

**BOOK PROPOSAL**

**EXCLUDED AMERICANS**

Untold Stories of American-Born Chinese  
in the Exclusion Era (1882–1968)

by



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## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

*Excluded Americans* tells the story—through personal stories collected from more than 90 interviewees combined with historical research—of a previously unknown generation of people who profoundly and permanently influenced the face of America: ethnic Chinese born in the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to Chinese immigrant parents. The subjects of the book are not Chinese Americans—they are, more accurately, *American-born Chinese* (ABCs).

From time immemorial, the communal histories of people have passed from one generation to another by means of oral stories. Sustaining history through raconteurs yields a picture quite different from official or culturally mandated histories, related by historians of the racial and cultural majority. The histories of many ethnic and cultural groups in America have only become known since the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1976. The story of the “Silent Generation” of *American-born Chinese* remains missing from the fabric of American history.

Born between 1900 and 1925—during the era of legalized discrimination created by the anti-Chinese Exclusion Acts—they were fewer than 5,000 among 100 million Americans. Most lived on the West Coast, primarily in and near San Francisco. Rejected by white society and looked down upon by their parents born in China, they created their own unique culture in order to establish a new identity as both Chinese and American. They established a solid beachhead against discrimination and persisted through the

xenophobic 1920s and the Great Depression, until the changing social environments of World War II and the Civil Rights movement created opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities.

They are called the Silent Generation because historians did not take note of them until after the end of the Chinese Exclusion Era in 1968. Prior to that the Chinese in the United States were always considered to be immigrants no matter where they were born—historians had no concept of Chinese as Americans.

They have also been silent because their story has never been told before. Excluded from citizenship by law and from participation in mainstream American society by discrimination, and forced by zoning laws to live in isolated enclaves—the Chinatowns of San Francisco, New York, Boston, and elsewhere—American-born Chinese had no voice.

Now, for the first time, public historian [REDACTED], himself the son of Silent Generation parents, offers a detailed personal and historical account of this generation drawn directly from interviews and primary sources, as well as his own rich personal memories of growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1930s and 40s.

*Excluded Americans* is part history book and part narrative, combining meticulously researched information about the Exclusion Era with personal stories told to the author by members of the Silent Generation, historians, and Silent Generation colleagues. The result is a highly informative, highly readable book that will engage a broad spectrum of readers.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK**

The most intriguing question about Chinese Americans is how they were able to make such phenomenal progress from their modest beginnings in America, against all odds. This is the remarkable and instructive story that is revealed in *Excluded Americans*.

The first Chinese Americans were uneducated sojourners who came to California during the Gold Rush to seek their fortune in the gold fields. Driven out by angry white American miners who considered the heathen Chinese unworthy of sharing in America's wealth, the Chinese sought work unwanted by whites. Their willingness to endure extreme physical hardship drove the building of the Transcontinental Railroad through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Considering how visible Chinese Americans are in all walks of American life today, and the extent to which their culture has permeated American life, you may be surprised to learn that they constitute just 1.2% of the U.S. population, numbering 3.6 million in 2006. By contrast, Hispanic Americans number 44 million and African Americans 41 million—together 23 times the Chinese Americans.

Chinese Americans have contributed to the history, development, and culture of the United States in far greater magnitude than might be expected from their tiny numbers. Those contributions to American progress were made during the *Exclusion Era*. In 1882 Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act suspending immigration from China. It was to have been a ten-year ban, but in one form or another it remained in force until 1968, imposing limitations on the growth and progress of the Chinese community. But the Chinese were determined to secure their full place in American society and they were prepared to overcome all hurdles to achieve that goal.

Today Chinese Americans outpace all other ethnic and racial groups in the number of leading figures in medicine, science, and technology. To name but three whose work has impacted the entire globe:

- Dr. David Ho, pioneering AIDS researcher and *Time Magazine*'s 1996 Man of the Year.
- Dr. Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy and Nobel Prize winner, a leader in the push to combat global warming by developing alternative energy.
- Jerry Yang, cofounder of Yahoo and the 316<sup>th</sup> richest person in the world in 2006.

In nominating former Governor of Washington Gary Locke, an American-born Chinese, as his Secretary of Commerce, President Obama told a simple life story that is the story of millions of Chinese Americans, including many of [REDACTED]'s interviewees:

More than 100 years ago, Gary's grandfather left China on a steamship bound for America. He had no family here. He spoke no English. He found work as a servant, and purpose in a dream. He raised a son—Gary's father—who would go on to fight in World War II, return home and open a grocery store, and later raise a family of his own.

Gary didn't learn English until he was five, but he earned the rank of Eagle Scout, worked his way through Yale University with the help of scholarships and student loans, and got a law degree. He returned to Washington state and served as a prosecutor, a state representative, chief executive of one of the most populous counties in the United States, and finally as governor—in the State Capitol building not one mile from the home where his grandfather worked as a servant all those years ago.

