The childhood experience of Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay area has changed dramatically since the turn of the twentieth century: from political rejection and discrimination to political acceptance; from independent single life to family life; from menial labor to education. This historical shift makes for an interesting study of Chinese American childhood. Theirs was a unique situation. The hardships of immigration, combined with the stresses and responsibilities of being pushed prematurely into adult life, converged on the children of a culture that expected nothing less than blind obedience to the expectations of their elders. The contributions of Chinese American children to public and private histories are thus easily forgotten. Their struggles, which inform a growing interest in the role of children in political, economic, and social life, are generally ignored. A nuanced narrative covering both general trends and local issues and stories finds that, among tragedies of racism, economic hardship, and gender oppression, there are surprising and encouraging accounts of Chinese American childhood in the San Francisco Bay area in the early twentieth century.

Although a large number of their ethnic compatriots had immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century, the children were part of a Chinese community in California whose population had only begun to stabilize by 1900. Traditional city-centers were slowly bleeding away their Chinese residents. Chinese faced widespread discrimination not only in government policy but in their daily interactions with other Americans as well. The gender distribution of the Chinese community held serious implications for the family situation of its youth, especially in Contra Costa County, located in the San Francisco Bay area. These conditions in Contra Costa County were not hospitable for childhood, but children learned, played, and lived there nonetheless. It is precisely this contrast that makes Chinese American childhood in the San Francisco Bay area at the turn of the twentieth century especially noteworthy.

What makes the children’s experience with the trans-Pacific journey to the United States remarkable is that despite their age children were afforded no special considerations or care. The conditions onboard the emigrant steamships were not intolerable, but their unfamiliar conditions were the main concern of children traveling alone to America. Lee Chew was sixteen when his father gave him $100 to move to the United States. Chew recalls: “Everything was new to me. All my life I had been used to sleeping on a board bed with a wooden pillow, and I found the steamer’s bunk very uncomfortable, because it was so soft.”

During the voyage to the United States, American skepticism and suspicion of the Chinese were often returned at the “white devils,” as Whites were known vernacularly in the community. An illustration in the 20 May 1876 issue of Harper’s Weekly depicts mealtime onboard the steamship Alaska. While the White captain and cook of the boat

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discuss the dishes prepared and spread on the floor for the Chinese passengers, three
Chinese men stand to the side examining a steaming pot, their faces sullen and doubtful
about the food with which they have been called to partake. Mrs. Chin, who was
nineteen-years old when she left for America in 1913, recounts that coming by ship was
not a hardship, “not as long as you didn’t get seasick.” Most children recognized that
the real difficulty lay not in crossing the ocean, but in gaining entry once they had arrived
at the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco.

As the western counterpart of New York’s Ellis Island, the Angel Island
Immigration Station was the gateway to America for all immigrations coming from the
Far East. The examinations at Angel Island attained such cult status that entire industries
sprang up in China to help immigrants pass the verbal tests. The tests include a medical
examination that thoroughly humiliated the very modest Chinese. Mr. Lee, who arrived
at Angel Island in 1930 when he was twenty-years old, remembers: “The doctor told us to
take off everything. [It] was humiliating. The Chinese never expose themselves like
that.” After the physical examination, immigration officials called the Chinese
individually into hour-long interrogation sessions. The officials queried about seemingly
trivial matters, such as the number of hours in the subject’s village or the number of steps
between the subject’s house and his neighbor’s. In truth, the minutiae were instruments
to draw out discrepancies between the testimonies of family members and friends, thus
disqualifying as many potential entrants as possible under the terms of the Chinese
Exclusion Act. Sometimes, according to Mr. Chew, who arrived in 1920 when he was
fourteen, the interrogations were simply inhumane:

One person even went crazy. Her husband said he had four sons. Of course, Chinese
always reported sons in order to have them come to America to make a fortune. Who
would report daughters? So this inspector tried to trip her and said, “Your husband said
you had four daughters. Why are you saying four sons? We’re going to send you to jail
before we deport you.” So they drove her insane.

