PODCAST

Ep. 22: Michael Luo on the Chinese-American Story

The New Yorker writer discusses his new history of the Chinese in America, and immigrant identity from the Chinese Exclusion Act to Donald Trump.

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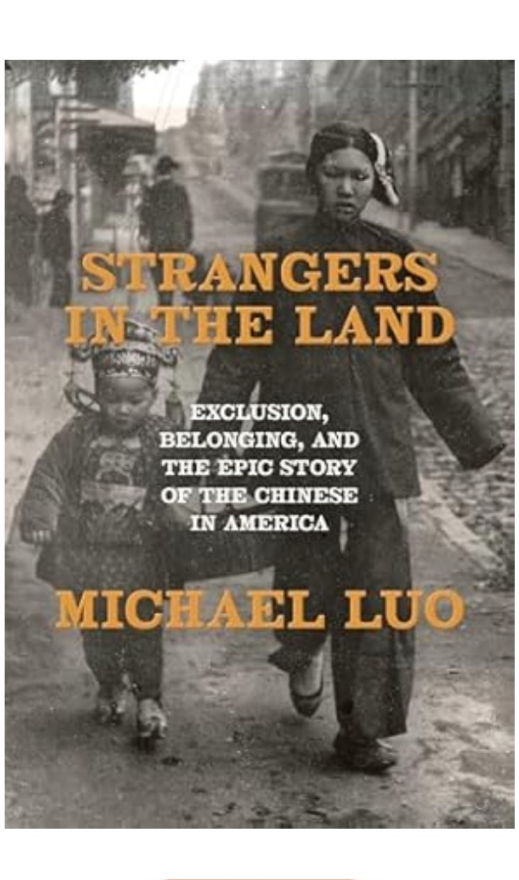
HISTORY

This is an episode of the China Books Podcast, from China Books Review. Follow us to listen to the pod on your favorite platform, including Apple Podcasts and Spotify, where a new episode lands on the first Tuesday of every month. Or listen to this episode right here, where we also post the transcript.



Buy the book

The story of the Chinese in America began, by one telling, with the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Many of us are familiar with this story: the influx of Chinese laborers who came to mine gold, and to help build the transcontinental railroad, while also trying to build new lives in a country that didn't always welcome them — and that eventually barred them from entry with the Chinese Exclusion of Act of 1882, which was only truly lifted as late as 1965.

Our guest this month is Michael Luo, an executive editor at *The New Yorker* and author of the new book *Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America* (Doubleday, April 2025). The book puts flesh on the bones of this history, combining assiduous research with compelling prose to complicate our understanding of Chinese migration to America over the last century and a half, and to detail the horrific prejudice and persecution that they endured — and maybe still do today, in different ways.

We were delighted to be joined by Michael at Asia Society's studio in New York, to talk about the book, this history, and wider narratives of belonging and identity around the topic:

> Our exclusionary past can help explain our exclusionary present. … This was the first time in our country's history that we restricted immigration on the basis of race.
>
> — *Michael Luo*

Guest

Michael Luo is an executive editor at *The New Yorker* and writes regularly for the magazine on politics, religion and Asian American issues. Before joining *The New Yorker*, he spent 13 years at *The New York Times* as a metro reporter and national correspondent. He is a recipient of a George Polk Award and a Livingston Award for Young Journalists. Luo is the author of *Strangers in the Land* (2025).

Video

Transcript

ALEC ASH: Michael, welcome back to the Upper East Side of New York where, unfortunately, the idea for this book began, as you write in your introduction, when in 2016, a stranger shouted, "Go back to China," to you and your family on the street. It's a common experience, I gather from many friends who've had the same thing happen to them. Of course, you were born in the U.S., your parents migrated here from Taiwan in the 1960s. So tell us why this wider story of migration and belonging felt to you like one that you wanted to tell at this particular moment in America?

MICHAEL LUO: It did happen, this inciting incident, a block from here.

Oh, did it?

It's like literally a block over that way, on Lexington. We're on Park Avenue here.

We hope it's not representative of the neighborhood.

