

THE GOOD IMMIGRANTS

how the YELLOW PERIL *became the*
MODEL MINORITY

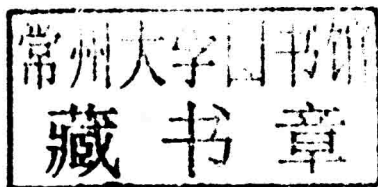
Madeline Y. Hsu



❧ The Good Immigrants ❧

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BECAME THE MODEL MINORITY

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton and Oxford

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW
press.princeton.edu

Jacket photograph: 1959 publicity still of refugees in Hong Kong boarding one of the last Pan Am planes chartered by the voluntary agency Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals, Inc. ARCI Collection, Box 1, "Chartered Flights." Courtesy of the Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.

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ISBN 978-0-691-16402-1

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available
This book has been composed in Sabon Next LT Pro

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞
Printed in the United States of America
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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For Izzy

Abbreviations

ARCI	Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals, Inc.
CCBA	Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
CEM	Chinese Educational Mission
CFRFS	Committee on Friendly Relations among Foreign Students
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRR	Chinese Refugee Relief
CSCA	Chinese Student Christian Association
FERP	Far East Refugee Program of the United States Escapee Program
ICA	International Cooperation Agency
IIE	Institute of International Education
IPR	Institute of Pacific Relations
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MSA	Mutual Security Agency
NRC	National Resources Commission
ORM	Office of Refugee and Migration Affairs, Department of State
PRC	People's Republic of China
RRA	Refugee Relief Act
RRP	Refugee Relief Program
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
USEP	United States Escapee Program
USIA	United States Information Agency, Department of State
USIS	United States Information Service, Department of State
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Note on Transliterations

THE HOST OF CHINESE DIALECTS and competing systems for transliterations makes it difficult to attain consistency in rendering names and places into English. In most instances, when the characters are available, I convert Chinese names into the *pinyin* Romanization system. Following Chinese practice, surnames are followed by given names, as with Li Zhengdao and Yang Zhenning, who are also widely known as T. D. Lee and C. N. Yang, respectively. H. H. Kung is thus rendered as Kong Xiangxi, Paul Chih Meng as Meng Zhi, Yuen Ren Chao as Zhao Yuanren, T. V. Soong as Song Ziwen, Chiang Mon-lin as Jiang Menglin, and Hu Shih as Hu Shi.

Some individuals and places are known pervasively by irregular romanizations, and I follow these common usages for Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), Peking University (Beijing University), Tsinghua University (Qinghua University), I. M. Pei (Bei Yuming), Yung Wing (Rong Hong), V. K. Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun), Yi-fu Tuan (Duan Yifu), and Hong Kong (Xianggang). I use the Nationalists or Nationalist Party rather than the plethora of names referring to the Chinese Republican Party, the KMT or Kuomintang, or the GMD or Guomindang.

Readers should note distinctions between unsanctioned entry, employment, and residency in the United States by Chinese. Many of the Chinese discussed in this book entered through temporary visas as students, diplomats, and technical trainees, statuses that did not, however, confer legal rights of employment, permanent residency, or citizenship. Legislative and procedural measures that enabled them to remain had to address these various components of resettlement. They cannot therefore be described as undocumented, although many remained and worked in the United States without permission or legal permanent status.

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Gateways and Gates in American Immigration History

UNDER CLEAR SKIES on July 3, 1986, in a ceremony broadcast around the world from Governor's Island, President Ronald Reagan presided over the first of a four-day commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty with a one-time presentation of Medals of Liberty to twelve outstanding immigrants.¹ These highly select acclaimed Americans included no less than *three* individuals of Chinese ancestry—the architect I. M. Pei (Bei Yuming, b. 1917), the computer scientist and entrepreneur Wang An (1920–1990), and the astronaut Franklin R. Chang-Díaz (b. 1950).² From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, the celebration of Chinese Americans as exemplary immigrants seems unsurprising given the pervasive image of Asians as model minorities whose educational and professional attainments surpass that of any other racial group, including whites.³ This is very recent history, however. Such an honor would have been inconceivable, and legally impossible, just a century before and as recently as World War II, when Asians categorized by race were barred from naturalized citizenship and subjected to highly limited rights of entry. The earliest American law concerning citizenship, the Nationality Act of 1790, had set aside Asians as racially ineligible, and the earliest enforced immigration laws (1875–1943) had targeted Chinese by race, who thereby became the first illegal immigrants against whom the legal and institutional foundations of American border controls were established. Under such circumstances, how did Pei, Wang, and Chang-Díaz, as Asians but particularly as Chinese, ascend so rapidly to become model American immigrants?

