Ticket

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Writing 101: *Asian American Narratives*
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"American Studies" was the required literature course for juniors at my high school. I vividly remember reading and discussing at length the nuances of racial politics throughout the Revolutionary War and the subsequent two and a half centuries through our readings, but specifically only within the scope of white, black, and Native American race relations. It was a wonderful, in-depth, and thoughtful class, but not once was there any mention of Asian American history within the curriculum.

Senior year, I registered for a course called "Asian Studies" to fill the last open literature class slot in my schedule. In this class, I read excerpts from Confucius' Analects, wrote about Buddhism and Hinduism, painted traditional brush paintings for my final project – but again, in a class about Ancient Asian civilizations that existed far before the formation of the United States, I learned nothing about Asian American history. It seemed, then, that there was no space for this subject in any of the curricula at my high school. It felt like an arbitrary binary to me – I could be taught about either Asia or America, but nothing in between.

When I saw that Duke was offering a Writing 101 course called Asian American Narratives, I signed up immediately. The Asian America that I learned about in Dr. Thananopavarn's class was one that I had never been exposed to in any educational environment before – entire histories, stories, and cultural legacies left out from all my schooling thus far. We read newspaper articles, diary entries, and memoirs exploring different aspects of Asian American history previously unknown to me. This was concerning to realize, to put it lightly – equally concerning was the fact that the things I was learning were directly applicable to me, and that being so blindsided to my own history has left me blind to the historical context and key influencing factors of my current position as an Asian American living in the U.S. in the 21st century.

Our final project for the class, entitled "History through Narrative," charged us to produce our own narrative about an aspect of Asian American history after reading and learning about so many examples in class. We were told to be intentional when choosing what narrative to explore – to consider whether or not the histories we were exploring were seldom acknowledged, and what we can learn from knowing these histories exist. I thought this apt, considering the impact the class had had on my conceptualization of my own Asian American identity after learning the histories behind it.

To those ends, I chose to do my final project on the history of Chinese laundries; we hadn't had a chance to cover them in class and as a Chinese American myself, I thought it important to know more about the history of my own community. Inspired by the symbolically rich imagery in Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do and the raw depictions of emotion and dialogue in Mira Jacob's Good Talk (both are graphic novels and were class readings!), I decided to create a graphic novel to tell the story of Carl Fong, the son of two Chinese laundry business owners in the mid-twentieth century (drawing has always come easier to me than writing has, anyway).

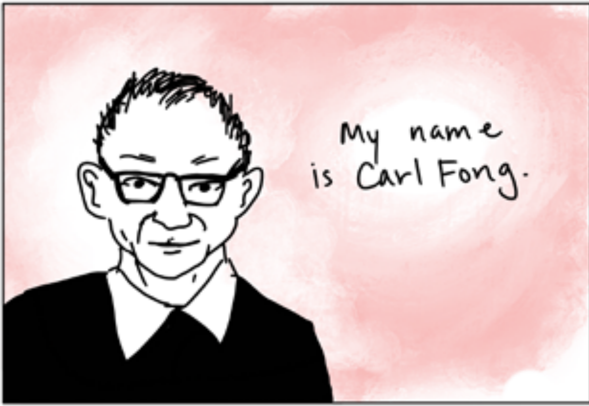
Quick interjection to say that the next part of this bio will probably only make sense after reading the graphic novel and artist's statement!

My decision to tell this story in a graphic novel format and to use paper as a main motif is self-referential. The red and pink of the metaphorical 'paper' of the novel itself continues to follow the theme of papers allowing upward social mobility, even outside of Carl Fong's story. This coloring is instead intended to acknowledge my ability to tell such a story by being able to learn from resources during the present day about the cultural and historical legacy of my own marginalized community, as well as highlight the parallels between the lives of two different people, both children of Chinese immigrants – Carl Fong and myself.