So, yeah. So that moment, you know, for folks who don't know, it was October 2016. Trump was a couple of weeks from being elected. We didn't, I didn't expect it. The world probably didn't expect it but you felt this kind of curtain of nativism, I think, descending on the country. And that moment, it really did shake me. It was a Sunday after church and this group of friends and my family were on the sidewalk blocking the way. This woman brushed past us and muttered, "Go back to China." And I abandoned my daughter in the stroller and I kind of went after her and kind of got in her face a little bit and was essentially like, "Are you serious? Like did you really just say that?" And she screams at me down the block, "Go back to your effing country." And I was trying to come up with something smart to say back, and I said, "I was born in this country." And I ended up tweeting about it. I used this hashtag because I was trying to kind of convey, this is 2016, the year 2016, we're still doing this. And I wrote this open letter to her from *The New York Times* where I worked at that point, just kind of writing about this feeling of otherness that is a common theme in the Asian American experience. And this feeling of kind of sadness really in me that I felt as I was walking away that day of just wondering if my two kids who are two generations removed from my parents' immigrant experience would ever feel like they truly belonged in this country.

That moment led to, I jokingly say that for like a few weeks, I was the face of Asian America because it became a huge deal. Like the Times published that letter on the front page of the newspaper. We asked people to send in videos of their own experiences, and that video itself went viral. And I was on MSNBC and doing panels and what I realized though is actually I was just a regular guy, you know: reasonably educated, reasonably conscious of my Asian American identity. But I actually didn't know a lot of the context and history that define the Chinese American experience, that defined the Asian American experience. And so it was in my head that I needed to be better equipped. That I needed to be, I needed to know more about this. I went to *The New Yorker* and I had a busy job and the pandemic happens and we experienced that surge in violence against Asian Americans.

And it was after the Atlanta Spa attacks, when several Korean women were killed by a white man, and, so many Asian Americans were feeling this otherness, this sense of not belonging, this sense of being vulnerable. And I wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* that drew on some of this history that drew in a couple of books that are worth shouting out. Jean Pfaelzer wrote this book called Driven Out. Beth Lew-Williams wrote this book called The Chinese Must Go. Iris Chang wrote this book, The Chinese in America. That piece wrote about this history of anti-Asian violence and how our exclusionary past can help explain our exclusionary present.

And the thing that I drew from that book, from that piece, that essay, I wrote a lot about this period called the Driving Out in 1885 and 1886, which was after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. when dozens of communities, nearly 200 communities in the American West, tried to drive out the Chinese from their communities. This was this history, it was essentially an American-style pogrom that I didn't even know about, and it forms the emotional heart of my book.

And you're trying to connect those two dots from the 1880s to being shouted at on the Upper East Side.

Yeah.

So let's go back 160, 170 years to the beginning. You start the book with the discovery of gold on an inland Californian river. A word about the discovery reaches Hong Kong, Southern China and Chinese come over to work and become called "coolies." Walk us through what kind of person exactly is coming over to America. What work are they doing and what are they looking for in America? And then, and then what was the initial reception that they got?

Yeah. I mean the word just kind of spread and it's fascinating to imagine the kind of game of telephone that it must have been like. There's actually this story, maybe it's a bit apocryphal — it was passed down in Chinese lore, Chinese American lore — of a merchant who had come in 1847, which would've been really early — that's why I'm not sure if this is true — who was among the legions that went into the Sierra Nevadas. And then he wrote a letter home, and then this fellow villager told others, and then he got on a boat himself.

And then what we know is that brothers wrote to brothers, fathers wrote to sons, cousins and they were told of the fortunes to be made in America. And people saw people coming back to their villages and building these elaborate homes that demonstrated their wealth. This was, it's important to point out, a voluntary migration because there is this erroneous perception that they were "coolie" laborers here on these oppressive contracts. And historians have concluded that's manifestly untrue, the vast majority came on their own.

But were they employed or were they going out to prospect themselves?