Similar to their experiences on the steamships to America, what the Chinese
children underwent at Angel Island was disturbing. The immigration facility made no
effort to distinguish between youth and adult in its operations, perhaps because children
were not significant enough a population at Angel Island to have merited the additional
resources. The combination of adults and youth is thus very telling about the size and
Whites’ perception of the young Chinese population. Many children were left alone once
they arrived at Angel Island. Mr. Gin, who came to America in 1915 with his uncle as a
six-year old, remembers: “As soon as the ship landed . . . [immigration] took me to Angel
Island and he just came back to Chinatown.”

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2 See plate 2, “Chinese Emigration to America – Sketch on Board the Pacific Mail Steamship ‘Alaska,’”
3 Mrs. Chin, interviewed by Judy Yung, Angel Island Oral History Project, box 1, folder 2.
4 Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel
5 Chetin, 19.
6 Mr. Chew, interviewed by Judy Yung, Angel Island Oral History Project, box 1, folder 11.
7 Mr. Gin, interviewed by Judy Yung, Angel Island Oral History Project, box 1, folder 6.
The system that the Chinese adopted to circumvent the Chinese Exclusion Act called for papers to be purchased for children in China who would come as the false sons of merchants returning to the United States. These children, who were commonly called “paper sons,” bought entry documents and coaching instructions for the Angel Island examinations for sums upward of $1,500.8 This system of false identities led to a complicated web of relations in the Chinese community; it forced the Chinese to re-evaluate and extend the traditional definition of family, leading to some very peculiar developments in a lived sense of family.

The trauma of this “paper son” system probably caused some psychological damage to the children involved. The system continues to manifest itself in the Chinese who experienced it as children at the turn of the century. Mr. Chan, who came to the United States as a “paper son” when he was sixteen, refused to disclose his real name even as late as the 1970s. During an oral history interview, he was afraid that revealing his illegal entry might jeopardize his current resident status.9 The “paper son” system also bred a deep distrust of American government.

Aside from isolation from their relatives, children’s lives on Angel Island seem idyllic. Of the fifty-eight immigrants interviewed for the Angel Island Oral History Project, the lengths of their stays at the facility ranged from three days to a year. The differences in duration made it difficult to arrange schooling for the children entering Angel Island, and no formal education was provided. Six-year old Gin remembers no other children at Angel Island during his three months there: “There were no kids. I don’t remember what I did with the time—fool around, I guess.”10 There was no English instruction, implying that Whites did not expect Chinese children to assimilate into the mainstream community. A few lucky children with families in the city received consoling letters, but immigration officials opened and inspected the letters before they were passed to their designated recipients.11

Education was uncommon for Chinese children, mostly because it was not a readily available resource or an economically viable option. When Chinese children received education, it was in segregated schools taught by White teachers, usually females. Christian churches ran many of these schools. Census data shows that younger Chinese children enjoyed a better chance at receiving an education than older children. In California, among 2,944 Chinese children aged seven to thirteen, 2,609 were listed as attending school in 1920. Of 2,235 Chinese children aged eighteen to twenty, however, only 708 were listed as attending school.12 From the discrepancy, one might argue that younger children enrolled in school were typically members of higher-class Chinese families that could afford the expensive trans-Pacific passage without demanding an economic return from those children. California census numbers also demonstrate that Chinese girls were more likely to receive an education than boys, with 60 percent of girls attending school in 1910 compared to 40 percent of boys.13 The likelihood of schooling

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8 Wong Yow came to America in 1921 after his father paid a merchant named Mr. Wong $1,650 for passage. Peter C.Y. Leung, One Day, One Dollar (El Cerrito: Chinese/Chinese American History Project, 1984), 48. Quoted in Choy, 45.
9 Mr. Chan, interviewed by Judy Yung, Angel Island Oral History Project, box 1, folder 7.
10 Mr. Gin, interview.
11 Mrs. Chong, interviewed by Judy Yung, Angel Island Oral History Project, box 1, folder 22.
12 Fourteenth Census, 1044.
13 Thirteenth Census, 1140.
for girls suggests that they were not expected to contribute to the family economy as much as boys were expected to contribute. The value of girls lay in preparing for the future, whereas the value of boys lay in their potential immediate economic payoff.

