

Interview: Historian Erika Lee on the 'Traumatic' History of Chinese Immigration to the U.S.

You mentioned the “trauma” that your family experienced. Can you elaborate on that?

During the exclusion laws, the vast majority of Chinese were barred from immigrating to the United States. Chinese laborers were barred, but if you were a Chinese merchant, student, teacher, diplomat, or a merchant's son or the child of a U.S. citizen, then you could at least apply for admission. But then you were put through the ringer. You were interrogated for hours, sometimes days. Your interrogations were then cross-referenced with witnesses who could be called on your behalf.

My grandfather was an orphan and he claimed he was a merchant's son. That was a lie and he bought papers, which was extremely common during that time because it was really the only way you could come in if you were Chinese. He eventually regularized his status and became a naturalized citizen when they granted Chinese “amnesty” during the Cold War — though they didn’t call it that at the time. By that time he kind of bragged about it: “Yeah, they tried to keep us out but I got in!”

On the other side, my grandmother whose great grandfather had come over during the gold rush, she had been left behind. She had been abandoned. Her father could only bring two kids with him. He brought his son and then gave my grandmother's slot to a nephew. And because of the way exclusion laws worked, that totally barred her from any chance of coming as his daughter. So she never talked about how she did end up coming. We all knew that you just don't ask. Don't ask her about her family, because it was clearly very traumatic.

Frankly those two experiences aren't uncommon — they do represent the range of Chinese American immigration experiences during those times.