I think both because I think there were these little companies that would kind of form and in some cases they were working in larger groups. But I think a lot of it was individual in the beginning. The initial reception actually was positive. This is in the early going when the numbers were not huge at that point. There was a ceremony held by city leaders and some pastors who were interested in evangelizing the Chinese in San Francisco. And they welcomed the Chinese. And you also see stories of the Chinese participating in a parade and the Daily Alta, which is the first daily newspaper in California, wrote this kind of glowing article about these Chinese in their midst and how they would one day be voting and maybe even in the halls of Congress, but also intermixed in this, were accounts of horrific violence, just sporadic stories of violence in the minefields and a lot of times the Chinese were kind of forced to work on the margins. If there was like a plot that had been kind of picked over already and abandoned that, oftentimes, Chinese miners were the ones who were left to kind of scrabble over what was left.

And paid less than white workers.

Yeah and so you could see some of that tension then, and you can actually see this in the primary documents, in these letters that people wrote, where they would talk about individual miners would be writing home and they're like, "Oh, there are too many Chinese here now," and that kind of thing. And so really when the numbers start to grow, you start to see more and more of these ugly episodes in the minefields.

It begins with the American dream in its sort of purist, unadulterated form. But pretty quickly, we see just a string of hate crimes in pretty horrible detail. It's quite a brutal read for beatings, lynchings, massacres, mining town riots against the Chinese. Could you give us an example of what the migrants faced, a decade or two in, when violence was rising? And also tell us what is the root cause of it in your view? Is it simply racism? Is it job displacement? What cocktail is involved here?

So I'll answer the first one, maybe we could start with the broader thing, because, actually, that is a big question I came in with, which was: What was it? Was it race? Was it religion? Was it economics? Was it language differences? That kind of thing. I think you have to say that it was all of these things. Certainly economics is part of the explanation because in the 1870s was really when the anti-Chinese movement started to take off, and that was when there was this economic downturn that had blanketed the country, which really affected California. They called this period The Great Depression before the 1930s Great Depression. This was kind of the beginning of the labor movement when there were white, disaffected working men as they called them, there were thousands in San Francisco of unemployed, white working men. And, this demagogue-like figure Dennis Carney, who was this Irish demagogue, started having these rallies on the sandlot. and he would be railing against corporate power and greed and that kind of thing, and he would end his, rallies with the, the cry, "the Chinese must go." And so it was kind of rooted in economics, but it really at its heart too, was this race and prejudice and bigotry.

Even before the driving out, which is kind of the emotional horror of the book, happened, after the passage of the Exclusion Act and it was a result, I think you can, say, of white people, white residents, of these communities being frustrated that the Chinese question, the problem of Chinese immigration, was not solved by the Chinese exclusion law. They were still seeing people coming in. They were frustrated. They were seeing people, in their views, evade the law. They were upset that Chinese were using habeas corpus petitions in court when they were being detained, and judges were actually letting them go and saying that they were actually justified in their claims and they were exempt, like whether they were merchants or, in some cases they were, a growing number said they were American citizens. But even before this period, we had the 1871 Los Angeles Chinese massacre, which took place, you know, before all of this and it was the worst mass lynching in American history.

I think it was 17 Chinese men were lynched and the 18th was killed in a different way. It's a pretty incredible piece of our history that very few people know about. Most people think about lynchings and they think about the African American experience. That started a little bit by accident. It was like there were these Chinese factions that were fighting and there was a white man who was accidentally … bullets rang out. A police officer came, somebody else came to the scene to help, and he ended up being shot. And then the word spread that he had died. And, he was like this popular rancher-merchant, in town. And, it seemed like this mob just kind of descended on the Chinese quarter. It's hard to explain what happens in a mob action like that. And there were other more isolated incidents that seem to be… I mean, Richard Hofstader, the historian, writes about how violence is actually complicated and difficult for historians to deal with because it can be of a very proximate cause, an insult, a wrong word or things like that, but then how do you explain these larger cycles?

It has a momentum of its own.

Yeah.

Was this happening just on the West Coast or was it spreading inland into the East coast as well?

The violence that I'm talking about in the 1870s and then, in the 1880s, this was a West coast phenomenon. Not just in California though, you know, we're talking in the Pacific Northwest. We're talking more inland. One of the most famous, brutal race crimes in American history took place in Rock Springs in the Wyoming territory, where 28 Chinese miners were killed and the Chinese quarter burned down. The Chinese presence on the East Coast really started to take off more around in the 1880s. And, sure it was not a completely peaceful existence either, and they had to deal with bigotry and that kind of thing. Many of them, though, came to New York to flee this violence. There's actually a newspaper story that I found where the reporter is asking people coming off the train, why are they coming? And they were coming because they were fleeing violence. They were hoping for a better life.

