



The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America

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If you're Irish American or African American or Eastern European Jewish American, there's a rich literature to give you a sense of your family's arrival-in-America story. Until now, that hasn't been the case for Chinese Americans.

From noted historian Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones* uncovers the three-generational saga of the Tape family. It's a sweeping story centered on patriarch Jeu Dip's (Joseph Tape's) self-invention as an immigration broker in post-gold rush, racially explosive San Francisco, and the extraordinary rise it enables. Ngai's portrayal of the Tapes as the first of a brand-new social type—middle-class Chinese Americans, with touring cars, hunting dogs, and society weddings to broadcast it—will astonish.

Again and again, Tape family history illuminates American history. Seven-year-old Mamie Tape attempts to integrate California schools, resulting in the landmark 1885 *Tape v. Hurley*. The family's intimate involvement in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair reveals how the Chinese American culture brokers essentially invented Chinatown—and so Chinese culture—for American audiences. Finally, Mae Ngai reveals aspects—timely, haunting, and hopeful—of the lasting legacy of the immigrant experience for all Americans.

The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America **Details**

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From Reader Review The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America for online ebook

Moses Hetfield says

I had a lot of problems with the way this book was written. I think Ngai really chose the wrong project with *The Lucky Ones*. She clearly did her research, but it's also clear that there was not enough material available to write an entire 230 page biography of the Tape family. Ngai could have written a good, fairly long essay with the material she had, or perhaps a fictionalized novel, but her final product feels neither historically robust or engaging.

Some of the information Ngai includes is factual and properly cited, but thoroughly boring (e.g. listing out the names and addresses of all the neighbors). Sometimes, when she lacks data on the Tape family themselves, she takes information about other Chinese-Americans and projects it onto them, which has the effect of flattening out Chinese-American identity by assuming that Chinese-American experiences are identical and thus interchangeable. The reasoning can get quite circular: Ngai asserts, based on the experience of *other Chinese servants* that "Jeu Dip's chores would have been typical of those of domestic servants in American upper- and middle-class homes in the mid-nineteenth century" (11). She projects the typical servant duties onto him, then proceeds to say that the duties he was assigned were typical. Ngai tries really hard to develop her characters in the book, often without much clear evidence to support this. She often makes value judgments about characters (Frank is "spoiled," among other things), without explaining how she comes to those conclusions, and then uses those value judgments to make assumptions about how the characters would have responded to or felt about certain things. Her attempts to get at the internal worlds of her characters are always highly speculative, yet she continues attempting. So much of what Ngai says is hedged with "maybe," "perhaps," "likely," "probably would have," etc. that the book often seems to lack any real historical information, instead coming mostly from Ngai's imagination. Of course, it's important for historians to be cautious about claims they cannot prove, but when everything the author says comes off as purely speculative, it is perhaps a sign that they either need to do more research or take on a less ambitious project.

Overall, a disappointing and uninteresting book with enough real substance to fill an essay one-fifth of its length.

Abby says

The Lucky Ones, by Columbia history professor Mae Ngai, is the intergenerational story of the Chinese-American Tape family. It chronicles their story from the immigration of family founders (Joseph and Mary) through their service in World War II and their "acceptance" as Chinese-Americans.

The Tapes were responsible for many civil rights firsts that many Americans, and many Chinese-Americans, may not be aware of. These include the fact that American-born children of Chinese descent were not allowed to attend public school because they were not considered the equals of their white peers. Joseph and Mary Tape had to sue the San Francisco school district in 1885 to gain access for their children to formal education, resulting in the landmark California Supreme Court case, *Hurley v. Tape* (1885). This case undoubtedly paved the way for the seminal Supreme Court case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* in 1898, which upheld the citizenship rights of Ark, a native-born American of Chinese descent, to re-enter the United States despite a Congressional Chinese Exclusion Act that had been passed to prohibit Chinese from entering the country. Incidentally, this case validated the citizenship rights of American-born children of immigrants, no matter their race, nationality, or country of origin, under the 14th Amendment.

