



Western Edition Episode 3
 “L.A. Chinatown: Exclusion and Struggles for Inclusion”
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(MUSIC – SPRITE STAR)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I’m Bill Deverell. Welcome to *Western Edition*, Season Two: “L.A. Chinatown”. In this third episode, we look at how the Chinese community of Los Angeles rebuilt itself in the decades following the 1871 massacre. How did Chinese Americans reclaim this space, and make it their own? How did they not just survive, but thrive, as Los Angeles grew from a rough-and-tumble Western frontier town to a burgeoning metropolis? To tell that story, you really need to know about Y.C. Hong. Y.C. – which stood for You Chung – Hong was an immigration lawyer and social activist who fought for Chinese inclusion in American society, at a time of widespread anti-Chinese violence and severe restrictions on Chinese immigration and access to citizenship.

LI WEI YANG: Y.C. Hong was born in 1898 in either San Francisco or in San Bernardino County, it’s not known for sure.

DEVERELL: This is Li Wei Yang, a co-producer of *Western Edition* and Curator of Pacific Rim Collections at The Huntington.

YANG: But he was born here in the states, and he grew up with his single mother – mostly we don't know much about Y.C.’s father. And as a single mother, she worked in various odd jobs around San Francisco, Chinatown and raised Y.C. And Y.C., he grew up like a normal kid; very smart, doing very well in school. And when he finished high school, he went to Boston to work in a Chinese restaurant as a bookkeeper – and this is all coming from the family’s oral history. However, he didn't really like working in a Chinese restaurant in Boston. He didn’t like the

owner, and so, he actually was able to secure a position in the federal government working at the Immigration Bureau as a translator involving Chinese immigration cases.

DEVERELL: This would be roughly around the First World War?

YANG: Yes, this would be the late 1910s. That would be when he was hired as a translator in the Immigration Bureau.

DEVERELL: Pretty good job, I would think.

YANG: Incredible opportunities for Chinese Americans, because as a Chinese American at this time, working for the federal government was essentially out of the question. But because of the enforcements of the Chinese Exclusion Act, you needed someone who knows the language, who can communicate back from the Chinese American immigrants back to the federal interrogators, interrogating individual immigration cases. That's one of the reasons why he came to Los Angeles. And starting in the early 1920s, he started attending law school at USC by attending night classes, because he saw that there was a tremendous opportunity to become a lawyer specializing in Chinese immigration. Because he was the translator acting as the go-between, he knew the process; he knew who to talk to; he knew all the insider details. He didn't have a lot of money for textbooks, so he would borrow the books from his classmates and then write them down on his own notes. And in 1923, without getting approval from his professor, he went ahead and took the state bar exam on his own without telling anybody. And apparently, his professors got really upset that he did this because they didn't think that he was going to pass. They thought that this was going to bring down the overall rates for the entire class, and they wanted him to make sure that he actually finished his bachelor's degree first. But to the surprise of everyone, he actually passed the bar exam. So, he was actually not the first Chinese as many have said, but he was definitely one of the earliest. And as far as we know, he is probably the first Chinese to pass a bar exam by written examination. And so, before that, most of these bar exams were done through oral examination.

DEVERELL: This sounds like a man with incredible drive – obviously very intelligent as you point out. What's your sense of the guy?

YANG: I think he is definitely someone who is very confident. He is someone who obviously is very smart. He wants to make sure that he can take care of his mother as well, too. And so, he's motivated to do well. When you just don't see that many Chinese people would take this step to be one of the most important immigration attorneys here in the state of California.

(MUSIC – SPRING FIELD)

DEVERELL: Y.C. Hong's son, Nowland Hong, is himself an attorney and has practiced in Los Angeles for over five decades. He says that even when his father was a teenager, he saw that the Chinese American community needed advocates.