When making Ticket, I drew from my Asian American Narratives class readings, read books and articles from Duke libraries, and used drawing software available through a free Duke student subscription. Even when only considering the scope of this one class project, juxtaposing my own position as a Chinese American living in the U.S. with the actual histories and oral narratives of Chinese immigrants a century ago made it difficult not to become hyperaware of the immense privilege that I as the author had while making Ticket. This was something that stayed in my mind during the reading, writing, and drawing processes. While recognizing the themes of upward mobility in Carl Fong's story, I started to draw parallels to the same themes in my own life, and thought it only appropriate that I incorporate this thought into my art through the red pages.

I want to thank Dr. T for introducing me to these histories through thoughtful and intentional discussions, and for making the class such an enjoyable one! Thank you so much!! I also would like to thank the Deliberations board, and Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch especially, for their thoughtful comments and their dedication to helping me during the editing process. Last but not least – thank you to my parents for their continued support of my interest in learning about Asian American history and culture along with their enthusiasm for my art and writing, to Jenny Green for her very thorough spell-check, and to Nichole Zhang for her many helpful comments (and unhelpful jokes) as well.

TICKET



We started driving when darkness set in. We planned out our route to 20-30 laundries at night to pick up clothes and started around 7-8 pm.

We eventually moved to Charlestown, MA.

Charlestown wasn't kind to the Chinese.

They'd always pick on me.

I would miss a lot of school because of the odd hours.

My mother, though, had other ideas...

YOU MUST GO TO SCHOOL

...she always stressed the importance of my education.

She wanted the best for her 6 sons...

... even in the midst of buckets of toxic soap and lye.

LYE

I appreciate the laundry business... I think it builds you up.

I was sad to see the laundries go...

But I understand some laundries sent their kids to college.

They scrimped and saved and did without

and saved up to pay tuition

and their children became success stories coming out of laundry.

I eventually went to Boston Tech for electrical engineering.

Boston Tech

When I graduated, I think my parents enjoyed seeing me get my diploma even more than I did.

2 Northeastern BU Service

3 BU Finance Vegas

4 Brighton High Mechanics

5 Restaurant

6 Northeastern Stanford Business

Artist's Statement

In the late 19th century, gold was discovered in California, and thousands of Chinese immigrants left their homes to seek fortune abroad. They called the United States *Gum Saan,* which means "Golden Mountain," and a new era of Chinese immigration to the U.S. began. Erika Lee, award-winning historian and author of the book *The Making of Asian America,* writes about this wave of Chinese immigration which culminated with over 63,000 Chinese people living in the U.S. by 1870 (Lee 59). The reality of the politics of race and immigration in the U.S., however, stood in stark contrast to the rumored mountain of gold. In his book *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain,* psychology professor John Jung writes that the massive influx of Chinese immigrants created a ready source of cheap labor to replace the recently freed slaves in the South, as their labor was deemed inferior to that of white workers (Jung 14). Even so, capitalists sought the cheaper Chinese labor as a means of breaking white worker strikes, leading to growing resentment among white laborers (Jung 16-18). Anti-Chinese sentiment spread as leaders of the anti-Chinese movement placed the blame for the current job scarcity on the large influx of Chinese laborers, who had been building the transcontinental railroad and taking on other labor-intensive jobs (Lee 91). A series of exclusionary laws were enacted throughout the 1870s, barring the Chinese laborers from working in mining, logging, fishing, farming, or any other work they sought after the railroad had been completed. Trapped by legislation and given little other choice, the Chinese turned to laundry businesses – which had less competition from white laborers – to keep themselves afloat in the midst of such a discriminatory workforce (Jung 17). In short, writer and activist Wong Chin Foo explains, the Chinese turned to laundry not because it was any sort of traditional occupation, but "simply because there is no other occupation by which they can make money as surely and quickly" (qtd. in Lee 75-76).

Yee Sing Chinese Laundry (1938) From the Ritzman Photo Collection, digitized by Northern Illinois University in collaboration with the Joiner History Room (Sycamore Public Library). Also available via the NIU Digital Library.

