The Revolving Door to Gold Mountain: How Chinese Immigrants Got Around U.S. Exclusion and Replenished the Chinese American Labor Pool, 1900-1910

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PROSPECTUS

By what means did Chinese Americans get around the U.S. embargo on immigration as they sought to maintain viable communities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries? This paper investigates the use of centrally orchestrated immigrant "substitution" schemes. First, we use primary and published law enforcement documents (circa 1896-1902) to elucidate the mechanics of the substitution schemes. Second, we use records for 4,887 steamship person-arrivals (circa 1904-1907) to estimate the contribution of substitution schemes to the total flow of illicit Chinese migration and their impact on the age composition of Chinese American communities. Substitution schemes were crucial parts of a "revolving door" system that achieved both external compliance with the immigration embargo and replenishment of the Chinese American labor force with younger workers.

When Congress slammed the door on Chinese immigration by enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, its main intention was to neutralize Chinese Americans as a source of labor force competition for white working men in the Western states. Because over 90 percent of the Chinese already in the U.S. were male and racial intermarriage was illegal, it was also a reasonable expectation that the Chinese American population (then totaling well over 100,000) would dwindle away of its own accord. By official measures at least,

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the Exclusion Act (actually a series of laws enacted first in 1882 but extended and elaborated until their 1943 repeal) was an unqualified success. In ten years subsequent to 1882, the U.S. Commissioner General for Immigration (CGI) reported no Chinese immigrants whatsoever (CGI 1901/02: end paper) and only modest numbers of Chinese who managed to finagle entry (but not immigrant status) through Exclusion's constrictive loopholes. Census figures from 1880 and 1920 show a decline in total Chinese Americans from 105,000 to 60,000. The actual decline was probably even steeper than census figures indicate, because following the 1880 census up through the first nine months of 1882, Chinese anticipation of Exclusion triggered a surge of 50,000 entries adding an indeterminate but possibly substantial number of Chinese to the pre-Exclusion population total (Chew, Liu, and Patel 2004). In any case, cultural isolation from American society combined with apparent lack of in-migration has become the longstanding foundation of conventional historiography, which depicts Chinese Americans during the Exclusion as a closed and declining population of "aging bachelors." A new release of data refutes this scenario, however.

Contrary to conventional historiography, the long period of Exclusion (1882-1943) did not witness the emergence of an aging bachelor society. Instead, newly released census data reveal a population that, if anything, was "perpetually young" throughout the 60 years' Exclusion (Chew and Liu 2004). This is evident in comparing Chinese American age-sex pyramids from the censuses of 1880 and 1900.

At the 1880 census, the population was overwhelmingly comprised of males in the prime working ages, roughly 20 to 44 years old (Figure 1). In the absence of generational succession (no new immigrants, negligible births), the dominant left hand bulge of prime-age workers would have been expected to move up the vertical age axis, becoming a dominant bulge of "aging bachelors." Surprisingly, at the1900 census (almost two decades after the start of Exclusion), Chinese Americans were still overwhelming comprised of males in the prime working ages, though somewhat older overall (Figure 2). Through a series of population simulations, Chew and Liu (2004) show that this paradoxical of

persistence in youthful age structure can only be explained by sustained migratory exchange, with younger in-migrants systematically replacing older out-migrants. Whereas net migration for the total population must have been zero or negative, this "revolving door" pattern was made up of net gains at the younger ages and net losses at the older ages (Figure 3). But if the abstract demographic processes are now relatively plain, the literal means by which the Chinese achieved these outcomes must still be demonstrated. That is the object of this paper.

The means by which Exclusion was circumvented penetrated every facet of Chinese American life. The obstacles of long distance, steamship travel, and a determined law enforcement bureaucracy created specifically to regulate the movement of Chinese required collective and coordinated responses that shaped Chinese institutions in both the U.S. and in the sending communities of southern coastal China where nearly all Chinese immigrants originated (see for example Lau 2000, Hsu 2000). The Chinese evaded immigration restrictions by trying to exploit loopholes in the ever-changing provisions of Exclusion. Their methods of evasion included:

(1) The "paper son" ploy, involving the use of fictive kin to exploit a loophole permitting entry to immediate family members of Chinese merchants. This method is the most often cited and analyzed (see for example Lee 2003), but investigation to date has been confined to qualitative sources, with no quantitative assessments.

(2) The "Earthquake Exemption," wherein the destruction of municipal records during the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake supposedly allowed non-native Chinese Americans to claim that proof of their U.S. birth had been lost in the post-earthquake fire. This apocryphal account would only have applied to a limited cohort of Chinese, and has not been quantitatively tested.

