940) and facing the gauntlet of repeated interrogations, only the most self-assured individuals overcame these odds.[18]

Even after Wong cleared the hurdle, the legacy of the "paper son" scheme continued to haunt his life and that of his family. After the war, See Wing, Wong's father, discovered just how fragile his paper identity

was. When he made an error in a document and used "Gee" instead of "Jee" as stated in his immigration records, that error caught up with him and delayed his return to the United States.

Yee Kim Suey, the "war bride" Wong brought with him from China in 1947, was subjected to scrutiny by U.S. officials who were, in spite of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, still highly doubtful of the true identities of these Chinese war brides. Wong's coaching of Yee for the interrogation, so as to avoid the fate of a long detention, was repeated by countless of other nervous Chinese GIs and separated, anxious Chinese husbands.[19] Like other Chinese war brides, to protect an entire complex immigration network, Yee had to conceal her husband's true past and provide information that matched his fictive ties. Wong's retelling of this part of their marriage is highly emotional, reflective, and deeply personal—no other published autobiography has covered this theme in such detail. This part of the autobiography should also remind readers of the significance of the war bride migration. Not only did this migration lead to the establishment of new Chinese nuclear families in the United States, but in other instances it also reunited families long separated by gender-biased exclusion laws. The days of the so-called bachelors' society had come to an end; Chinese immigrants were now making the transition from sojourners to settlers.[20]

The fraudulent scheme eventually caught up with the Wongs. In 1956 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) initiated the Confession Program, which allowed Chinese immigrants to correct their contorted family history by confessing their illegal entry. This program had a sinister quality: Cold War fears of communist infiltration into the United States by way of the paper son scheme had prompted it. Even before the program was initiated, leftist Chinese Americans had been picked up and subjected to intense interrogation, and a small number were deported. INS agents raided Chinese business establishments and searched residences. The witchhunt evoked a general panic in Chinatowns, discouraging Chinese from confessing.[21] The Wongs would never have confessed had their paper relative not done likewise, thus implicating his real and paper families, including the Wongs. Wong's candor in revealing this part of his life enables the reader to understand the "cost" of this Confession Program.

Wong's autobiography is also significant in another important way: it remains one of the few published works that offers insight into Chinese American adolescent life in the interwar years. Furthermore, though existing published autobiographies that advance such an understanding were written by the second-generation and native-born, Wong's is probably the first by an immigrant. What is perhaps most significant of all is that this is the first one situated in the Midwest, a region that uniquely shaped Wong's acculturation along a different trajectory than that of other Chinese Americans.

Second-generation Chinese Americans who resided in heavily populated Asian communities of the West Coast came under the influence of their peers, ethnic communities, schooling, churches, and mainstream popular culture. Their opportunities for acculturation were varied and took place in various settings. Wong's only contact with the non-Chinese world was through his teachers, and even less, through his peers. Work at the family-owned restaurant kept him away from those influences enjoyed by coethnics on the West Coast.[22] Because he lived in a region with a minuscule Asian population, he escaped the influences of Americanized coethnics. Similarly to most Asian American children before World War II, his labor was tied to the family economy.

Unlike Euro-American children, Asian children of working-class and petit bourgeois backgrounds fell outside the sheltered childhood ideal. The preoccupation of Euro-American children with play and schooling and their dependency on elders were foreign to Asian children's upbringing.[23] In the interwar years Asian children in the countryside toiled as farmhands, fruit pickers, cannery workers, and store helpers. Children were also drawn into housework and child care, a trend that continued into the postwar years, as witnessed in the Wong household. In urban centers, children such as those in St. Louis's Hop Alley, the local Chinatown, labored before and after school in family-owned enterprises ranging from laundries to grocery stores.[24]

Such labor, whether in urban centers or the countryside, took place against a backdrop of labor segmentation and racial segregation. Wong's recollections of life in Wichita (as opposed to his life in the army or elsewhere in the United States), however, suggest that he suffered little *blatant* racial discrimination. One exception took place in

the years following World War II with respect to whites' fears of "block busting," or the enforcement of housing segregation. Other instances of racial conflict involved his offspring: daughter Wilma, who claimed being a victim of job discrimination when she tried to find a teaching job, and son David, who endured name calling during the height of the Vietnam War.