The reader will be shocked and appalled at the many injustices that Chinese-Americans had to endure, but Ngai discusses it all with much historical evidence and in a compelling, even-handed manner. We learn that during the 19th and 20th centuries, when there were exclusion laws and prejudice prohibiting Chinese-Americans from schools, professions, homes, and worst of all, the full rights of U.S. citizenship, Chinese-Americans had to occupy a liminal world between East and West, working as interpreters, traders, and couriers, etc. Ngai says that it was this exclusion that created the world of the Chinese-American, for the American-born children of Chinese immigrants often did not speak Chinese or identify with the Far East, but were not accorded the full rights of U.S. citizenship, either. As a result, these Chinese-Americans started their own schools, civic associations, trade associations, and scholastic and fraternal clubs. They also invented the idea of Chinatown, a hyper-exoticized idea of the Orient, in the exaggerated architectural styles and souvenir shops that they built in San Francisco's Chinatown to cater to the tourist trade after the devastating San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

Ngai advances the interesting thesis that the fate of Chinese-Americans has always depended on the status of China, no matter how assimilated they are or how many generations they have lived in America. This will be interesting to follow as the United States begins to reckon with the growing might of China in the 21st century -- in trade, education, and more.

Christina Zawadiwsky says

The Lucky Ones by Mae Ngai, on sale by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt on September 15, 2010, 304 pages.

Written by a historian (and with ten years of research in the making!), *The Lucky Ones* none-the-less does not read like a boring tract. The protagonists (primarily the Chinese-American Tape family) come alive on the page, despite the fact that author Mae Ngai had mostly photographs (no diaries) and court records from which to determine their characters. This book is a first, the story of two self-made Chinese-Americans in the mid-to-late 1800's and early 1900's - that is to say, Chinese who came to San Francisco and attempted to Americanize themselves and their families.

Being first generation myself (my parents came to New York City - where I was born - from Ukraine), I understand the peer pressure to become Americanized (although in my case I was intensely immersed in Ukrainian culture, language, arts and cuisine as Ukrainians displaced all over the world strove to keep their cultural identity, which was then being suppressed by the Russians in their own country). But Joseph Tape and Mary Tape perceived themselves as Americans and dressed their children in proper Victorian-wear because of Joseph's enterprising business prosperity, rising from being a servant in San Francisco to having his own business moving Chinese immigrants from their ships to Chinatown in a horse-drawn wagon. Mary Tape was saved from slavery and prostitution upon her arrival in America by the Ladies Protection and Relief Society, where Mary McGladery took an interest in her and taught her not only reading and writing in English but also art and piano playing. Later, during Mary's life with her husband Joseph, she painted voluminously and even became involved in the dark room aspects of photography.

The couple married and lived on the outskirts of San Francisco. At one point they lived on Washington Street, raising their children, and "Mary undoubtedly felt that she and her daughters were secure in this environment, with its rich concentration of white people, Christians, and other people of the artisan and middling classes" and "the children went to the Chinese Primary School a block away and pursued private musical instruction: Mamie played the piano, Emily the violin and Frank the French horn. The older girls also learned embroidery and taxidermy to preserve their father's bird specimens" (Joseph loved hunting and owned hunting hounds). Many Chinese did not deem it important to educate their female children, but Mary and Joseph did, given Mary's example. Later Joseph hired an amah (servant) "to help with the household, a

sign of the family's status and prosperity." And when the state of California ruled that Chinese children could only go to Chinese schools, Joseph and Mary sued them on behalf of their daughter Mamie.

The *Lucky Ones* is an interesting book in which the real-life characters act humanly, the children of Joseph and Mary not always following their parents' wishes. At one point their son Frank becomes a governmental "interpreter," a desired position, but he actually spent his time informing against illegal Chinese to the Immigration Department. In 1806 an earthquake and fire destroyed San Francisco and thus displaced many Chinese and sparked the beginning of a newly-built commercial "tourist" Chinatown.

The story about how the children are raised continues, with Mary acknowledging them as "the same as other Caucasians, but in features." A truly unique topic about the first Chinese-Americans in America, and I highly recommend it as not only a book about discrimination but one of finely-drawn and described noble and independent characters.