Photographic evidence offers some hints to school life. An undated postcard entitled “Chinese Primary Public School” shows a class of Chinese boys in session.14 From the all-male composition of the class in the photograph, it seems that schools were divided by gender. A White female teacher sits in the front, leading her seventeen students in the reading of some book. Few of the students seem truly interested in the teacher or engaged in the lesson, which seems to be conducted in English from the cursive writing sample on a chalkboard on the sidewall. Many of the students turn distractedly to look at the photographer, and others stare blankly at the book on their desks as they recline, sitting on their hands. Drawings of tigers, elephants, and horses decorate a blackboard in the back of the classroom, suggesting that the class might be discussing science or zoology. The classroom scene gives a rather unfavorable impression of the education offered to Chinese children. Met by teachers who could not bridge the cultural divide between Whites and Chinese, children were ineffectively taught subjects that were irrelevant to their most salient roles as economic actors.

Although the youngest members of the Chinese community might have escaped the expectation of being gainfully employed, the majority of children contributed to the community’s economy in some way. This was especially true in Contra Costa County, where the privilege of education was lost to all thirty-seven individual cases of Chinese children identified in the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Census.15 Thirty-six of these children, males ranging in age from three to twenty, were listed as laborers of one form or another. The last child of the group, an eight-year old girl named Faun Lee, had no occupation listed. It is almost disturbing that a child as young as three-years old, Kew Ten of Antioch, would be listed as a laborer, but this fact demonstrates the rigorous employment culture in the Chinese community, particularly in Contra Costa County.

Chinese children mainly took jobs in manual labor or service and support industries. Of the thirty-seven individual cases identified between 1910 and 1920, the majority of the children were employed on farms. However, there seems to be no steady trend of child employment in the fields of Contra Costa County. Fourteen-year old Sun Toy of Palm Tract, for example, was the only hired hand under twenty years of age working at a potato farm. He did the same work of men twice his age.16 Others, like fourteen-year old Ah Wee of the unincorporated Second Township, worked as servants and cooks in a boarding house.17 Nilda Rego, a local historian, reports “many of the leading families of Contra Costa and Alameda counties had Chinese cooks. John and Louis Strenzel Muir not only hired a Chinese cook, but house cleaners and farm laborers.”18 Young Chinese also staffed workplaces such as mining and fishing camps.
The high rate of mobility demonstrated in census data suggests that Chinese American children were forced to adopt an independent lifestyle even at a young age. The data shows no continuity from census to census. The two California-born workers in the 1920 Census, eighteen-year old Jung Mon and twenty-year old Gene Ong, do not appear in any California census records since 1860, suggesting that the children may have been part of migrant families that evaded the census count in 1910. Alternatively, the scarcity of family units suggests that Mon and Ong were part of the young adult population from China identified as “boarders” in terms of their relationship with the head of the household. As boarders, Chinese youth received food, lodging, and perhaps a small stipend for the work they performed for the household. As independents, Chinese youth had greater control over their incomes and fewer restrictions on the type or the location of their work. The discontinuity between censuses proposes that, when work opportunities ran short, the child laborers had few reservations about relocating to more fruitful surroundings.

An 1897 Arnold Genthe print from a series on Chinese shrimp camps in Point San Pedro shows a young boy as a cooking assistant (Figure 1). An older man, probably in his twenties, prepares a meal for the camp and looks up to give instructions to the youngster. The boy is dressed in ragged clothes, his signature Manchu hair queue hanging shaggy and unkempt. It is clear from the boy’s clothing and position that his days are full of hard work and hurried orders; there is no time to waste on sartorial order.