NOWLAND HONG: He and a good friend in San Francisco Chinatown had a language school for Chinese people. And unlike the church schools, they taught them English words, phrases, and forms of speech, which they could use in order to find places, get transportation, buy things. And so, he was – he had this, this insight and foresight always, it seemed – to be able to sense if there was a need, and how to fulfill that need both from the standpoint of the Chinese who were migrating here and who lived here and were trying to bring in their children or families, as well as the system itself. Because in those days, the immigration system was chaotic. If you think it's, you know, chaotic now, it was much worse then.

DEVERELL: Why was this immigration system so chaotic, particularly for Chinese immigrants? To understand this, we need to understand the history of exclusionary immigration laws at the end of the 19th century. Beth Lew-Williams is an Associate Professor of History at Princeton University.

BETH LEW-WILLIAMS: So when I look at this period, what I see is a move from state and local attempts to regulate Chinese migration, to federal attempts to regulate Chinese migration. Sort of the call from the west that the Chinese are undesirable, unassimilable, and should be excluded, is answered by Congress first with the Page Act in 1875. But then with a bill that was known at the time as "Chinese Restriction" in 1882, which today we think of as Chinese Exclusion. And one of the reasons that I care that it was called "Chinese Restriction" at the time was because that law, it proclaimed that the Chinese were undesirable. But it left open many ways for the Chinese to continue to immigrate. It banned all Chinese laborers for the next 10 years, but it allowed merchants and diplomats and students to continue to come. And it allowed any Chinese person who had previously resided in the United States to return. What this meant in effect was on one hand, this law is draconian and driven by racist and classist concerns – certainly othering. On the other hand, there were some really large loopholes written into this law that meant that Chinese migrants continued to come into the country. They came sometimes legally – exploiting these loopholes, and other times they are more like undocumented migrants – they're crossing U.S. borders undetected by the state, usually crossing the U.S.-Canadian border.

DEVERELL: Mae M. Ngai teaches Asian American Studies and History at Columbia University and co-directs the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race. She helps us understand these laws at the local, national, and global levels.

MAE M. NGAİ: What's really interesting to me about exclusion is that it starts obviously as a very sectional question, right? It's California, it's the Pacific slope – but it's mostly California that's agitated about it. And it really takes a while for them to get a hearing in Washington. You know, through the 1870s and 1876 and 77, the California State Senate holds massive hearings

on the Chinese problem. And they get people from Washington – from the Congress – to come and have their own hearing. So, you have thousands of pages of testimony on the Chinese question in the late 1870s.

DEVERELL: Mae M. Ngai also points out that exclusion and anti-Chinese violence existed in a broader constellation of racial politics.

NGAI: As the 1870s unfold, you know, you have this retreat for reconstruction in national politics. And the infamous Compromise of 1877, by which the federal troops are withdrawn from the south in exchange for the White House. It's interesting, you see some voices from the north or the Midwest from congressmen or senators who say, "Wait, wait, wait, wait a minute, wait a minute. Are you sure they're slaves? They're not slaves, are they really?" You know, so there's this – some skepticism about this line as being peddled from California. And, but it's not a big voice, you know? And then of course, you know, the Congress has race fatigue, right, from The Reconstruction. But how does Exclusion pass the Congress? It's an alliance between the south and the west. That's the nail in the coffin. And that is our legacy of, that's our map right in the United States of white supremacy from the 19th century – the west and the south. And you could say that pattern is still there today, right? That's where all the red states are. You know that famous speech Frederick Douglas made in 1869 about Chinese exclusion? It's remarkable. He says, "Let them come. Let them all come. Yeah, maybe a lot of them will come. You know, China's a big country and there's a lot of poor people. But you know, migration is a human right. So let them come. And if they come, they'll become part of us. That's a good thing." And so, he wasn't daunted by it at all. And he basically was laying down this gauntlet. He says, "This country has a choice. It's going to either be based on equality or it's going to be based on white supremacy." I mean, he didn't use those words exactly, but that's the choice he was laying out and we know which way the country went, right? And so, he got it. You know, he understood the big picture, right. About the spread of racism and white supremacy in this country. And, you know, in Asian-American studies – when I first got involved in Asian American studies, many, many decades ago – you know, we used to say that the fate of Chinese hung on the fate of African-Americans. And I don't think we teach that enough anymore, that the relationship between those things and, and we treat these different racisms as being very separate from each other. And so, then it's hard for us to see how these histories are entangled and entwined – and they're not the same either, right? They have different origins, different parts of the country, different systems – the labor, slavery, et cetera, et cetera, but they're related. And I think we need to think more about that.