Reviewed by Christina Zawadiwsky

Christina Zawadiwsky is Ukrainian-American, born in New York City, has a degree in Fine Arts, and is a poet, artist, journalist and TV producer. She has received a National Endowment for the Arts Award, two Wisconsin Arts Boards Awards, a Co-Ordinating Council of Literary Magazines Writers Award, and an Art Futures Award, among other honors. She was the originator and producer of *Where The Waters Meet*, a local TV series created to facilitate the voices of artists of all genres in the media, for which she won two national and twenty local awards, including a Commitment to Community Television Award. She is also a contributing editor to the annual Pushcart Prize Anthology, the recipient of an Outstanding Achievement Award from the Wisconsin Library Association, and has published four books of poetry. She currently reviews movies for <http://www.movieroomreviews.com>, music for <http://www.musicroomreviews.com>, and books for <http://www.bookroomreviews.com>.

Della says

Thank you to FirstReads and the publisher for providing an advanced reading copy!

The *Lucky Ones* is a narrative of the life of the Tapes, a Chinese American family that initially set foot in San Francisco and then settled in Berkeley, CA. Although there were many Chinese that immigrated to San Francisco in the late 1800s, what made the story of the Tape family unique was: (1) their desire to fully integrate themselves into American culture and society, and being amongst the first Chinese Americans to fight for equal rights as any other American-born citizen (at least for secondary education), and (2) their middle-class status, due in part to the lucrative family business of brokering/ticketing passage from China, and the social status of possessing the desirable governmental job as interpreters. What makes this second point even more striking is that their wealth and social status is ultimately derived from their 'exploitation' of Chinese immigrants.

From the outset, the author-historian points out that this is not the typical story of Chinese immigrants to California. Despite the focus on the story of the Tapes, the contrast to other immigrants gives you an idea of what the general experience for the typical Chinese immigrant was like. Overall, it is quite remarkable for the author-historian to put together a timeline like this without any diaries, journals, or other written references to go by other than documentation on photographs and albums.

This book wasn't a very enjoyable read. Much of the narrative was surprisingly boring. There isn't much of a voice to the writing, and it resembled more of a straightforward re-telling of a factual timeline of events. It's unclear whether this was a purposeful decision in order to maintain a neutral point of view of history, or that this voiceless writing was a natural consequence of the limitation of primary information on the intimate thoughts of the Tape family members. In the few instances that the author-historian does try to offer some guesses about what was going on the minds of the Tape family members, I felt that it was done quite poorly. Overall, I found no compelling reason to care about the outcome of the family.

This is a good read for those that are not looking to feel connected to the people in a historical narrative, and are instead interested in the factual aspects of their lives.

Cindy says

2.75

Kathryn says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, but know that any review I write won't match up to the "The Wall Street Journal's" review. You can find it here: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001...>

Deb says

I raced through this one. Historian Ngai has a wonderful ability to mix family history with a social history of San Francisco, and later Portland, Oregon, from the 1870s onward, using three generations of a Chinese American family to highlight immigrant experiences, but also social mores of the period, the tribulations of the 1906 earthquake and fire, anti-Chinese sentiment, opportunities for economic success, family ties and family black sheep, the connection between various world's fairs and the importation of Chinese goods across America, and many other topics. The Tape family represents both a microcosm of the Chinese experience and also a perfect petrie dish of assimilation. I highly recommend this to historians interested in immigration, California history, family history, and even the symbolism of See's candy.

Sara says

ARC received from the Goodreads First Reads program.

The story of the Tape family is not one to read if you're looking to learn more about the experience of the typical Chinese immigrant or Chinese-American family during the exclusion era. Unless you're looking for a family that proves to be the exception to the rule.

This history of Joseph Tape and his family spans about 100 years, from the 1860s to the 1960s. Tape and his

family carved out a name and role for themselves as culture brokers--the link between recently-arrived Chinese immigrants and mainstream (aka white) American culture. The Tapes lived a fairly typical middle-class life, unlike most Chinese-Americans of the late 1800s. They owned a house outside of San Francisco's Chinatown (very unusual), and engaged in typical Euro-American recreational pursuits like hunting (Joseph) and painting (his wife Mary). The Tapes also fought the California school system trying to enroll their eldest daughter Mamie in school.