Figure 1

Although boys were the most commonly employed of Chinese youth, one Genthe photograph, entitled “The Fish Dealer’s Daughter,” reveals that girls sometimes shared the burden of manual labor, in this case carrying shrimp baskets for her fisherman father. Genthe catches the girl in her work, the baskets strewn about her as she stops momentarily for the portrait. Her face evinces no childish joy or happiness; rather, her furrowed eyebrows betray a premature adult stress. While the census provides the sterile data that Chinese child employment was prevalent but not methodical in Contra Costa County, the Genthe photographs reveal the pain and hardships that these young laborers endured.

19 Arnold Genthe, Genthe’s Photographs of San Francisco’s Old Chinatown (New York: Dover, 1984), 36, plate 19.
20 Ibid, 37, plate 20.
The public lives of Chinese children also come through in their encounters with the police and the courts. Writing at a time when negative stereotypes of the Chinese abounded, sociologist Mary Coolidge asserted that the Chinese were actually a more law-abiding citizenry compared to other ethnic groups. Between 1870 and 1900, Chinese males made up 14 percent of the adult male population on average, but only 11 percent of the criminally held in state prisons and 4.2 percent of those deemed insane. In contrast, British males made up only 4 percent of the total male population but made up 52 percent of the criminal population and 6 percent of the insane.

The most well known Chinese criminals were highbinders, or mobsters hired to enforce the rulings of the village associations known as tongs. Although highbinders were mostly older men, some young Chinese became involved in the dangerous underworld of mob politics as well. The tong wars that sometimes ripped apart the San Francisco Chinatown spilled over to Contra Costa County. On 21 April 1917, the Contra Costa Gazette reported a double murder in the city of Martinez by two highinders of the Hop Sing Tong organization. An elaborate entrapment led Ah Toy and Lee Toy to their deaths as twenty-two-year-old Joe Lum gunned them down on Escobar Street. Lum was arrested and sentenced to San Quentin State Penitentiary on 24 April 1917 and served three years. The remarkable thing about Lum’s case is that it was the singular Chinese criminal case reported in the hundreds of files at San Quentin. The only other two criminal cases involving Chinese youth were reported in the county’s Register of Patients and Inmates, where fifteen-year old Frank Chew and fourteen-year old Alfred Beo were “diagnosed” with juvenile detention. In total, there were three cases of criminality in a population of 343.

The only other court documents relating to Chinese youth in Contra Costa County address issues of family life. George Guen Ong, a nineteen-year old Chinese male, is mentioned in Superior Court documents in 1923 regarding a change in guardianship. Surprisingly, the adopter is a White female: Adalyne Dungan of Pittsburg. Ong’s parents, Chang Wah Ong and Chan Shee Ong, passed away in February 1923, and George, according to the court documents, “nominated [Dungan] as . . . guardian.” Dungan’s previous relationship to Ong is described as a “friend,” although a mentoring or teaching relationship may be more accurate.

The case of George Guen Ong is important for several reasons. First, it sheds light on the non-existence of nuclear Chinese families in Contra Costa County (Dungan could only become guardian because the court found no extended family in the county). Second, it establishes the closeness of relationships that some Chinese shared with Whites, enough to cause Ong to request Dungan as his legal guardian. Finally, the case highlights the agency Ong takes in deciding his own fate. The adoption case of George

21 Coolidge, 448.
24 Contra Costa County Hospital, “Number 4805 and Number 4806,” 1908-1926, Register of Patients and Inmates, Contra Costa Historical Society, Martinez.
Guen Ong is an anomaly in the otherwise grim public experiences of Chinese children in Contra Costa County.

The private lives of Chinese children in California, particularly the domestic living situations, are difficult to discern because of the lack of documentation. Family structure and family values can be gleaned from sociological studies such as Coolidge’s *Chinese Immigration*. However, outside of oral history, there are few accounts of Chinese home life at the turn of the century. The lack of historical family documents should not be surprising considering the circumstances. Migratory families are less likely than settled families to document their living spaces and family lives because they do not hold any sentimental value to their temporary home; economic needs simply do not make family portraits and other such trivia cost-efficient. As a result, children’s experience in family life must be gathered from what scanty evidence there is of their public interactions.