DEVERELL: Well, and you make this excellent point, that it's the first instance of that Red State Alliance, what we would call a Red State Alliance between regions. This is the first and foundational moment of that, right?

NGAI: I think you could say that, yeah.

(MUSIC – MELANCHOLIA)

EUGENE MOY: The native Americans were decimated in many ways, but Chinese and other immigrant groups came to be targeted also for being competitors in the economic marketplace.

DEVERELL: Eugene Moy, a longtime member of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, connects this past violence with our present.

MOY: So, it became with formal exclusion and other anti-Asian laws, other anti-Chinese laws. You know, you can't have a laundry in a wooden building, for example, or people didn't like you dirtying up the water because you were doing laundry. So, there were many, many attacks on the Chinese in the 19th century. And that resulted in many ways that the early Chinese had to adapt to fight exclusionary and anti-Asian attitudes. Today, you know, with this issue of COVID and the fear that somehow Chinese are still bringing in disease and are stealing secrets and somehow are a blight on society – it just unleashes this attitude that somehow, it's okay to go and attack Asians.

DEVERELL: What did all this mean for Chinatowns across the United States, especially in the west? How did these policies impact L.A. Chinatown in the late 1800s? Back to Mae M. Ngai.

NGAI: You know, the first thing that happens is that there's more violence. It's as though the Exclusion law justified all the racism against the Chinese. So now it's like, okay, it's not just exclusion – like we're not going to let any more in – we're going to drive out everybody who's here. And so, some of the worst violence erupts up and down the Pacific coast in the mid 1880s – from these riots they called the Driving Out campaigns, from Humboldt to Tacoma, Washington, up and down California. There were massacres – Snake River – there were 30 Chinese who were murdered and thrown into a river. Yeah, it was just horrible. And this is all after the Exclusion laws passed, right? So, it's as though now the racist had license to just try to drive people out. And one of the most famous massacres was in Rock Springs, Wyoming. It was a coal mine owned by, I think the Southern Pacific – one of the big railroads owned this coal mine, and it was – they mined coal for the railroad. And Chinese and whites actually earned wages that were comparable, but the whites wanted the Chinese to go on strike with them and the Chinese demurred. So, this mob went through the Chinese who lived on the mines, and they also went through Chinatown and they injured and murdered scores of people and burned down Chinatown. So, you know, you have this – this fury that's unleashed throughout the west. It's really scary. And it's kind of, I guess, it dies down by the late 1880s and a lot of Chinese leave the country. Chinatowns become smaller, more isolated, more marginal. You also have another trend, which is interesting, you know, even in these very isolating conditions – people still come. They manage to get in, and you have families that begin to establish. So, you have a second generation of Chinese Americans – people born in the United States by the 1880s and 90s. And so, Chinatown slowly begins to change. It's not so much a community of solo men, you know, they're more children, more families. But they also grow up in much more segregated circumstances. But it's also, you know, the center of Chinese businesses, Chinese cultural organizations, the traditional family and district associations, the schools, churches, you know,

so it's a real community, you know, it's got its own class and social hierarchies, you know, its own politics.

(MUSIC – SAVANNAH)

DEVERELL: Let's return to Li Wei Yang for more on Y.C. Hong and the legal practice he built in Los Angeles Chinatown. His practice helped the Chinese community navigate exclusionary immigration laws.

YANG: 1925, 1926, he started his own practice. This is actually not something out of his own desire. It's just, he has no other choice because as a Chinese person, even though he passed the bar, he was not going to get hired anywhere in major law firms around the country. And so, he started his own practice and became very successful from the beginning. As far as I can tell, within the first three years of his practice in old Chinatown, he was already working on 200 to 300 cases in the first three years. So obviously there was a demand, especially for Chinese immigration, but because Y.C. was someone that could communicate with them in their native language. Y.C. was someone that they could trust as a fellow, Chinese person. So, that's one of the reasons why he became so successful as an immigration attorney. And of course, you know, being one of the first Chinese to pass the Bar also made him very famous. We know from 1920s up until the 1960s, he has personally created and worked on 7,600 – more than 7,600 cases.