Personally, I found this an interesting book because it's NOT about the typical poor immigrant experience. This is new territory--Chinese-Americans during the late 19th century and early 20th century as part of the middle class. It's interesting to read about the way the Tapes assimilated, but still retained aspects of their ancestral culture.

I'd recommend this book to those who are already pretty familiar with Californian history, especially as it relates to Chinese immigration. This book serves to illustrate an example of a family of "lucky ones" who leveraged their position to obtain money, power, and about as much acceptance as one could get where racist policies were law.

Nathan says

A history totally devoid of human interest, vivid setting, or substantive analysis. The story of Chinese immigrants to America has plenty of potential that has often been recognized in other books, but this read like a jr. high social studies report. The Tape family isn't cast as representative of the Chinese immigrant experience, but neither are they given any qualities that might explain why their story might be worth telling. And it doesn't seem to be; this is marriage after marriage, journey after journey, start-up business after start-up business; not, to be sure, inaccurate or contrived, just boring. I don't like history done this way.

Nghi Ly says

Mae Ngai's "The Lucky Ones" describes the formation of Chinese America, especially focusing on the life of Jeu Dip, a Chinese immigrant who came to America for a new beginning. This book is set in San Francisco, California during the late 1800s, when immigrants began pouring in from all over the world in search of new opportunities and freedom. Living in the midst of a new form of discrimination, Jeu Dip and his family must try to live a normal, Americanized life while dodging the anti-Chinese and immigration laws. Although Jeu Dip worked his way up the social ladder, he and his family still must face the harsh reality of racism, living in the US as Chinese immigrants. This book describes with great detail another form of discrimination, which allows us to see what it really was like to be living as an immigrant in America during the 1800s. This book left a lasting impression.

The most memorable detail in this book to me so far is when the author quoted William Babcock, a company director who often observed the nature of Chinese laborers, "If you will look at their hands and feet and neck you will see them as clean and neat-looking people as you ever saw in the world. They are different from the lower white classes." I feel that this is the most memorable quote so far because it gave a point of view from a white person. Babcock praised and credited the Chinese laborers for what they are instead of criticizing them for being different racially. He also gave us a visual representation of the typical Chinese laborer. This quote is so memorable because the information given in this book are by a Chinese author who also grew up

as "a daughter of immigrants", therefore the point of view from a non-asian person is quite prominent. It can be inferred that the author spent a great deal of time researching on the subject, because the information is incredibly detailed!

Ultimately, the story of one man's life as a Chinese immigrant during this time period demonstrates the hardships of exclusion and prejudice such as being accused of involvement in illegal business and restriction from certain rights. It all adds up to a tale of human discrimination, a path leading us back in time to a period when racial equality was only a dream. "The Lucky Ones" allows us to experience the difficulties of being an outsider in America a hundred years ago.

I felt that this book started out strong with how and when Jeu Dip (Joseph Tape) arrived in America. I found it quite interesting at first because it talked about this man's journey, past, how he met his wife in America, and the reasons why he immigrated. However, as I go further into the book, it became less about Jeu Dip, and more about politics. I appreciate the large amount of details because it gave you an opportunity to have a more realistic view of whatever subject it revolved around (politics, economy, society); however sometimes it was way too much. I became bored at certain points of the book, sometimes I would even forget the point of a certain part by the time I finish reading all facts because they are long! Would I recommend this book? Yes, if you love history. If you're not into history, I wouldn't recommend it because 80% of the book is facts, facts, facts!

Like I've said many times, this book has A LOT of facts. I felt like I was reading a history textbook at certain times. Although the details made it boring, I did learn a lot! I've learned things from this book that I did not learn in my history classes! I was able to dig deep into American society during the 1800s, I didn't realize how badly the Chinese immigrants were treated until I read this book. I knew that immigrants were looked down upon, accepted low wages, and were isolated; however I didn't know that violence was involved, that their homes and shops were trashed, etc. Not only did I learn more about American history, but more about my own family history reading this book!