I. M. Pei's life story surfs astride the shifting ideological, political, and legal tides that advanced the integration and visible successes of Chinese. Individual brilliance aside, Pei had excellent timing, for his arrival in the United States in 1935 at age seventeen coincided with the onset of major changes in the relationships between immigration priorities and practices, the politics of foreign relations, and views of domestic racial inequalities that transformed the positioning and possibilities available to Chinese. The immigration histories of Pei and his generation of fellow students, heretofore



Figure 1.1. Ronald Reagan awarding Medals of Liberty, July 3, 1986. A dozen exemplary immigrant Americans were honored at this one-time ceremony to celebrate the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. I. M. Pei is third from the left, next to Franklin Chang-Díaz and Wang An. Courtesy of Ronald Reagan Library.

treated as exceptional to the mainstream of Asian American history, require our attention because they illuminate the many intersections between immigration history and international relations, underscoring that the evolution and institutionalization of American border controls emerged not just from domestic political agendas and racial ideologies but as manifestations of American ambitions and constraints abroad. The twentieth-century turn from restriction to selection gained momentum as the U.S. government—chiefly the executive branch and the Department of State but in conjunction with internationalists active in education, missionary work, and public policy—realized and co-opted the use of educational and cultural exchanges as means first to advance American foreign interests and eventually to develop national reserves of economically enhanced human resources. Immigration policies and practices shifted from a set of defensive measures protecting America from unwanted immigrants seen as posing dangers to the state to a set of selective processes recruiting immigrants seen as enhancing the national economy.

Pei entered the United States as a student, which, along with merchants, diplomats, and tourists, was one of the few exempt classes of Chinese permitted legal admission, although only for temporary residence. A banker's son, he came to study architecture first at the University of Pennsylvania but then transferred to MIT and continued to Harvard University for graduate study. As did other Chinese students, and even some American-born Chinese facing discrimination in the United States, Pei anticipated working in China, where professional careers were more readily available to ethnic Chinese. The Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), the outbreak of the Cold War (1948), and the hardening of political divides with the Korean War (1950–1952) shattered these plans and transformed him from a relatively privileged professional-in-training with a secure future in his homeland to a stateless refugee with uncertain prospects for either residence or employment. Unlike most Chinese in America, stigmatized as working class, ghettoized, and inassimilable, however, Pei had abundant talents, bicultural adeptness, and top-notch educational credentials that brought opportunities knocking at his door. On graduating in 1940, he received the Alpha Rho Chi Medal, the MIT Traveling Fellowship, and the AIA Gold Medal and continued his studies at Harvard with leading architects such as Walter Gropius, garnering special attention and teaching assignments. Pei was not alone in receiving support and succor from Americans. In 1948, alerted to the plight of thousands of elite Chinese students and technical trainees rendered homeless in the United States by the tragic turn of events, Congress made legal and financial provisions to provide sanctuary that included payments for tuition and living costs, stays of deportation, and legal employment. In the mid-1950s the Department of State came to accept the permanence of China's communist government and sought ways for the "stranded students" to gain permanent residence and eventually citizenship in the United States, a strategic move in light of the intensifying Cold War competition in the arms and space race.⁴ In 1954 China's assistant foreign minister, Wang Bingnan (1908–1988), had issued an open invitation for overseas Chinese scientists and technicians to return and help rebuild their homeland, a move that prompted the State Department to make U.S. citizenship available to selected resident Chinese refugees of good standing and demonstrated usefulness, such as Pei and Wang, who were otherwise unable to regularize their status because of restrictive immigration laws.