The graphic novel *Ticket* tells the story of Carl Fong, the son of two such Chinese laundry business owners in the 1940s and 1950s, and draws directly from the 2012 interview with Fong and the Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project (Institute for Asian American Studies). The stories discussed in Fong's interview depict the overarching themes of his self-made prosperity and optimism, as he cites his family's laundry business (named "Fong Wet Wash") as one of the main reasons for his family's upward social mobility. In fact, his interview concludes with updates on where he and his brothers were at the time of the interview; many of them had gone on to attend prestigious universities and start non-labor jobs, opportunities that Fong credited to the family's laundry business. John Jung similarly rationalizes the "lives of drudgery" that Chinese laundry owners endured, calling the laundry business "not an end in itself," but rather a means of both survival and opportunity for themselves and their families (Jung 222). In both Carl Fong's oral narrative and John Jung's analysis, laundry itself was simply a means of obtaining a better life and small slice of the proverbial Golden Mountain. Jung introduces this point in his title -- *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain* -- and continues to emphasize the importance of the tickets mentioned, a motif that is revisited throughout the graphic novel also named Ticket:

> The laundry *ticket* became an emblem of the Chinese hand laundry. Although a laundry ticket is nothing more than a small piece of paper that serves as a

claim check linking each customer with his laundry items, it came to be used to ridicule Chinese as in the well-known mocking expression, "no tickee, no washee." ...A completely different meaning of ticket, a means of gaining admission beyond a barrier, is the sense that is intended by its inclusion in the title of this book. The laundry was the best, and at one time, the only, "ticket" available to Chinese immigrants to rise from their low position in society (Jung *xii - xiii)*.

Ticket has extended this meaning toward a general theme of papers facilitating access to upward mobility in Carl Fong's story. Within the graphic novel, this theme is illustrated with the color red with the intention to draw the reader's attention toward it because it stands out from the black and white, but also because the color red traditionally symbolizes happiness and fortune in Chinese culture. In applying meaning from traditional Chinese symbolism to the various red-highlighted papers in Fong's story, *Ticket* hopes to further emphasize Carl Fong and John Jung's points and push the reader to realize the ubiquity of these themes within the Chinese immigrant story. In particular, it hopes to challenge the reader to realize that this yearning for admission and desire for upward mobility is present in multiple aspects of Fong's life outside of just the laundry business. The fake papers Fong's father buys to gain physical access into the U.S., the symbolic power of the laundry tickets Fong takes from customers allowing his family to run a business, and the graduation diploma that he finally receives when he completes his education are all examples of this desire, and are all emphasized with the color red. Each of these papers acts as a form of admission into upward mobility for Fong's family, culminating at the end of the story with him and his brothers going to university.

In order to fully understand the themes of Fong's story illustrated within *Ticket,* it is necessary to first contextualize the history of Chinese laundry businesses in the mid-20th century – specifically, to understand the social, political, and legislative factors that forced Chinese immigrants to turn to laundry work in the first place. A long list of exclusionary laws pertaining to immigration had been passed in the U.S. during the previous century, eventually culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: the first and only piece of legislation to exclude a group of people from immigration based entirely on race (Lee 90). This act banned Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. for 10 years, and required that non-laborers present certification from the Chinese government if they wanted to immigrate (Chinese Exclusion Act). New laws in 1892 and 1902 renewed this exclusion law, and it was passed permanently in 1904. Laws like these made it extremely difficult for Chinese laborers to enter the country, which led to the widespread use of the "paper sons" method, in which Chinese immigrants would falsely claim membership of a group that wasn't barred from entering the US -- usually as exempted merchants or family members. They could buy papers and a fake identity, pretending to be a business partner or false child of a merchant already legally in the U.S., hence the name "paper sons" (Lee 95). Despite its illegality, this way of entering the U.S. was a widespread, multinational business; in fact, around 90-95 percent of all Chinese immigrants entering the country are estimated to have used this method (Lee 95). However, even though this practice emerged as a means of skirting past restrictive immigration laws, up to a fourth of all new arrivals were still rejected from entering the U.S. in the early 20th century, illustrating the severity with which these exclusionary laws were implemented (Lew-Williams 209).

