

Adrienne Winans
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of History
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“The In/visibility of Race: Mixed-race Chinese Americans during the Exclusion Era”

“The In/visibility of Race: Mixed-Race Chinese Americans during the Exclusion Era” interrogates the experiences of mixed-race Chinese American families during the years of Chinese exclusion, 1875-1943. Drawing on a piece of my dissertation, “Race, Space, and Gender: Re-mapping a Chinese American from the Margins, 1975-1943,” I read through the archives left by the anti-Chinese measures of the U.S. gate-keeping state. In this presentation, I use the history of Charlie Stewart Cue as a case study of intimate interraciality in small town America at the turn of century and as an example of the erasure of not only these spaces but also of biraciality from the narrative of Chinese America.

Charlie Stewart Cue

In September 1908, 12 year old Charlie Stewart Cue held for 13 days at Portal, North Dakota, the overland crossing from the Pacific port of Vancouver, Canada to the spaces of the Middle West.¹ Traveling in the care of his father, Joe Cue, Charlie’s case file shows the mutability of race for biracial individuals. Charlie was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the oldest son of Chinese immigrant Joe Cue and Modena Stewart Cue. In 1899 Modena left Joe, not wanting to be separated from her folks in Mississippi anymore. In the intervening years, she

¹ “Charlie Stewart Cue,” 1903 1908, Case POR 641, Box 06, Portal, North Dakota Subdistrict; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1904-1925; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA (Portal, RG 85, NARA PNW Seattle).

had illegally remarried, and continued to have children with her new husband. In 1901, Joe took his eldest son, Charlie, to Hoi Ping, China to live with his grandmother. In 1908, American-born Charlie and his immigrant father Joe returned to the U.S.

Scholars have examined the boundaries formed by exclusion of Chinese and other Asian Americans from the social and physical spaces of normative U.S. society, a society often racialized as black or white. From 1875 to 1943, most Chinese immigrants were barred from entering the U.S. and all were considered ineligible for naturalized U.S. citizenship. Historians Mae Ngai and Erika Lee argue that anti-Chinese immigration policies became the basis for the growth of a “gate-keeping nation” where Chinese were perpetual foreigners as “aliens ineligible for citizenship.”² American-born individuals experienced racialization and a secondary form of citizenship. This era also saw the growth of restrictions against intermarriage (interracial marriage) on the state and local level. In many places, the racial and gendered perceptions of intermarriage framed all such relationships as illicit sex, and some states placed these perceptions into anti-miscegenation laws. As historian Peggy Pascoe has argued, the creation and implementation of these anti-miscegenation laws, on a state by state basis, helped construct American understandings of race.³

In further examining the intersections of race, space, and the acts of border-crossing, I construct a social history of Chinese America from the margins, in this case through the lens of interracial families, and re-map a Chinese America of places like Clarksdale, Mississippi. To do so, in the works of anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, I read governmental files “against the

² Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Mae M Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

grain,” analyzing archival documents created by the Chinese Division of Immigration and Naturalization Service, the U.S. governmental bureau whose inspectors who were charged with finding and deporting undocumented Chinese immigrants.⁴ Due to the stringent and extensive anti-Chinese immigration and naturalization laws, from 1875 onward the U.S. government’s historical Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) built an extensive system of monitoring of Chinese and Chinese American bodies.

I examined INS’ Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, archived in regional research centers of the National Archives, to address the geographic places and erasure from historical memory of mixed-race Chinese Americans.⁵ In researching Midwestern regional files on Chinese Americans, including interrogations, official identification forms, and witness statements by (white) neighbors and friends, I seek to recover the stories of biracial women and men. I then analyzed the ways in which biracial or multiracial identity related to strict legal and societal definitions of race, gender roles, family and community, and citizenship, asking research questions such as: How did mixed-race individuals and families negotiate movement through national and transnational space, as well as the scrutiny of immigration agents? In a time of

⁴ Ann Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2002): 87–109.

⁵ While this analysis focuses on a single case study, the broader project addresses mixed-race families and individuals from the following records in the regional centers of the U.S. National Archives: RS Files ca. 1882-1920; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Port of Sumas, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files ca. 1895-1943; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Port of Vancouver, British Columbia ca. 1905-1925; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Portal, North Dakota Subdistrict; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1904-1925; ; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Chinese Division; Chinese Case Files (Chicago); Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Chicago, IL. Case files of Chinese immigrants, 1904-40. Baltimore District Office (District 5); Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Philadelphia, PA.

racial construction via anti-miscegenation laws and court cases on naturalization, how did Chinese inspectors construct race for individuals in the liminal regions of race and nationality?