The Chinese family structure was highly patriarchal. Coolidge writes: “The treatment of women is the darkest blot upon the civilization of China. Daughters are unwelcome in the family because, when married, they are lost by absorption into the husband’s family.” In Coolidge’s observation, there is a sense that every child is a potential economic contributor, and his or her value is appraised by his or her potential contribution. A Chinese Hawaiian explains: “It is generally believed that in a typical Oriental family, the mother is secondary and unimportant, she being so submissive and meek.” While the men and the boys worked outside the home, girls “were taught to clean the house, help with the cooking, wash the dishes and in general do all the household duties that a good daughter should know.” In private homes, the hierarchy would be organized along the lines of gender, with the elder receiving more respect than the younger. Nevertheless, this theoretical system of family organization was never consistently applied because the rules, and the demographics of the community necessitated its change. Social pressures forced the Chinese to re-evaluate their definition of family and, in many cases, re-evaluate the role of children in their lives.

One of the ways in which the definition of family was changed by social pressure can be found in many of Arnold Genthe’s photographs of San Francisco’s Chinatown. From the photographs, it would appear that fathers were the primary caretakers of the children. Indeed, very few of Genthe’s family photographs show a woman with her children in public. In Genthe’s “Reading the Tong Proclamation,” a father dressed in western garb stops along a wall to read announcements from his neighborhood association. The daughter, dressed in traditional Chinese clothes, clings to him and looks down the street, oblivious to whatever important news her father brought her out to see. The father-child relationship in this photograph seems distant, each member having a different concern and neither taking interest in the other.

The daughter might have yearned for her mother, who usually did not show her face in public under the community’s rules of decorum. Sociologist Ivan Light explains: “As late as 1900, married Chinese women never dared to venture on foot in the streets of

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26 Coolidge, 10.
27 Hoobler, 87.
28 Ibid.
29 Genthe, 67, plate 53.
San Francisco’s Chinatown. Because of the numerous street walkers…‘no Chinese man…who has respect for his girl friend will be seen with her in Chinatown.’”

The girl might also have yearned for her neighborhood “uncles.” One 1927 Genthe print shows a group of three men in Western dress on a street corner interacting with three small children while an older man, possibly the children’s grandfather, looks on. These three men would have been known as “community uncles.” As historian John Tchen writes of these phenomena, “One of the deepest sentiments running unbroken from the bachelor society of the 1800s through that of the early 1960s was the great affection the community’s many ‘uncles’ had for the children of the quarter.” As a bachelor society and a society generally unfamiliar to the concept of family, the Chinese community came to redefine public family roles in the care of its young, and it seems, from the convulsing delight of a young Chinese boy playing with his community uncle, the children took the redefinition to heart without reservation.

Even without the accompaniment of their families, children maintained a conspicuous presence in the Chinese community. Genthe’s photographs of the San Francisco Chinatown capture many moments of children at play, often with siblings but sometimes alone. As seen in “The Crossing” and “Their First Photograph,” older brothers and sisters were often responsible for their younger siblings in the public, though they look no older than seven years old themselves. Children enjoyed myriad diversions; although, without adult supervision, the diversions sometimes became mischief. There was much to see in the Chinese quarter of the city, and Genthe captures many children parading around Chinatown. “Boys Playing Shuttlecock” catches five boys in a favorite street game in which the object is keep a feathered shuttlecock in the air by kicking it and passing it with the feet (Figure 2). In “His First Cigar,” Genthe spies on a group of four Chinese children engaged in something less innocent: experimenting with tobacco. A boy no older than six years holds a cigar to his lips, his hands poised to light it as the others look on. A nearby girl seems to view the smoking with particular disdain.

Genthe’s photographs might be somewhat misleading; he is known to have shot more women and children because they were “exotic” and commercially profitable. But the spontaneous moments of childhood still show that Chinese children enjoyed many

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31 Genthe, 131, plate 127.
32 Ibid, 131.
33 Ibid, 118, plate 113.
34 Ibid, 120, plate 117.
freedoms within the confines of their ethnic neighborhood. Outside those confines—for example, across the bay in Contra Costa County where the Chinese population was too small to have formed a booming Chinatown—childhood was a different experience.