It was during this time that Carl Fong's father arrived in America. Fong's father,

like many others, relied on fabricated papers to get into the country because he was classified as a laborer. After successfully entering the country by buying the fake papers under the name "Chin," he was able to bring his wife over as well. Though not mentioned in Carl Fong's interview, Fong's father and other paper sons would have had to undergo extensive testing at Angel Island and obtain witness affidavits swearing their non-laborer status in order to successfully enter the U.S. Witnesses had to be white and affirm in their affidavits that they were non-Chinese (Jung 37). Testing consisted of arduous and mentally taxing interrogations that could last for weeks, and Chinese immigrants were asked about thousands of niche details about their family history in order to prove their legitimacy to the U.S. government. Any interrogation answers during the interrogations that were inconsistent across family members were grounds for deportation (United States Immigration Station). Carl Fong's father's fabricated papers, then, were truly the only way he could gain admission into the U.S., hence, their metaphorical significance as a 'ticket' to a better life within the story.

As difficult as it was to enter the country, workforce discrimination within the U.S. wasn't any better: a host of very clearly racist ordinances targeting Chinese laundries was passed by a public who increasingly feared the expanding presence of the Chinese in the U.S. In 1870, an ordinance in San Francisco banned carrying laundry with a pole, a method commonplace to Chinese laundries; another ordinance decreed that laundries could not be run in wooden buildings because of the higher fire hazard, even though only Chinese laundries were run in wooden buildings (Jung 76-77). Additional laws that required the Chinese laundry owners to pay unfair fees, limit hours of operation, and move to different living areas were passed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, further restricting Chinese laundry businesses.

After obtaining entry into the U.S., Fong's parents opened Fong Wet Wash, a Chinese laundry located at the intersection of Main and Bunker Hill Streets in Charlestown, Massachusetts. While Fong does not mention any of the specific legislation affecting his family in particular, anti-Chinese sentiments of the time were clearly still present in Charlestown, as Fong had several run-ins with the local gangs while working odd hours for his family business. Violence toward the Chinese families, especially laundry business owners, was common during that time: accounts of robberies, harassment, and vandalism of Chinese laundries were especially prevalent (Jung 92-96). In Fong's interview, he states, "I remember they always had gang [rivalries] between Charlestown and Everett and Somerville and they would always pick on me until it came time to recruit another fighter… Being Chinese living in Charlestown... I tell that to my golfing buddies now and they say, 'you lived in Charlestown?!!'" (Institute for Asian American Studies)

While laundry provided a ready form of livelihood and subsequent upward financial mobility for Chinese families, highlighted by the red coloring of the laundry tickets in the graphic novel – it is clear that the social and legislative factors at the time made it very difficult for them. The laundry tickets are spoken about by Fong and Jung as if they are tickets to success and fortune; however, the reality is that they were tickets to so-called success and fortune in a society that actively institutionalized racism and discrimination so deeply against Chinese immigrants, within an industry that was forced upon them. Fong ends his story on a cheerful note, touting the opportunities laundry created for him and his brothers, but it is important to note that his family's means of social mobility still largely exists within a hegemonic system, with the overwhelming power still white. The papers his father had to buy

were necessary due to white laborers' pressure to push for anti-Chinese exclusionary laws. The witnesses and the affidavits that allowed Chinese immigrants to enter the country had to not only be white, but also swear that they were not Chinese. Fong Wet Wash was able to exist because the laundry business had less white competition. Even Fong's diploma (giving him an American education) comes from an American school, which was the only way for him to climb the socioeconomic ladder in a white-dominated society. Laundry was a ticket to upward mobility, yes, but only because it was a ticket given by those already in power. This idea is particularly illustrated on page 3, with the white customer positioned above Fong, handing him a laundry ticket and essentially providing the consumption necessary for Fong's socioeconomic stability. It is also reiterated throughout the graphic novel with the red-pinkish haze that surrounds the people and events in the story, aiming to again emphasize that Fong's entire American Dream-esque life was derived from a society that left Chinese immigrants with little choice. The ubiquity of the red in the papers and the haze is included not only to visually illustrate the yearning for acceptance and admission in all aspects of Fong's life as mentioned previously, but also to reveal the many barriers to admission that originally entreated this yearning. Chinese laundries will forever remain an integral part of the Chinese immigrant story: a ticket to socioeconomic success in America as well as a reminder of the discrimination and hardships that Chinese immigrants were forced to endure to achieve success.

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