Race and Clarksdale, Mississippi

When questioned about his separated wife's nationality at the border, Joe Cue described her as "born in Mississippi, but was mixed with white and Mexican blood."⁶ Modena's color or race changes throughout the file. Verbally, Joe Cue described her as mixed. On another form, Joe Cue described her as "white."

Portal, N. Dak.

Sept. 3, 1908

In Re Charlie Stewart Cue, applying for admission as a Native born:

Testimony of Joe Que:

...

Q Where was he born?

A Clarksdale, Miss.

Q What was his mother's name?

A Modena Stewart

Q What nationality was she?

A She was born in Mississippi, but was mixed with white and Mexican blood.⁷

When Charlie himself was asked where his mother was "Chinese or American" he identified her as American.⁸ In the next inquiry, when asked if his mother looked like his father, Charlie replied "no."

Portal, N. Dak.

Sept. 3, 1908

Testimony of Charlie Stewart Cue:

...

⁶ Interrogation of Joe Cue, Sept. 3, 1908, "Charlie Stewart Cue, Case POR 641, Portal, RG 85, NARA PNW Seattle."

⁷ Interrogation of Joe Cue, Sept. 3, 1908, *ibid.*

⁸ Interrogation of Charlie Stewart Cue, Sept. 3, 1908, *ibid.*

- Q Was your mother a Chinese woman or American woman?
A She was an American woman.
Q How did you know she was an American woman?
A I remember of her being an American woman.
Q Did she look like your father?
A No.⁹

Meanwhile, the INS office in New Orleans dispatched Chinese Inspector Brough to take Modena Stewart Cue's testimony.¹⁰ Brough found her "engaged in picking cotton" and described her as "an unusually intelligent colored woman." In Charlie Stewart Cue's file, it is only through Brough's interview that the voice of Charlie's mother appears, filtered through the eyes of the immigration inspector sent from New Orleans to rural Mississippi to take her testimony.

Sept. 16, 1908

At Coahoma, Miss., I engaged a buggy, and succeeded in locating the alleged wife, Modena Stewart Cue, who was engaged in picking cotton on one of the plantations a few miles from this town. She proved to be an unusually intelligent colored woman, thus enabling me to get a reliable statement, the same being given by her without recourse to any data or memoranda; said affidavit is submitted herewith. All answers, as made by the two applicants, and which she would be in a position to know about, were readily verified by her.

I feel satisfied, from my investigation of the case, that the marriage between Modena Stewart Cue and Joe Que (Cue) was actually performed, and that they had a son "Charlie" by this marriage, who was born at the time and place specified, and I would therefor recommend that the applicant, Charlie Stewart Cue be admitted as a citizen of the United States.¹¹

⁹ Interrogation of Charlie Stewart Cue, Sept. 3, 1908, *ibid.*

¹⁰ September 16, 1908 Letter from A.W. Brough, Act. Immigrant Inspector To the Chinese Inspector in Charge, New Orleans, LA, *ibid.*

¹¹ September 16, 1908 Letter from A.W. Brough, Act. Immigrant Inspector To the Chinese Inspector in Charge, New Orleans, LA, *ibid.*

In the eyes of the white INS official, Modena was “colored,” in the eyes of her former husband, mixed or white, and in the eyes of her son who left the U.S. when he was too young to remember much, she did not look like his father.

For the purposes of the INS, however, the race or color of Charlie’s mother did not matter – white, mixed, or colored – as long as she was an American citizen whose testimony verified his birth on American soil. Charlie’s race was not as mutable. Having a Chinese immigrant father and speaking only Chinese due to his extended stay in China with his grandmother, Charlie’s race was American-born Chinese. Modena Stewart Cue’s testimony supports my argument for a connection between small-town space, mobility, and interracial marriage. Modena married Joe Cue, at that time a merchant with a general store, in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1894. Together, they had had three children: Charlie, born in Clarksdale, Mabel, born two years later in Webb, Mississippi and since deceased, and Joe Lee, born in Bonham, Texas in 1898.¹² Re-constructing the geographic places of Chinese intermarriage, points to small town space, in this case places in the Middle West/ South that complicate the previous paradigm of urban Chinatown and ethnic enclaves.¹³

Charlie and his father Joe Que were admitted to the U.S. The federal census of 1910, taken two years after their stay in Portal, North Dakota, shows the further erasure of Charlie’s biraciality. Joe and Modena’s youngest son, Joe Lee/ Jules, had joined his father and older

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For scholarship on Chinatown space see: Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto Class, Authorship and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

brother in Chicago.¹⁴ In the census, both boys are “Ch” (Chinese) under race. Their birthplaces were correctly stated as Mississippi and Texas, but BOTH their mother’s and father’s birthplace is listed as China. Their white/ mixed/ or “colored” mother was erased from the record.