The Chinese children of Contra Costa County were mostly laborers living in boarding houses, their lifestyle and culture varied greatly from that of an established Chinatown. The lack of families hastened the maturation process for children as they were expected to take on more than their share of professional and social responsibilities. Residents of the same boarding house often shared similar local background. In an oral history interview, Wei Bat Liu recalls his communal living experience: “In 1913, all the cousins from the Liu family in my village had one big room so all the members could fit in it, and we slept in that room, cooked in that room.” Communal living was a necessity in this time of temporary and migratory work. Youth contributed to the pooling of resources such as rent and rice.

Weekdays were filled with work; sixteen to twenty hour workdays left little room for leisure time. On the weekends, wages earned during the week might be spent on opium, a prostitute, or theater. The unemployed resigned themselves to swapping stories, complaining of their troubles, and playing the Chinese tile game of mahjong. For the independent Chinese children of Contra Costa, life was listless and repetitive, but there was always the promise of marriage or moving elsewhere.

The Chinese girls of Contra Costa County maintained a separate and distinct experience from that of the working boys. Although the census only records one underage female between 1910 and 1920, press clippings show that Chinese girls lived in Contra Costa County in larger numbers. With only seventeen females to 326 males, every girl was a commodity. Fifteen-year-old Yee Ying of Walnut Creek was set to marry someone of her choice when suddenly a court order to desist arrived from Cheyenne, Wyoming where another Chinese merchant had arranged with Ying’s parents to marry her for $3,000. In fact, the sale of girls into marriage was something of a norm in Contra Costa.

The possibility of marriage at times even instigated violence. This was the case in 1892, when armed gangsters forced their way into the home of Pon Lin to kidnap fifteen-year-old Lin Oy, who, though she had run away to elope with another man, was still considered the property of her first husband. In these few cases, the ability for Chinese girls to press for their own romantic lives was remarkable, considering their general economic circumstances. To that end, enterprising Chinese girls found respite and stability in marriage, and Chinese men were more than happy to oblige a steady companion.

By 1911 children were beginning to enter the mainstream of American culture in their daily lives. Earlier photographs show that children remained close to Chinese customs, particularly in dress. A class portrait from 1911 shows a class of Chinese girls, half of whom wear the customary Chinese pantsuit for women while the other half wear

36 Genthe, 62.
38 “May Hai, Well Known Chinese Girl of Richmond Was Sold in Marriage at Age of 13 Claim in Divorce Suit,” Richmond Daily Investigator, 16 August 1922.
39 Rego, 2.
simple, white dresses.\textsuperscript{40} Family relations changed as well. Asian studies scholar Betty Lee Sung tells the story of Eddie Wang’s father, who encountered a note from his son asking for his black shoes to be polished in preparation for a dance. “Why the very nerve of that boy!” Eddie’s father thundered. “Asking me – his father – to shine his shoes for him! Why, it’s utterly disrespectful! When I was a boy, I spoke to my father only when spoken to.” But Eddie’s father complied with the request. “What could I do? Sometimes Eddie’s actions appall me, but we enjoy a warm relationship that I never experienced with my father,” he said.\textsuperscript{41} Again, children were at the very forefront of immersion into American cultural values.

This is only a very brief survey of the experience of Chinese American children in the San Francisco Bay area at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in Contra Costa County. As witnessed by the systems of “paper sons” and “community uncles,” children were often at the center of a constant storm in the Chinese community to redefine family as necessitated by political and social changes. Within the boundaries of their own ethnic enclaves there was predictability, but for those who moved outside into areas like Contra Costa, life remained difficult, lonely, and impermanent. The most promising aspect of the Chinese childhood experience was that Chinese children remained the sector of the Chinese population most susceptible to American cultural influence. The youngest of the community became leaders in making the Chinese full-fledged members of American society.

\textsuperscript{40} “Chinese students,” circa 1911, “San Francisco schools: an album of photographs,” Bancroft Library, Berkeley.
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