They and others in their cohort of student-refugees, such as the Nobel Prize-winning physicists Li Zhengdao (T. D. Lee, b. 1926) and Yang Zhenning (C. N. Yang, b. 1922), are also early examples of the phenomenon later criticized in the 1960s as "brain drain," the dynamic of educated elites departing their developing homelands to work in advanced economies, chiefly that of the United States, seeking better professional opportunities and working conditions, resources conducive to intellectual development, and

political stability. In the face of Chinese with such outstanding capacities, and in the context of the mounting Cold War refugee crisis and intensifying competition for highly valued knowledge workers, changing the priorities and practice of U.S. immigration controls to privilege individual merit rather than race and national origin presented compelling imperatives.⁵ The product of these shifting considerations, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, facilitated the transformation of Asian Americans into model minority groups by prioritizing employment and educational criteria over race and national origin in potential immigrants. *The Good Immigrants* traces the longer history of such selective processes to the exemption for students articulated in the 1882 law restricting Chinese entry by race, a differentiation that laid the ideological and legal foundations for the role of Chinese students and refugees in enabling this dramatic turn in American immigration strategies, racial ideologies, and foreign relations, as immigration controls turned from emphasizing restriction to selection, with the aim of enhancing America's international political and economic agendas.⁶

Considering immigration as both a restrictive *and* a selective process makes several major interventions. At a basic level it integrates students and intellectuals into standardized narratives of excluded, largely working-class Asian immigrants, thereby providing the connections between the dominant, early twentieth-century trope of Asians as a yellow peril to the late twentieth-century positioning of them as model minorities.⁷ Furthermore, it alleviates the scholarly neglect of the Cold War era by tracing how the international alliances and enmities of World War II and the Cold War improved acceptance for certain kinds of Asian immigrants and conditions for their permanent resettlement in ways that foreshadow the transformations more usually associated with the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. Although some monographs have addressed social and cultural history dimensions of race and foreign relations during the Cold War, none so far has addressed how international politics and fiscal considerations contributed to significant shifts in immigration laws, practices, and ideologies that in turn transformed the demographics, attributes, and trajectories of Asian American communities and U.S. immigration policies more broadly.⁸

The Good Immigrants contributes to discussions concerning the relationships among foreign policy, the naturalization of neoliberal principles, American immigration laws, and domestic ideologies of racial difference and inequality. Celebratory narratives emphasizing the successes of Asian "model minorities" have obscured how selection processes serve economic purposes by screening immigrants for educational attainment and economic potential, thereby eliding domestic limits on access to opportunities and systems enabling upward mobility and success for those without such advantages. Cold War politics laid the groundwork for transformations associated with the Civil Rights era in repositioning Asians, here particularly

Chinese, as capable of, and even ideally suited to, participating in American democracy and capitalism. Attributed with exemplary economic, social, and political traits, educated and readily employable Chinese, and other Asians, gained preferential access to “front-gate” immigration as permanent residents eligible for citizenship, in the framing of Aristide Zolberg. In contrast, “back-door” immigrants such as refugees and unsanctioned migrant laborers face greater, sometimes insurmountable, barriers to naturalization.⁹ To these I would add the “side door” through which migrants such as students, paroled refugees, and now H-1B workers legally enter through less scrutinized temporary statuses yet routinely gain permanent status leading to citizenship. Between 1948 and 1965, such side doors enabled thousands of Chinese screened for educational and employment credentials to resettle in numbers far exceeding quota allocations as part of campaigns for general immigration reform. The H-1B visa side-door system, which primarily admits Asian workers in the high-tech sector, exemplifies twenty-first-century priorities in immigration selection that demonstrate how this metamorphosis has become naturalized, thereby rendering invisible how our systems of border controls continue to designate certain racial and ethnic groups for success while severely penalizing others.

Legacies of Exclusion

Asian Americans have featured most prominently in U.S. history in the Gold Rush period, as workers on the transcontinental railroad, and as the innocent victims of incarceration during World War II. After the shocking attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were categorically treated as “enemy aliens” who were liable to engage in sabotage or espionage if allowed to remain within one hundred miles of the West Coast. “Military necessity” justified removing about 120,000 Japanese Americans, a majority of whom were American-born citizens, from their homes to isolated, hastily erected, “relocation camps” in the interior. Although no evidence of espionage or treason ever came to light, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of such mass civil rights violations in cases such as *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943) and *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), decisions that were not vacated until the 1980s.¹⁰ That the executive branch enacted such mass incarceration against targets defined by race as bound to enemy national origins, a move sanctioned by the highest reaches of the judicial branch, illustrates the pernicious prejudice with which ethnic Asians have been viewed as essentially foreign, inassimilable, and therefore probable threats to national security if allowed to enter and remain in the United States.

The impossibility of Asians becoming U.S. citizens was established early in America’s history. As noted earlier, Asians had been excluded from