How is it possible that Chinese Americans could have progressed from uneducated laborers in the gold mines and on the Transcontinental Railroad, excluded from virtually all facets of mainstream America, to positions of prominence, wealth, and power? Between the first Chinese immigrants to the United States and the present-day superstars of science, music, politics, and business is the Silent Generation. The progress of Chinese Americans can only be understood by grasping how that generation overcame

huge challenges, defeating one after another the obstacles that stood in the way of their full participation in American society, including, most significantly, laws passed by the U.S. government to deepen their exclusion.

That generation built upon the foundation of social enclaves (Chinatowns) laid by the early laborers to establish themselves solidly in this country, and then expanded well beyond those limiting walls to create a new culture, a Chinese American way of life incorporating features of Chinese and American societies. It is their years of striving against a hostile surrounding society, through decades of discrimination and hardship, that paved the way for the success of today's Chinese Americans, and in fact of all Asian Americans. In the end, *Excluded Americans* is an uplifting story of victory.

### **WHY READERS WILL BUY THIS BOOK**

Public historian [REDACTED]'s *Excluded Americans* is a long-overdue account of the lives of the Silent Generation. 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese Americans will find here their own untold history in the personal stories of life in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America known only to their parents and grandparents, and in an in-depth exposure of the social, political, and economic forces that sought to restrict the freedoms and advancement of Chinese Americans once their usefulness as hard laborers expired. This book is sure to be of interest to the 13.5 million Asian Americans, and to all those who have an interest in U.S. history and politics, ethnic studies, and race relations. More broadly, anyone whose ancestors came to this country from abroad with no English and practically empty pockets will identify with the Chinese American experience.

## UNIQUE FEATURES & BENEFITS OF THE BOOK

- The book is built around a framework of themes illustrated by personal stories, rather than mere academic analysis of historical events.
- Readers will access the true story of American-born Chinese directly through oral histories, the author's expertise and personal experience, and many photographs, maps, and other documents of the era.
- Transcripts of interviews conducted by [REDACTED] relate stories that until now have never been told to non-Chinese, nor even to the children of ABCs, often out of a sense of shame. As one interviewee told the author, "We thought we weren't good enough to be Americans." The children of ABCs will read the story of their parents and grandparents for the first time, and will understand how their current-day opportunities came to be.
- [REDACTED], born in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1937, heard these stories throughout his childhood and adolescence, from his parents and their friends. He shares his intimate and rich knowledge of Chinese American life, combined with his academic knowledge as a public historian.
- The book shows how Chinese Americans first created fully self-sufficient communities for their survival, and then stood ready to take advantage of changing social conditions and new opportunities that arose in the new post-WWII society.
- The stories in the book elucidate the social forces that have impacted all people of color, women, and those who did not belong to the dominant White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture in this country. Its lessons go well beyond Chinese Americans.
- The story of the Silent Generation adds new and important information to our American story, creating a more complete and stronger heritage for all Americans.



## **WHY PUBLISH THIS BOOK NOW?**

With the election of Barack Obama as our first African American president, now is the perfect time to publish the untold story of one of our major ethnic groups.

We have been working to realize the promise of the Declaration of Independence for 250 years. Finally Obama's election signals that we have turned a great corner and entered into a new age marked by respect for human rights and a search for honesty and disclosure at all levels of society and government.

Obama's domestic and foreign policies center around dialog as the tool of choice for uniting diverse communities at home and abroad. In a speech delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, the president addressed race relations in our country:

I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

Never before has our country been so open to understanding our differences, making this the ideal moment to publish *Excluded Americans*. Today more than ever all Americans need to understand our complete historical roots in order to know who we are as a nation today. Only with that understanding can we develop a new and reasoned vision for our place in the world, one that is based in deep respect for all cultures and in inclusion rather than exclusion.

Like many other important events in our nation's history— Thomas Jefferson's slaves and his black descendants; the genocide of Native Americans; the role of women

in history; the internment of Japanese during World War II—the story of the Silent Generation and the legalized discrimination against them has been systematically hidden from public view by historians. The movement toward greater honesty in accounts of our history, toward full disclosure of those events that mark us as a people striving imperfectly toward human rights, has been underway since the 1970s. Americans are now demanding to know the full truth about our past—the previously hidden social conditions, attitudes, laws, and government policies that served the cause of oppression—so that we can understand the lessons of history. Readers are especially open now to learning the stories of forgotten peoples. *Excluded Americans* falls solidly in both the new era of dialogue and human rights, and the new era of truth in our history books.

The Silent Generation played a key role in opening up our society to all people. In this new era, [REDACTED]'s *Excluded Americans* will play a role in the constructive dialogue among our nation's diverse peoples to heal, join forces, and move forward with our new president. This book fills a very large gap in our history. It is time to include the Silent Generation of American-born Chinese in the story of our nation.