Module 3
The World's Fair

By Mae Ngai

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Supporting Questions

What opportunities did the World's Fair of 1904 provide for the Tape family to forge a new identity as Chinese American brokers in the interpreter class?

How did the Chinese Village reflect Western perceptions of China and Chinese exclusion laws?

How did the gender of Chinese immigrants and workers affect how they were perceived in trafficking and smuggling schemes?

1. Can one family's assertion of their civil rights become a "victory" for an entire community?

In 1904, Joseph Tape devised a plan for his eldest children, Mamie and Frank, to attend the St. Louis World's Fair (officially called the Louisiana Purchase Exposition). It was the United States' fifth and largest world's fair, running from April to December 1904. The fair was part of a tradition since the late eighteenth century, with countries hosting grand, months-long expositions that promoted international cultures and trade. The world's fairs introduced the public to the peoples, histories, and industries of different countries. Western powers like the United States used the expositions to promote values of progress, expansion, and imperialism. They were also fun occasions, with games, rides, performances, and new innovations like the Ferris wheel and the ice cream cone.

Seeing an economic opportunity for his family at the St. Louis World's Fair, Joseph arranged for Frank, Mamie, and her family, to work at one of the fair's concessions: the Chinese Village. Frank and Joseph's son-in-law, Herman Lowe, also started careers as immigration interpreters through the fair. This set them on the path that Joseph had pioneered as a broker in the immigration trade—arguably the best financial success path for their generation.

This module is about the Tape family's experience at the World's Fair of 1904, and how China and Chinese immigrants were represented on an international stage. The Tapes became culture brokers at a large-scale cultural extravaganza, in which China's position in the world was recognized for the first time, but as a minor player; and where anti-Chinese immigration politics played out in dramatic ways.

2. China at the World's Fair

Although Chinese representatives participated in previous world's fairs, China did not have an official pavilion at any international expo until the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The Qing dynasty, which governed China at the time, built a miniature replica of the Dowager Empress's Summer Palace and sent Prince Pu Lun, a nephew of the emperor, as its representative at this "Chinese Pavilion."

The main Chinese attraction, however, was an exhibition of twenty thousand tons of goods sent by the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, run by British and Americans. These goods were displayed at the Palace of Liberal Arts, a museum-like setting that featured civilizational achievements. But the exhibit was frankly commercial, aimed at developing trade relationships between the US and China. It included a few cultural and artisan exhibits like cloisonné and silk cloth manufacturing, which had commercial value. No Chinese art—such as China's ancient bronzes, jade carvings, fine porcelains, paintings, or calligraphy pieces—had been represented in the Palace of Fine Arts, a separate exhibit that displayed art from various countries.

3. The Chinese Village

The Tapes had no association with the official Chinese Pavilion. Instead, they worked for the

"Chinese Village" on the fair's midway, which was a separate section that featured novel and exciting commercial entertainment, including what Westerners considered exotic displays and stereotypical performances (belly dancing, snake charming, spear throwing) of "primitive" peoples. These were meant not only for entertainment but also to provide a contrast to the perception of Western nations as models for civilization. The general lesson was that European and American colonization was uplifting and progressive.

The Chinese Village had a good location on the midway near other pavilions, between the Siberian Railroad and Constantinople, and across from Cairo. It boasted a large structure with pagoda-inspired eaves and was ostentatiously painted in red and gold. There was a museum ("All the Odd Things of a Nation 4,000 Years Old"); a theater with jugglers, magicians, and acrobats; a restaurant and tea garden ("served by 50 Beautiful Chinese Girls")[1]; a joss house, or Chinese temple; a performance of a Chinese wedding; and a gift shop. As was the case of Chinese Villages at prior world's fairs, it was sponsored by Chinese American entrepreneurs.