DEVERELL: Y.C. Hong's son, Nowland, spoke to us from the Hong building in what had been his father's office in Chinatown, and he recalls the energy of his father's busy practice.

HONG: I was four years old, and I remember running up those stairs, which I can no longer do. And, and it was such a thrill because it was so different from my father's first office on Alameda Street. But I can recall trying to run up those stairs to my dad's office and going to lunch with him. And there was a well-known Chinese restaurant, which served roast pork. And I can almost taste it today, but that was always a wonderful adventure and chance to see my dad.

DEVERELL: Tell us a little bit about this office space. So, it must have been bustling with clients. I mean – tell us your sense of, you know – a client would come in downstairs, and then what happens?

HONG: I really don't know whether they had appointments or not because most of the Chinese people who could retain a lawyer were businesspeople. So, they had odd hours of coming here to the office – and as much as they had to take care of their own businesses. But it wasn't unusual to see the reception room filled with people. And my father used to have Chinese newspapers and periodicals sitting everywhere so that they could read them while they were waiting to see him.

DEVERELL: Many of the clients sitting in that waiting room needed Y.C.'s assistance with immigration cases. Li Wei Yang continues.

YANG: I think exclusion, specifically Chinese exclusion – for him – was an opportunity acting as the middle person between Chinese immigrants who want to come to the United States during the Exclusion era and the United States government who wanted to keep out as many Chinese as possible. And so, he is trying to include as many Chinese as possible by submitting the paperwork in English, which many of the Chinese immigrant didn't have the language skills to do. He has the contacts within the federal government and with immigration attorneys all over the country to try to resolve complicated cases. He also had to supply a lot of these little details about what people should be on the lookout for when they were trying to come into the United States, because as each Chinese person coming in for the first time, they had to go through very lengthy interrogations, and these interrogations can last anywhere from 200 to 400 questions – sometimes even a thousand questions about your personal history, your family situation, your village layouts. And these are the kind of things that he learned working as a translator with the Immigration Bureau back in the days.

DEVERELL: After the San Francisco earthquake and fires in 1906 destroyed public records, a loophole in Chinese Exclusion Laws opened up. Chinese men could claim U.S. citizenship, travel to China, and declare that they had children born to them abroad that qualified for U.S. citizenship based on their status. The paperwork surrounding this process became known as creating a "paper son." In reality, these files could be used for biological sons or as a loophole for others – more distant relatives, friends, or even complete strangers. U.S. immigration officials policed these loopholes.

YANG: I think the ultimate goal is to try to keep out as many Chinese as possible, because of what the Chinese Exclusion demanded from the federal governments. And so, they created this incredible complex system – enforcement system – to question every single Chinese, to look at every single incoming Chinese, as someone who is fraudulent, someone who is a paper son, paper daughter, or someone who is not who he or she really is in real life. And so, this whole complex system was set up to keep the Chinese out. And that's why immigration attorney like Y.C. Hong became much-needed professions that are there to try to help navigate the system for these Chinese individuals who wanted to come in.

DEVERELL: Give us a sense of the questions that would be thrown at these people.