Right, so that's also the decade where the title of your book comes from.

The title of the book is *Strangers in the Land*, and it comes from a Supreme Court decision. It was actually 1889. It was a decision upholding one of the Chinese exclusion laws. And actually that's something that's a little, maybe for people who are interested in nerding out on history, there's actually a little dispute among historians. The law that was passed in the 1882 that banned Chinese labors from entering the country that is known today as the Chinese Exclusion Act, Beth Lew-Williams actually makes the argument that it was, she believes that it was more commonly known as the Chinese Restriction Act at that point. You can actually go in and search newspapers very easily nowadays, like newspapers.com, genealogybank.com. You can look up Chinese Restriction Act, look up Chinese Exclusion Act. I actually found a fair number of mentions of it but I think her point is correct, that actually the better way to understand Chinese exclusion is that it was not a single law, but a series of progressively more onerous laws that passed between 1882, 1884, 1892 and finally the Chinese exclusion was made permanent soon after the turn into the 20th century.

Because as you write, it was meant to be an experiment for 10 years, and then they'd see. And it just becomes a fixture slowly of its own. And then it was only properly repealed in 1965, which was a lot later. I was quite surprised when I found that.

Yeah, totally. So anyways, to answer your question about the title, the justice was upholding one of these exclusion laws. And when he was explaining the rationale for it, he was saying that the Chinese were unassimilable with the rest of America, with us. And he referred to them as "strangers in the land." And you know, sometimes when you write a book, you have a title in your head, and then by the time you get to the end of it. It's not your title. This was the title I had picked from the very beginning and it wound up as the title at the end. I really like it because what I try to say in the book is I actually think that the book is not just the story of the Chinese and America; it's the story of any number of immigrant groups who have been treated as strangers, who are currently being treated as strangers and it's the story of America and the story of our diverse democracy.

One thing actually that I haven't mentioned as we're walking through the history and the explanation is political polarization was actually a big explanation and a big driver of the passage of Chinese exclusion, of the Chinese Restriction Act. Basically in the 1870s, the Democrat and Republican parties were evenly divided. You saw some of the closest elections in American history in the 1870s, deadlocked elections, and so one the big questions that you might have or any reader might have coming in is like: How did the Republican Party, which is the party of Lincoln, which stood for liberty and equality and these ideals, you know, freeing the slaves, how did they also become just as vitriolic, just as ugly, in denigrating a people and speaking about a people as the Democrats, who, at this period, their stronghold was in the south, and they were vanquishing Reconstruction at this point. And, what was going on is like both parties were deadlocked and were looking for political advantage. This is just the way politics works and they looked to the West Coast for an advantage. In order to win California, in order to win, Washington, Nevada, you needed to court the anti-Chinese, anti-immigrant base and you needed to out-anti-Chinese. You needed to be as ugly and vitriolic as the next person.

So it was politically expedient.

Yeah, very politically expedient. And so most Republicans really kind of set aside those ideals for the sake of this political experience. The other thing that's just really interesting — Mae Ngai writes about this in her book The Chinese Question — is the way politicians turned the concept of free labor on its head, as free labor was this term that was used to justify the end of slavery and they used that to justify Chinese exclusion. And what they said, and this is where the "coolie" label, the inaccurate "coolie" label comes in, so they're basically trying to paint all Chinese as slaves, like they were all here as coolies against their will.

I was looking at the derivation of "coolie," and there's an Urdu word, *quli*, which means slave, but another one, which means hired laborer.

But it's that concept that they were trying to get at. They were trying to say, "Oh, we stand for free labor, so we actually want to exclude the Chinese because we actually want to stand up for free white labor and we won't stand for slavery in any form." It was just this twisting of a principle and an ideal and turned against a people.

And layered onto post-Civil War America.

Totally and so incredibly powerful and effective in that way.