(3) Crossing a land frontier after arrival at a Mexican port. (Canada had implemented its own Chinese exclusion.) Both Exclusion-era immigration officials and contemporary scholars assume significant volumes of border

crossing, but direct (especially statistical) evidence is understandably elusive.

(4) Subversion of "in-transit" status through a multiplicity of "substitution" schemes (Romero 2004). According to one loophole in immigration policy, many Chinese immigrants not legally entitled to reside in the United States were allowed to land at American sea ports and travel “in transit” through the United States en route to Mexico and other destinations. Somewhere en route to the ultimate destination, however, Chinese travelers whose actual intention was to remain in the U.S. were replaced by other Chinese who wished to leave the U.S. Thus arose a surreptitious shuttle system, in which equal *numbers* of migrants arrived and departed (but whose social characteristics, especially age, systematically differed).

Until now, the foregoing methods for resisting Exclusion have not been subjected to an assessment of comparative importance; their relative contributions to the total stream of illicit migration have only been speculative.

This paper takes a first step toward such an assessment. We focus specifically on the fourth and final method, manipulation of the in-transit exemption. This evasive method has only been recently identified as a distinct strategy (Romero 2004). Based on the contemporaneous testimony of immigration officials, we summarize some of its salient features. Finally, with data from steamship passenger manifests for the port of San Francisco (Chew *et al*. 2003), we address the question: was the "in-transits" loophole big enough to plausibly account for the persistent youthfulness of the Chinese American population during the first 20 years of Exclusion?

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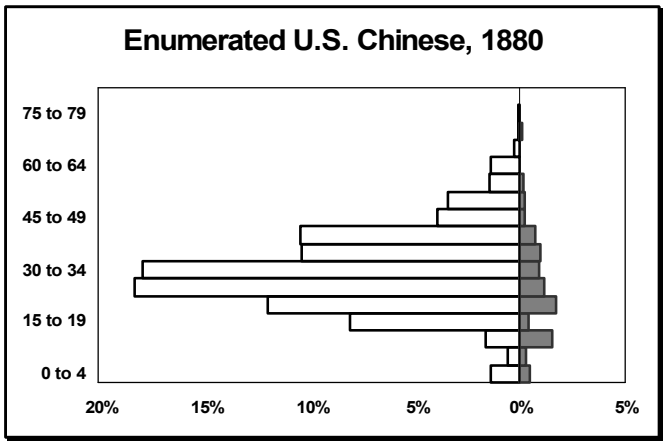

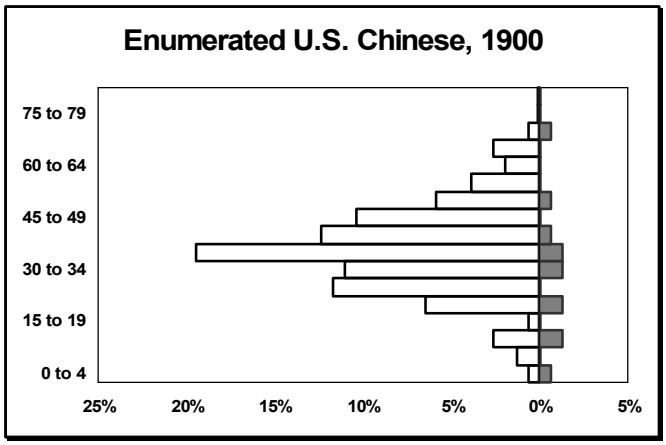

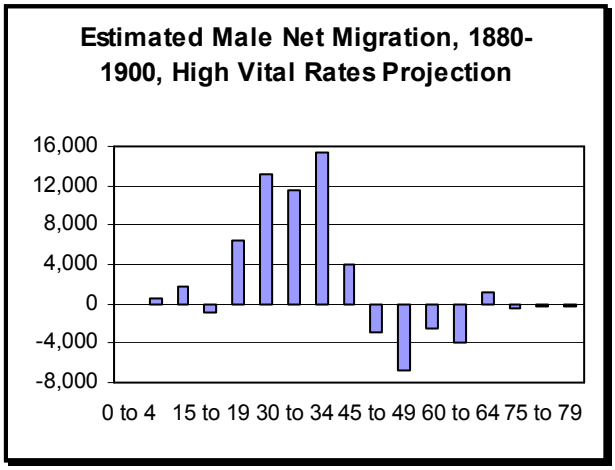

Figures 1, 2, 3. Adapted from Chew and Liu (2004).