YANG: Sure. So, we have these coaching papers, which lists both the questions and the individualized answers of these immigrants. And so, a typical coaching paper, would start out with your name, your birth date, where do you live? But as it goes on, it's going to get more complicated. It's going to get very mind-numbing eventually, because it's asking questions such as where is the communal toilet within the village? How many trees are in front of your house? Who is your neighbor to the east of your apartments? And can you describe what they do for a living or whether how many oxen are there within the village? And these are little questions

that was designed to trip a person up about the various details about his or her life. And as a normal person, these are not the things that you are gonna remember just on the top of your head. And so, in response the Chinese – and on the advice of the attorneys – would study these questions beforehand to make sure that they memorize every single detail as they were going through the interrogation. But because the interrogators had no way of knowing whether they're telling the truth, and so for them is to question, not only the Chinese person who is coming in, but to question that person's sponsor, for example, your Chinese American father, who is sponsoring your entry into the United States and ask him the exact same questions so that they could match the answers together and see whether you were telling the truth or not. And so it's become a very obvious cat and mouse game between the Chinese immigrants, the attorney, and also the interrogators. But because of the typical journey, traveling from Hong Kong to San Francisco, for example, would take anywhere from 30 to 50 days. So that's a lot of time for these individual immigrants to study and to memorize anywhere from 200, 400, even a 1,000 questions. And then those details that you had to in order to pass the interrogation.

DEVERELL: So, of the 7,600 or more cases – obviously each one presents its own special facts or needs or anxieties and concerns – so, they're all different. But what's your sense of the resolution of all those? Does it work out for most of these people, do you think, or is it a story of exclusion?

YANG: It's hard for me to say for sure but studying a few of the cases from the 1930s era in particular, and I found that a lot of these major cases, the people were deported because of the testimony that it provided was not satisfactory to the Immigration Bureau. Or maybe their bone structure – so, Immigration Bureaus sometimes would take x-rays of the individual immigrants to look at their bone structure to determine that this person is younger or older than he is stating to be. So, these are some of the tactics that was being used. And so Y.C. had to enlist opinions of medical doctor; he has to get expert opinions on how x-ray and using bone structure to determine a person's age is actually not scientific in the court of law, but a lot of these cases were eventually denied because they just simply didn't trust the Chinese, or they did not provide good enough testimony or documents in order to satisfy the cases.

DEVERELL: So that's astonishing about the bone structure, x-ray shenanigans. The fact that you find so many failures and deportations and dreams dashed is testament to Y.C. Hong that he keeps going, if he's got a 40-plus year legal practice, right? Do you feel like you know him?

YANG: In some ways, because by being one of the archivists who went through the collection, I feel like I do know Y.C. a little bit. People do respect him because of what he's done and because of the cases that he has taken on all these decades. So, I think he's definitely one of the giants within the Los Angeles Chinatown community.

(MUSIC – ASSEMBLING)

DEVERELL: Y.C. Hong navigated the politics of exclusion and inclusion. His fight against racist exclusion policies garnered significant respect and recognition within and beyond the Chinatown community. Back to his son, Nowland Hong.

HONG: Well, even in, in old Chinatown it seemed that all the, the people there knew him, and he was always acknowledged in some way by virtually anybody and everybody he ran into. Interestingly enough, he was very recognized by politicians. And politicians, of course, realized that the Chinese were citizens and could vote. And so, they came to Chinatown, and they always wanted to meet my father. There's a picture at The Huntington of my father and Richard Nixon and myself.

DEVERELL: Do you remember that?

HONG: I do recall that, because it was an important event – in as much as Nixon was attempting to get into the Senate, I believe. And so, there was quite a gathering of people at the time, and he came up to the office and we took this photograph.

DEVERELL: Wow. You must be very proud to be his son.

HONG: I am, I really am. And in a way, it's a little intimidating because there's no way that I could ever accomplish the things that he did.

DEVERELL: I have a sense though, he was probably very proud of you as a son, too.

HONG: Well, he was. He was very pleased when I was working in the city attorney's office, and when I became General Counsel for the Port of Los Angeles, he was very, very happy with that. And then when I became a partner in my first private firm, Parker Milliken, he was very pleased with that. And I brought him up to the office and introduced him to all the senior partners and they actually looked forward to seeing him.

DEVERELL: Well, it's a path that you took that wouldn't have been available to him.

HONG: That's true. And it wouldn't have been something that he would have expected or anticipated as well.

DEVERELL: I'm thrilled that we can be talking in your father's office. Do you feel his presence here?