The Tape family worked in various roles at the Chinese Village. Frank and Herman were employees of the Hong Tai Company of San Francisco, which ran the concessions at the Village and hired 125 Chinese acrobats and other performers for the theater. The trip was a kind of junket, with all expenses paid. Frank managed the restaurant and Herman oversaw the concessions. Mamie watched her two young children, Harold and Emily, who also participated as fair entertainers. They were part of a group of about ten children—all with parents working for the Hong Tai Company—who wore Chinese costumes and ran around the midway with flyers promoting the Chinese Village. Fairgoers assumed they were from China, but in fact they were American-born US citizens. Emily, the youngest child in the group, was featured in fair guidebooks as a kind of scientific specimen: "Emily Lo, one of the many bright children in the 'Chinese Village.' This little girl is a full-blooded Mongolian 3 years old and measures only 2 ½ feet in height. The pride of the 'Chinese Village'."[2]

4. Immigration Crisis at the Fair

The 1904 arrival of merchant exhibitors, diplomats, and actors from China sparked an immigration crisis in the United States, which was also fueled by anti-Chinese sentiment and

legislation from previous decades. Government immigration officials believed the St. Louis World's Fair had created a giant loophole through which Chinese could enter the country in violation of the exclusion laws. They viewed all Chinese migrants arriving in San Francisco and heading to the world's fair with suspicion, and imposed stringent inspection rules including interrogation, fingerprinting, and a $500 bond per person to ensure their departure following the fair.

Chinese merchants and diplomats—who were categorically exempt from the exclusion laws—were also subject to these inspections and outraged that they were treated like low-class laborers. After diplomatic complaints, the Immigration Bureau eased its harassment of merchants and diplomats. But US officials still assumed that actors and others working in the Chinese Village were laborers intending to desert the fair and remain in the United States in violation of the exclusion laws. For example, there was talk of a Chinese American syndicate allegedly selling $1,000 "freedom contracts" to facilitate their disappearance from the fair.

The first group of two hundred Chinese migrants arrived in San Francisco in early August 1904. They traveled to St. Louis by train, confined in locked railway cars and accompanied by more than sixty US soldiers and immigration agents. The local immigration inspector, James Dunn, placed the migrants in quarantine in the Chinese Village and under a twenty-four-hour watch. Dunn also believed that a number of women brought to the fair were being trafficked or smuggled as part of the prostitution industry. Leaving the Village required a pass and an escort. No other group of foreign performers or workers at the world's fair was subject to such restriction and surveillance.

Dunn bolstered his strategy of containing the Chinese by hiring Frank Tape as an immigration interpreter. Frank's real job though was as an undercover informant, hanging around the Village and picking up information about the actors, sometimes by standing outside a window of the living quarters and eavesdropping on conversations.

The alleged trafficking scheme blew up when twelve women, who had been hired in China to work as waitresses in the tea garden, learned that their recruiter, Lee Toy, intended to sell them into the prostitution industry. When four of the women objected, they were beaten by Lee Toy's associate, Hippolyttus Eça da Silva, a former immigration inspector. In September, Eça

da Silva and Lee Toy were arrested in San Francisco. News of their arrests reached St. Louis and threw the Village into a panic, as workers who had purchased "freedom contracts" feared they were now worthless.

James Dunn reported that the situation was "restive" and "ugly." By the end of October 1904, the Chinese Village had "virtually gone to pieces."[3] The weather had turned cold and there were few visitors. The only activities left were a juggling act and three small concessions selling curios. The Village owed the exposition company $5,000 in rent. Dunn began arresting women at the Village on prostitution charges. On November 17, he removed the remaining 201 Chinese workers from the Village, on grounds that the building was unsanitary and an unsafe firetrap, and prepared to deport them. Only the jugglers, who had secured a contract to tour the country on the vaudeville circuit after the fair, were spared.

On **deportation** day, immigration officers shuttled the Chinese workers in patrol wagons to the train station in groups of ten, their hands tied behind their backs with rope. They boarded six locked railroad cars. The deportation train departed with the 201 Chinese performers, accompanied by watchmen, marshals, and Frank Tape.

5. The Path into the Immigration Bureau

China's participation in the world's fair was a tiny step of cultural representation on the world stage. Western nations had believed China had a glorious ancient civilization but that it stagnated and lagged far behind the West. This transitional moment underlay the confusing perceptions and conflicting representations of Chinese people and culture at the fair: a miniature national pavilion alongside a massive trade show organized by Europeans and Americans; the broad application of the exclusion laws to diplomats and the modern commercial class; the racial suspicions surrounding Chinese immigrants; and the opportunities afforded to bilingual Chinese Americans like Frank Tape and Herman Lowe.