Just for our listeners' sake, let's just properly explain the Chinese Exclusion Act. Because I think it can be seen as a monolith by people. And Chinese were still entering the country, generally reentering. So how effective were those laws and what do you see as the most long-lasting effect of that period, that shrinking of migration?

The most long-lasting effect really is: this was the first time in our country's history that we restricted immigration on the basis of race. You could say it was ethnicity because basically the language of the law was Chinese laborers specifically were banned but really what they were after was banning all Chinese. And the folks who were in charge of enforcing those laws made clear that that's what they were aiming to do. It's actually interesting because I've been reading up a little bit about it this week because we're talking about Chinese students right now, Chinese international students. And I've been thinking about that history because I'm writing a piece for *The New Yorker* about Chinese students. After Chinese exclusion, there was this group of missionaries, businessmen, diplomats who still wanted to facilitate Chinese students from coming into the country for a period of probably like 20 plus years after the passage of Chinese exclusion. Very few Chinese students came in, even though they were ostensibly legally exempt from Chinese exclusion, but because of the arbitrary, completely overzealous, heavy-handed way that Chinese exclusion was handled by the people who were guarding the ports, effectively it was impossible for Chinese students to get in.

Why were Chinese still able to come in? They found ways around the law. They were claiming merchant status. Merchants were able to come in and so there was this whole kind of physical description. They were basically inspectors of the port, where it's a little bit like today where you see these kind of stereotyping around physical characteristics. They have tattoos and so then they must be gang members or that kind of thing. They were looking for calluses and things like that, "Oh, you must be a laborer." And then they continued to try to tighten the law. There was a period too when, actually if you were in the United States before the passage of Chinese exclusion who went back and then came back or there was kind of a group of people who were outside the United States upon the passage of a Chinese exclusion and they were trying to return back into the country. They ended up passing laws to kind of tighten that and bar people from leaving and returning. And then the other method that really started to take off was claiming American citizenship. And so obviously there we were reaching a point when there were a significant number of Chinese were born in the country. But it really started to take off, actually, after the earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco that destroyed the vital records of the city and it made it easier, or actually harder, to approve your birth and citizenship.

Is that because records were lost?

Yeah, records were lost, there was a fire that destroyed most of San Francisco and destroyed the Chinese quarter. So anyways, they were looking for ways around the law and they were not afraid to exercise their rights. And so they were, like I said, filing habeas corpus petitions. If you enter the country and you said you were a merchant and they denied that you could file a habeas corpus petition and challenge that in court.

And the fascinating thing is these federal judges in San Francisco, many of them we know from their private papers, didn't like the Chinese. And so these judges in some cases worked themselves to exhaustion handling these Chinese habeas corpus cases because they took seriously their obligation and their law. It's another reminder today of how important judges are in this fight over immigration.

Right. The parallels are eerie. We're recording this the day after Trump again tries to bar entry from a dozen countries. You know, China's not among them, but same old story.

Yeah.

I just wanna go back and flesh out a sidebar on citizenship. You write about this 1896 ruling upholding the 14th Amendment for birthright citizenship, with the story of Wong Kim Ark, who was born in the U.S. and then detained on trying to get back in, which is also a parallel with Trump trying to ban birthright citizenship. So it seems that this debate around birthright was already going on a long time ago.

Yeah. As hopefully people know, the 14th Amendment, which was passed to clarify the status of formerly enslaved Black Americans, and to give them their full and equal rights, it says that if you're born in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, you are an American citizen. That's what it says in the 14th Amendment. The legal precedent that we rely upon today, everybody relies upon today, dates back to 1896 and the case of Wong Kim Ark, when his birthright citizenship was upheld by the Supreme Court.