Meanwhile, in Oklahoma, the same 1910 census lists Modena Stewart, along with her second husband and their children, as “white.”¹⁵

Multiraciality and Asian American history

Within the field of Asian American history, Filipino American and South Asian American communities are seen as responding to the pressures of these sets of racialized, gendered, and classed (im)migration and anti-miscegenation laws by constructing multiracial communities with other communities of color.¹⁶ Despite their initial status as the most numerous ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Oriental’ demographic on the mainland U.S. and holding the dubious distinction as being the aim of the first racialized and gendered U.S. immigration law, the 1875 Page Act, the histories of Chinese America during the exclusion era pay little attention to multiraciality. As in this case study, in the broader chapter, I draw upon biracial and multiracial individuals and families from the INS’ Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files to address the place of bi/multiracial

¹⁴ Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Year: 1910; Census Place: Chicago Ward 23, Cook, Illinois; Roll: T624_266; Page: 15A; Enumeration District: 0973; FHL microfilm: 1374279. Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

¹⁵ Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Year: 1910; Census Place: Forest, Pottawatomie, Oklahoma; Roll: T624_1271; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 0214; FHL microfilm: 1375284. Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

¹⁶ Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Rudy P. Guevarra Jr., *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

Chinese/ Americans. Furthermore, while studies of Chinese American community and identity formation often focus on ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatowns located in San Francisco, New York City, and Chicago, I analyze instead the moments of movement and crossing of nation-state borders.

Rather than the rural Punjabi Mexican communities in California, the Mexipino communities of urban San Diego, or an integration into East Coast African American life by Bengali sailors, I suggest that it is the small towns that become places of interracial marriage for Chinese Americans.¹⁷ In other files, interracial couples had their children in the west, from Bethel, Alaska, Everett, Washington, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota.¹⁸ In the Midwest, families moved between towns such as Crown Point, Indiana, Kankakee, Illinois, and Youngstown, Ohio.¹⁹ In the south, Charlie Stewart Cue born in Clarksdale Mississippi and his younger siblings

¹⁷ Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*; Guevarra Jr., *Becoming Mexipino*; Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*.

¹⁸ “Minnie Mary Evan,” 1926 1931, Case 7030/533, Box 425, Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Minnie Mary Evan from Bethel, Alaska and of “Eskimo and Russian” blood, married a Chinese man and gave birth to their oldest daughter in Touaha/ Fort Gibbon Precinct Alaska and their son in Seattle, WA.

“Richard Ahmond Rumjahn,” 1925, Case 30/4981, Box 31, Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Richard Ahmond Rumjanh was born in Everett, WA in 1925. For more on his case, see Chapter 6 of the dissertation.

“June Virginia Yee,” 1919 1923, Case 205/13-22, Box 088, Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Michigan-born and a “white woman of the Finnish race,” 32 year old Mary Yee nee Kasky gave birth to her fifth child, June Virginia Yee, on June 8th, 1919 in Sioux Falls, Minnehaha County, South Dakota. On her birth certificate, Odean Hareid, the Clerk of the Circuit Court, recorded the father’s name as Harry Yee, his age as 42, his color as white, his place of birth as China, and his occupation as laundryman. My thanks to Sue Karren of the National Archives in Seattle for pointing me to this family.

¹⁹ “Margaret Lim,” 1929, Case 30/6299, Box 039, Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Francis Lim (Lim Kho Beng) and Sonya Netzell married in Crown Point, Indiana. Their daughters were Margaret and Janet Lim, born in Chicago, IL.

“Charlie Bane,” 1896 1897, Case POR 468, Box 02, Portal, North Dakota Subdistrict; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1904-1925; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA (Portal, RG 85, NARA PNW Seattle). On October 10, 1894 Charlie Bane married Christina Thilmont in Kankakee, Kankakee County, Illinois. In 1896, Charlie Bane was a “Grocer and

in Webb, Mississippi and Bonham, Texas as the family moved around from year to year. As well as urban areas with Chinese immigrant populations such as New York City, the Northeast also had mixed-race marriages in disparate places such as Camden, New Jersey and East Barnard, Vermont.²⁰ A focus on Chinatown populations of San Francisco, Chicago, New York City as ethnic enclaves of immigrant Chinese bachelors has not only overshadowed the histories of small town Chinese America, but also of interracial Chinese America.²¹ This may also be an artifact of the mobility of these interracial families.