HONG: I do. I do, because I can see him sitting in my mind's eye at the desk. And I also – and there were photos of this at The Huntington – seeing him there with national and local

politicians. And I don't know why, but frequently they would all be eating at his desk – eating Chinese food, of course – on top of his desk.

DEVERELL: Y.C. Hong was one of a number of Chinatown leaders, including Peter SooHoo, who worked together to advocate for the Chinese community. Peter SooHoo's daughter, Pat Lem SooHoo, shares her memories of her father's friendship with Y.C. Hong.

PAT LEM SOOHOO: One of his really good friends was Y.C. Hong, and they both spoke Chinese and English. And they were always very interested in taking care of the Chinese because at that time, you were very discriminated against. And they were always wanting to be sure that the Chinese were well-represented, or as representative as they could be. So, they were good friends.

DEVERELL: We all know there's a darker history to the Chinese in L.A. There's a darker story of discrimination and racism. Was that talked about? Did you grow up aware of that?

SOOHOO: Mm-mm. Chinese didn't talk about things like that. I have a theory – maybe a lot of the people that were in old Chinatown, they might've been paper sons. And, you know, you don't talk about it 'cause you could be sent away. My father and all his sisters and brothers were born in Los Angeles, so that was not a problem. My father was outgoing, and he talked, and he knew kinds of people, and he had ideas. He was never wealthy. When he died, I don't think he had maybe no money. I mean, lots of Chinese have lots of money and they got apartments and lots of cars. My father never – it all just, I just, he, well – Y.C. Hong had money, but they were just very concentrated on granting rights to Chinese. And they went everywhere, those groups – and I wish I knew all the men, I just know Y.C. Hong. They went on the train, they went to Congress, they went to New York. They went everywhere where there were Chinese and always about getting rights for Chinese. And then they went to Washington, DC, they spoke to Congress about rights – not citizenship, but rights – that Chinese should have rights.

DEVERELL: And that work continues into the present. From Y.C. Hong and others to Gene Moy, one of the community activists and leaders who picked up the torch of this earlier generation. Gene Moy offers us a last word on the connectedness of efforts to fight anti-Chinese laws and the historical continuity of broader community activism.

MOY: I am part of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. I've been a member of the organization for almost 40 years. So, the CACA has been in the forefront of fighting against anti-Chinese legislation. You know, whether it's related to immigration or voting rights or other social and community issues – like English-Only movements in some of our communities. But recently, some members of our CACA joined with members of African-American and Latino communities to hold discussions, to develop a coalition that would provide a sense of leadership for many of our communities.

(MUSIC – DIGITAL SOLITUDE)

DEVERELL: As Gene Moy notes, this is an exciting development. Groups of people coming together, each with their own historical trajectory through the thicket of immigration laws, exclusion, bureaucracies, antagonism, racism, discrimination, and the occasional triumph. To work together, to collaborate, to advocate, and, yes, to agitate. The effort is one of hope and hard work. And reminds us that – yes, history is important.

(MUSIC – DIGITAL SOLITUDE)

DEVERELL: I'm Bill Deverell. Coming up on the next episode, we learn the long history of the contest over building a major rail depot in Los Angeles. Union Station, our beloved passenger terminal, is built atop what once was L.A. Chinatown – demolished, destroyed, and leveled in the 1930s, its residents dispersed and displaced with little thought as to where they would go. We learn that dark story, as well as about the continued resilience and resourcefulness of the Chinese community as they built New Chinatown in Southern California.

MARLYN MUSICANT: And, you know, I have to point out the irony here, which is that it was the Chinese labor that really built the railroads. And so now years later, having completed that, they're being driven out by the railroads. Driven out of their homes and they had very few options available to them at the time – as far as where they could live – they were legally excluded from most residential communities.

DEVERELL: If you'd like to see images related to this episode, head to our website dornsife.usc.edu/icw. *Western Edition's* team includes Avishay [ah-vee-shy] Artsy, Katie Dunham, Greg Hise, Jessica Kim, Elizabeth Logan, Olivia Ramirez, Li Wei Yang, and Stephanie Yi. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Thank you for listening and be well.