The story of Wong Kim Ark is the Justice Department and others who were opposing the Chinese were interested in making a test case to establish this point about birthright citizenship. There was actually a lawyer, a little bit eccentric guy, a guy named George Collins, who was advancing this legal theory that Chinese who were born in the United States were not American citizens because he was zeroing in on that clause: "subject to the jurisdiction thereof." He was trying to say that Chinese whose parents are subjects of the Qing Empire were not subject to the jurisdiction thereof. So he was, focusing on that clause and trying to make the case that this exempted them from birthright citizenship. It went all the way to the Supreme Court. It's fascinating because actually again, it kind of says something about the resourcefulness of the Chinese community. The six companies, which is this kind of coalition of mutual aid associations that actually financed a lot of these court battles on behalf of the Chinese community overall, they hired lawyers, very fancy lawyers, to take this case. And it was argued from the Supreme Court. In the end, the decision is kind of fascinating because it's dense with explications of common law precedent and things like that. But the justice writing the majority opinion makes this observation that if they didn't uphold birthright citizenship millions of European Americans, descendants of Scots, Irish, English, all of these European Americans who were born in the United States, their citizenship would be lost. And that was beyond the pale. That was unacceptable. And so that was a big part of the decision.

It's funny how several of those laws were clearly designed for white people. And then when people found, "Oh, there's a loophole for non-white people to use it," the judges were like, "Oh, we didn't mean that." There's another example you give, I think it was called the War Brides Act, where after World War II, I think something like 15,000 Chinese Americans fought in the war. China was an ally, of course, and they posited this law whereby American soldiers who'd married Europeans should be able to come back and that those European brides would be American citizens … but not Chinese.

That was actually an early example of activism of the Chinese American community where they went to Congress and lobbied against it and actually managed a kind of partial victory, and allowed some of these Chinese brides — for people who have fought for the United States, were able to bring their brides over.

Hmm. So it seems that by now we're into the 20th century. The tide is turning. There's organization in the Chinese American communities. What turned the tide? Was it World War II that led to the gradual acceptance and eventually legalization of Chinese immigration?

I don't think the tide actually quite turned. It was a change in geopolitics. China was an ally of the United States in the war against Japan. While the U.S. was really focused on the war in Europe, in the beginning, China was taking the brunt of the casualties in the war against Japan, losing millions of soldiers. And it was recognized that this was not a good look. Eventually, there was some lobbying of a group of people who got together to form a committee to kind of push for this. And these were kind of Asia-philes and people who were, kind of internationalists, kind of interested in making this case. One interesting thing is they very carefully decided to not include Chinese Americans or Chinese immigrants in their lobbying effort. They thought it would be more effective if they made their case in front of Congress with a white advocate for this. So what happened was Chinese exclusion was formally lifted in 1943 but only a nominal number of Chinese were admitted, and it was something like 109 a year. And so, that is the formal lifting of Chinese exclusion. The Chinese exclusion was technically repealed during World War II.

But, as you said, it really wasn't lifted until 1965. Chinese immigrants were not placed on equal footing with other immigrant groups until 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act, which is also a bit of an accident. I think that's where I see the line from then until now. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was signed by Lyndon Johnson, overhauling the quota. The national origins quota system that governed our immigration system was a priority of John F Kennedy's, and when he died, Lyndon Johnson kind of took up the baton, passed the Civil Rights Act, and then he turned to immigration after that. The important thing to know though, is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the way it works is it prioritizes family reunification and people with special skills and abilities. The proponents of the bill made a point of saying, this isn't going to change the demographics of the country. They were basically, it was a little bit of a math mistake.

They were like, you look at America and it's a group of people. Here's a certain number of this group, certain number of this group, certain number of this group, they're all gonna bring their families. So it's roughly going to stay — the math, the numbers — are going to roughly stay the same, right? They underestimated the exponential power of family reunification. And so Asian immigrants, when they start to arrive, they start to bring a lot of their family over. And that is why Asian immigrants are the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States, and are projected to be the largest immigrant group, in a couple of decades. But it was accidental. And I think that Lyndon Johnson actually, when he signed the bill in front of the Statue of Liberty, he said, this is not a revolutionary bill.

So the door opened by accident, and then you had this great influx of Chinese immigration, which has ballooned to the levels it is now — today over 5 million Chinese Americans. Of course the more things change, the more things stay the same. It's eerie reading the book in this political period, the context of recent and breaking news in America, and just to see how Chinese Americans still face so much prejudice today, whether it's anti-Asian violence during COVID… and Chinese migration to America is freshly challenged today with Trump's proposed visa ban for Chinese students, and migration more broadly. So, clearly you didn't predict that in 2016 when you were first starting to write the book. But, tell us a little bit about the parallels you see today. The progress we've made. But also the progress we haven't.