One reason for Wong's low exposure to racism revolved around the minuscule Chinese (and Asian) population in Kansas until recent times. In 1930, census takers enumerated 53 Chinese men and 7 Chinese women in the state of Kansas. This total of 60 climbed to 133 in 1940, which broke down as 124 men and 9 women. Yet the total number each year made up only 0.01 percent of the state's total population. Even though the total Chinese population in the state after World War II continued to grow—from 315 in 1950 to 537 ten years later—as a percentage of the state's population, it inched upward by only 0.01 percent.[25]

The "invisibility" of the Chinese population in Wichita undercut any perception that it represented an economic or social threat to white society. Chinese American residential and occupational concentration confined to the parameters of several blocks in the downtown business and commercial district also meant that the Chinese experienced limited contact with a broad spectrum of other Americans. More important, work in an entirely coethnic setting—specifically in the kitchen—that did not bring them in contact with white customers consumed all of their time, leaving them with little opportunity to interact with whites in churches, parks, theaters, or other public spaces. Furthermore, because Chinese in Wichita depended on coethnics for employment—almost wholly in the Chinese American restaurant business that non-Chinese did not participate in—white hysteria over "Oriental" competition for jobs, which ran rampant in California, was preempted.[26] Finally, unlike late-nineteenth-century immigrants caught up in the heights of the exclusionary movement, Wong came to a prewar United States where heated anti-Chinese sentiments had cooled off to some degree.

Though *blatant* racial discrimination did not completely suffuse Wong's adolescence and his later post–World War II adult life in Wichi-

ta, the few relationships he had with white Americans fell largely within the parameters of a paternalistic superior-subordinate relationship. His teachers and fellow students were helpful, but Wong never formed close relationships with any of them. Wong was grateful for their benevolence, but that did not mean these were his intimate friends. Wong recounts other individuals who had extended their magnanimity: the boarding house lady and a minister in Kansas City, the immigration official onboard the ship that brought him and his bride back to the United States, and business customers who shared their resources with him. Yet they too lived on the margins of Wong's social life. Still, Wong was overly grateful for their benevolence, so much so that readers would be reminded of the ingratiating reactions of another Asian immigrant, Mary Paik Lee, as documented in her autobiography, *Quiet Odyssey.* (See the appendix for a longer discussion of the commonalities between Wong's and Lee's works.)

Wong's life could typify that of many other Asian Americans who lived and worked in this region during the exclusion era. First, the immigration of Wong's kinfolk to the Midwest mirrored that of other Chinese immigrants who either fled or avoided the exclusion era's anti-Chinese prejudice and declining economic opportunity on the West Coast.[27] Later waves of immigrants like Wong himself came directly from China to the Midwest, drawn by existing kinship ties in the heartland or by news of economic opportunities, or both. This pattern of migration suggests that Chinese Americans have not necessarily radiated from the West Coast, as the Asian American history's master narrative, with its broadly paradigmatic West Coast emphasis, would have us believe.[28] By 1920, two years before Wong's biological father immigrated to the United States, only about 63 percent of the Chinese populace lived in the American West; the rest had scattered all over the Midwest, South, and East Coast. Ten years later, in 1930 (about five years before Wong himself immigrated), the U.S. Census estimated that that figure had dropped a little to 59.8 percent; the gradual dispersal continued to play out.[29]

Yet there were few Chinese in the Midwest throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century. In 1900 the size of the Chinese popu-

lation in the following states was as follows: Ohio, 371; Indiana, 207; Illinois, 1,503; Michigan, 240; Wisconsin, 212; Minnesota, 166; Iowa, 104; Missouri, 449; Nebraska, 180; and Kansas, 39. Thirty years later the numbers had increased for all states: Ohio, 1,425; Indiana, 279; Illinois, 3,192; Michigan, 1,081; Wisconsin, 363; Minnesota, 524; Iowa, 153; Missouri, 634; Nebraska, 194; and Kansas, 60. As a percentage of the entire states' populations, Chinese residents still constituted a numerically insignificant presence. In 1900 the percentage of Chinese residents (measured against the total population) in all of the aforesaid midwestern states was around 0.01 percent except for Nebraska's, which was 0.02 percent. Thirty years later, the only state that showed an obvious increase was Illinois (0.04 percent). The percentage inched slightly upward to 0.02 for four states: Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri. The percentage for Indiana, Wisconsin, and Iowa remained the same, while that of Nebraska dropped to 0.01 percent. Little changed a decade later; Chinese residents as a percentage of the total population for these states in 1940 ranged between 0.01 and 0.02 percent.[30]

In the absence of a visible ethnic community, and bereft of "normal" family life, midwestern Asians faced the contradiction of being invisible in the eyes of the larger society and yet remained "different" enough (because their racial marker drew attention in white-dominated areas) to be targets of Americanization, as was the case with Wong's experience with schooling and Christianity. Furthermore, Asian immigrants and their descendants in the Midwest (as well as those in the East and South) were more so the "foreigners within," to borrow Lisa Lowe's phrase, than their coethnics in the "multicultural" Pacific Coast. Racial formation in the Midwest, as in the South, was rigidly structured by the dominant black/white model, and as such, Asian Americans found themselves treated by the state and the dominant society as either "white" or "black."[31]

Such policies and actions were often quite arbitrary. For example, Chinese Americans in Louisiana were in 1860 classified as whites, but a decade later they were classified as Chinese, while their biracial children in 1890 could be classified as either blacks or whites.[32] The midwestern states of Nebraska and Missouri classified a person as "black" if he or