This book made me feel more connected to my own family history because my parents also immigrated to the US for similar reasons as Jeu Dip. This was actually the whole reason why I chose this book in the beginning, I wanted to read something that I can somewhat relate to. Of course my parents came to America during a different time, therefore they did not experience the same difficulties and hardships. I wanted to find out how American society changed to accept immigrants and that connection to my own family.

Bookventures Book Club says

The Lucky Ones is essentially a historical account of the Chinese Americans in California. The book features one family in particular, the Tapes of Russell Street in San Francisco who were among the first middle class Chinese American families in that area. If you are not familiar with the history of California, Chinese labours came to this state firstly during the gold rush in the 1840's as a cheap, abundant source of labour. However when the gold rush era panned out, large numbers began to come into the state around the 1860's to work on the transcontinental railroad. The fact that their labour was cheap angered the Occidental population and led to discriminatory laws against the Chinese well into the turn of the twentieth century. It is under this climate

that the Tapes, Joseph and Mary lived in California.

Ngai has done a great job telling the story of this family. It is not so much analysis as it is a narration of the family's life, their battle against segregation in education and how they retained or in some instances assimilated their culture with that of America. The author used mostly family photos and official documentation to reconstruct their lives, the former can be found throughout the book.

At 304 pages, this book is not a light read and may be mostly suited to history buffs like myself yet the content of the book gives you a story not just about this family but about Chinese (and Japanese) Americans during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and more importantly the development and growth of one of the most populated states in America, California.

Kristin Barney says

The book is very informative about how one Chinese American family overcame the status that plagued most Chinese immigrants.

Laura says

This story of Joseph and Mary Tape (to use their American names) and their family is one that we rarely hear: how the Chinese came to America and became part of our country's melting pot. We've all heard about coolie labor during the gold rush and the building of the railroad, or those Chinese prostitutes, but what about the others? The vast majority that weren't either, but wanted to have what Euro-Americans had? The Tapes may not have been unique, but their story does illustrate this chapter in our history quite nicely.

There are two main problems with this book, however. The author became interested in the Tape's saga after hearing about *Tape v. Hurley*, a court case in which the Tapes sued to get access to American public education for their daughter. Given that starting point, one would think that there would be more about the case in the book. Instead, it's buried inside, with little real discussion and/or analysis. I felt a little as though I were some 50 years in our future, reading a biography of the Brown family in which *Brown v. Board of Education* was dispensed with in a few pages.

The other problem is the over reliance on "perhaps" and other suppositions. If you don't know, fine. But sentences that start "Yet it must have been awkward..." and "What did Mary think about..." with nothing to give you a sense that the author has anything concrete to go on are problematic.

In short, an important story ill-served by the author (and editor).

ARC provided by publisher.

Chris Bull says

To be rich is glorious.

Swimming upstream is the fate of any new immigrant and especially to those of colour. Ambition is one

thing, but how you achieve "success" is another. The Tape family had the advantage of being early immigrants to California and they took full advantage of their "luck". The only ethical system at work seems to be centered around the family unit. Getting ahead and making "good" business decisions still rings true in much of the U.S. and now in mainland China. I don't know if it builds a stronger society or nation though. Ngai at times mentions certain photographs in detail, but does not reproduce them in the book(!)

Melissa Mcavoy says

I've been reading a ton about Chinese immigration. This book was intriguing and valuable as it followed one atypical Bay area family over three generations. The Tape family were far more prosperous than most Chinese immigrants of the 1800's. In a sense they were among the first self-identified Chinese-Americans and their life history helped establish the possibility of that ethnicity. (The American born daughter was the plaintiff in the landmark case petitioning for public school education for Chinese. The son was the first Chinese American to serve on a jury.) Despite some hype, and the cool cover, this book isn't a novel, but it is intriguing for its specificity and I appreciated the reality check of the complexity of the Tape's story. They faced discrimination, but they did assimilate and they did prosper. Much of their financial security was the result of anti-Chinese discrimination and their role as immigration brokers. The second generation son was intimately involved in upholding draconian laws excluding Chinese and seems to have taken part in cheating and extorting Chinese immigrants. I found this book full of interesting information and very valuable for upsetting some of the stereotypes other, more general, histories promulgated.