The thing about the Asian American experiences is, I think it's important to recognize it can be multiple things at once. And when I was doing my book tour, I did a private event in San Francisco for basically Asian American founders. And so I was, I was in a room full of really successful, powerful Asian Americans. And that relates to the myth of the model minority, this idea that all Asian immigrants are successful and that traces to the fact that the immigration preference system prioritized people with special skills. My parents, my dad came, he was a PhD in engineering. My mom got a master's in accounting. But it masks the diversity of the Asian immigrant experience and the fact that no other ethnic group has greater levels of income inequality. You know, the thing that I think Asian Americans are struggling with is invisibility and, the epigraph to the book, the little line that when you open the book, comes from this novel *Interior Chinatown*, a fantastic novel which came out in 2020 by Charles Yu.

Now an HBO series.

For folks who don't know the book, the main character is a background actor in a TV police procedural about a black cop and a white cop. The show is called Black and White, and he is Generic Asian Man and his aspiration in life, his greatest aspiration is to become Kung Fu Guy, and it's a indictment on the way that race in America is often, largely, entirely viewed through the lens of black and white. And the line that is the epigraph is: "Who gets to be an American" And so this comes from this kind of imaginary courtroom scene where the main character is making his case and, he says, "Who gets to be an American, what does an American look like?" And, you know, that is actually, the question I'm driving at through the book. And then he goes on, and this isn't in the epigraph, but I love it. He says, "Why do we keep falling out of the story even though we've been here nearly 200 years?" And that's what I'm trying to do in the book, is write us into the story.

I think a lot of this history, a lot of this background is not known. And so, when we talk about the Chinese student debate, for example, I just think it's important that we have this lens of history. Because obviously the Trump administration is trying to make it about national security, ostensibly. But this suspicion and this paranoia about the Chinese and the yellow peril has been part of our history, and it shows up repeatedly. I have a piece that I'm writing for the magazine this week that actually goes back to the Communist takeover and the kind of paranoia that was happening in the 1950s when this council in Hong Kong, a guy named Drumright, he writes this report, it's an 89-page report kind of saying that the vulnerabilities in America's immigration system where there are all these people coming over who claim to be American citizens, they're not. It's a pathway for infiltration by Chinese communist agents, and it led to this crackdown and this far-reaching investigation that was just pure paranoia. They ended up arresting people. They arrested, you know, I think a few dozen people's lives were upended, but they never found this elaborate espionage operation.

So when you talk about yes, we are in this kind of global competition with a superpower over technology, over economics, over military supremacy. But the thing that I want people to be aware of is to be careful, and to think about our history. You know, history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. There's so much that in this moment when I think about my book, if you hold that in your head, I think you'll look at this current moment in a different way.

And it's also a question of people I think failing to separate out China, the nation, and Chinese Americans. Many of whom are second, third, fourth generation.

Totally. I think the Asian American Foundation just released this survey that said something like more than 40% of Americans believe that Asian Americans are more loyal to the country of their ethnicity than to the United States. And I think they said something like a quarter believe that Chinese Americans are a threat to U.S. society. And it relates to that question of who is an American.

And of course we saw this with the Japanese internment camps, but that's another story.

Totally.

So last question. Do you think that the stories of what it means to be Chinese American, Chinese and American are coming to the light more? This 150-year old history that you tell, it gets flattened so much. Where are we now and what's the future?

I'm a big reader of narrative histories. That's the section of the bookstore I go to. When I wrote this book, our kind of comp that we pitched it as – we wanted to do for Chinese immigration what Isabelle Wilkerson's book, The Warmth of Other Suns did for the Great Migration. Asian American history is American history. I will say we're still early in the life of the book. I think in general, where the discovery of books is a challenge in America, at this moment, you know, the literary culture is imperiled. I love the fact that you guys have a book review dedicated to books about China. This book was not written for a narrow audience. It was meant for the dad who loves World War II history, who loves civil rights history or, Civil War history, Revolutionary War history, buy Strangers in the Land.

Well, we're happy to spread the word for you. We hope that all the dads out there buy a copy.

And moms.

And kids! ∎