In tracing family geographies utilizing the documents collected in their INS files as well as the U.S. federal census, the resultant maps show consistent regional as well as international movement. As well as movement through space, the INS documents also provide a window into economic prosperity. Interestingly enough, the INS did not seem unduly concerned with changes in downward economic motion. A male immigrant could cross the border as either the holder of a Section 6 visa (merchant, teacher, student, consular official) or as a “registered Chinese laborer.”²² For working-class immigrants, obtaining a Certificate of Identity as a registered Chinese laborer meant providing evidence of accumulated capital, usually in the form

Dealer in general merchandise” in Youngstown, Ohio. A white witness Robert Darden, testified that he “is familiar with the facts of their family history and relations; that Christina Bane was formerly Christina Thilmont, widow of Christopher Thilmont, late of Cook county, in the state of Illinois aforesaid, deceased; that Charles Bane is a Chinamen.” Willie Thilmont, 10, was the son of Christina and her first husband, and Frederick Bane was the infant son of 20 months old of Charles Bane and Christina Bane. .

²⁰ “Charley Yick,” 1912 1913, Case 1224, Box 35, Port of Vancouver, British Columbus ca. 1905-1925; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Charley Yick married Mary Klain in Camden, New Jersey. “Sara Lydia Hing,” b1923 e1950, Case 30/4980, Box 31, Port of Seattle, Washington; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Seattle District; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1781-2004, Record Group 85; National Archives at Seattle, WA. Sara Lydia Hing, born in East Barnard, VT. See Chapter 6 of the dissertation for more on Sara’s case.

²¹ Huping Ling, *Chinese Chicago: Race, Transnational Migration, and Community since 1870* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012); Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*; McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*; Shah, *Contagious Divides*; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²² For more on geography and Chinese international students, see Chapters 3 and 4 of the dissertation.

of money owed to the laborer in question. For professional Section 6 visas, teachers, students, or consular officials provided evidence of employment or student status. The category of Section 6 merchant was the subject of the most intensive investigation by INS officials. To prove merchant status, an immigrant needed to give evidence of being a partner, usually with at least \$2000 of investment, in a business. He could not have engaged in “labor,” and officials interrogated all witnesses directly about any work performed by the subject under investigation. Downward economic motion, however, drew little comment.

Joe Que’s file serves as an example of downward mobility. He left the U.S. in 1901 as a merchant, having owned a series of businesses as he moved his family around the Mississippian region. In 1902, he re-entered the U.S. Leaving again in 1907 to retrieve his son Charlie from Hoi Ping after his caretaker, Joe’s mother and Charlie’s grandmother, had passed away, Que exited as a laborer. Problems arose from his 1907 re-entry, but not related to his economic status due to his class downgrade from a business-owning merchant to a laundryman. Instead, his illegal second marriage caught the eye of immigration officials. Eventually, the INS admitted Joe. By the next federal census, the same one that recorded his biracial sons as monoracial, he was employed as a laundryman in Chicago. Downward mobility evidenced little question, while upward mobility meant extensive INS investigation.

Conclusion

In the act of crossing U.S. national borders, the histories of the invisible, the history of biracial Charlie Stewart Cue, his Chinese immigrant father Joe Cue who married in Clarksdale Mississippi and took his growing family through Webb Mississippi, Bonham Texas, and Modena Stewart Cue, become visible. Analyzing the governmental files of INS officials, I read through their eyes and their documentation to recover a more complex history of race and space in early

20th century America. I build a new social history of Chinese America, one inclusive of mixed-race Chinese Americans, and re-map a Chinese America beyond coastal Chinatowns. In my broadest argument, I interrogate the construction of race and citizenship, inclusion and exclusion, American belonging and the foreshadowing of an interracial democracy.

On the broadest scale, this scholarship speaks to the construction of modern U.S. society. I utilize historian Matthew Briones' post-World War II concept of "interracial democracy" in arguing that the pre-World War II experiences of biracial/multiracial Chinese Americans serves as a lens into the early possibilities of interracial democracy, even during the era of increasing immigration and naturalization exclusion.²³ Asian American women and men's challenges to state and societal racialized exclusions were forerunners of an idea of an interracial and multiracial America, one that also embodied progressive beliefs of democracy. As such, this history further complicates the contemporary idea of a 'postracial' democracy, an idea that whitewashes difference and structural inequities. I argue that during those decades of immigration and citizenship discrimination for Asian, Latino, and African Americans, these smaller, quieter histories of everyday Americans, immigrants and citizens alike, helped build the foundations for challenging exclusionary and discriminatory notions of race in the United States.

²³ Matthew M Briones and Charles Kikuchi, *Jim and Jap Crow: A Cultural History of 1940s Interracial America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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