Frank returned to St. Louis and reported to the city's immigration office for duty. He threw himself into the work of pursuing Chinese immigrants who entered the United States in

violation of the exclusion acts. He raided Chinese laundries and arrested those without official documents. He broke up a ring of merchants who were selling counterfeit certificates of identity. His escapades were written up in the newspapers and contributed to public perceptions of Chinese immigrants.

Meanwhile, Mamie's husband, Herman Lowe, was hired by the US Immigration Bureau to work in San Francisco. He became the first ethnic Chinese employee to enter the service as an official interpreter. The Daily Morning Call ran an article with the headline, "Chinese Blood Goes into the Bureau" and noted that he was the son-in-law of "well known Chinese broker, Joseph Tape."[4] The San Francisco Chronicle wrote, "Man Employed by Slave Importers During St. Louis Exposition is Presented with a Good Federal Position."[5] Herman Lowe was soon posted to Detroit, and then to Portland, where he had a long, if unremarkable, career as an immigration interpreter. He and Mamie lived in a modest house in a white neighborhood. Their children Harold and Emily went to predominantly white schools. They were living the life that Joseph Tape had wanted for them.

Frank and Herman's appointments as immigration interpreters marked a new chapter in the job opportunities available to Chinese Americans. The San Francisco District Office had a long-standing policy of hiring only white people as interpreters, drawing upon a small pool of white workers who could speak Chinese, typically from families with missionary or business backgrounds in China. In 1904, the Immigration Bureau decided it was necessary to hire more Chinese interpreters. A few East Coast districts, however, had hired Chinese interpreters since the 1890s, where there were even fewer Chinese-speaking white people than in San Francisco. Although the exclusion laws sharply curtailed Chinese immigration throughout the United States, there were still Chinese migrants who ventured to America using counterfeit papers or by crossing the border.

6. Rise of the Interpreter Class

Between 1900 and 1907, the US Immigration Bureau hired thirty-five Chinese interpreters, in addition to a half dozen white Chinese-language interpreters. Most interpreters were paid on a per diem basis ($4 a day), but seven—including Frank and Herman—drew an annual

salary of $1,200, nearly as much as junior-grade inspectors who were all white. Though they lacked civil service protections (including pension), they did not have to take the civil service exam. Government work held out many advantages: good pay, a month's paid vacation each year, and no extreme overwork. Chinese people who had even a slight knowledge of English coveted these positions.

Although most Chinese interpreters secured their jobs through connections (as is often true with government work), some acquired positions through other professional backgrounds and were well-educated. William S. Lee was born in New Zealand to a Chinese merchant, was raised in Oregon and Wisconsin, and worked as a translator for banks in New York and Pittsburgh. Seid Gain was the son of a wealthy merchant, labor contractor, and opium smuggler from Portland, Oregon. Gain was educated at Baptist mission schools and also attended law school before becoming an interpreter with the US Immigration Bureau.

Most Chinese interpreters were not formally educated, however, in either English or Chinese. Many had learned English in Protestant mission churches and spoke with only a fair degree of facility. Only a few, like Frank Tape, Herman Lowe, and Seid Gain, were born and raised in the United States and fluent in English. Some interpreters, like Frank, were barely proficient in Chinese. But English-speaking, American-born interpreters still had the greatest advantage within the bureau.

The St. Louis World's Fair was a giant performance of international cultural exchange. The Tapes tapped into it as culture brokers and took advantage of the anti-Chinese immigration crisis at the fair to parlay their way into jobs with the government. By 1906, four men of the extended Tape family were working as interpreters: Frank and Herman worked for the Immigration Bureau. Robert Park, Emily Tape's husband, interpreted for Chinese witnesses and defendants in San Francisco's criminal court. Robert's brother, Edward Park, worked as an immigration interpreter in San Francisco. And so, they were now all part of a new privileged social class of Chinese Americans—the interpreter class.

Endnotes

[1] Advertisement, *World's Fair Bulletin,* May 1904.

[2] Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones,* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 104.

[3] Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones,* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 110.

[4] "Chinese Blood Goes Into The Bureau," *SF Morning Call,* April 4, 1905.

[5] "North gives Chinese a Job," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), April 4, 1905.