

## **Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America**

Michael Luo, Published by Random House, 2025, Pp 560.

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The book “*Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America*” by Michael Luo presents an in-depth look at the rich and complex history of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Through a powerful narrative with personal stories woven in historical documents, Luo describes the pictures of struggles, triumphs and the eventual resilience of the Chinese American community. This book is not only a historical record of the Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, and White collective struggles for freedom, it is also a poignant meditation on themes of exclusion, belonging, and ongoing challenges faced by immigrant communities. This takes place in a land that, too often, has been perceived as a landscape of hope and opportunity. The story starts with Luo remembering the *California Gold Rush of 1849* when a lot of Chinese in America came to seek fortune and a normal life. At first, they were accepted for their labour but soon turned exceedingly against them. It was because of economic competition and racial prejudices. The author intelligently records how these early Chinese immigrants were faced with hostility and discrimination, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It was a landmark piece of legislation for immigration policy in America. It was specifically designed to

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ostracize an entire community for reasons of race and ethnicity. Luo argues that the Chinese Exclusion Act was not an isolated event but part of a larger pattern of exclusion and nativism repeated in American history. By putting the narrative in this historical frame of reference, the author invites readers to think about a previous condition of systemic racism shaping immigration policies and the way in which 'host societies' have perceived 'others.'

What distinguishes "*Strangers in the Land*" from countless other studies of Chinese exclusion is that Luo includes personal narratives of Chinese Americans, fleshing out the historical accounts with a human emotional dimension. The author relates stories of people and their families who were tormented by the arbitrary exclusion. Luo discusses the voices that present the experience of the emotional and psychological fallout of living under the shadow of discrimination. Gene Tong, a Los Angeles herbalist who was dragged from his apartment and hanged by a mob. Such incidents shed light on how it feels to live under the darkness of discrimination.

The concept of belonging is a crucial theme in Luo's book. The Chinese immigrants have continually and often unconventionally grappled with how to balance questions of identity, bilateral acceptance, and seeking social and cultural belonging throughout their history in America. The author looks at how Chinese Americans were able to straddle the middle by balancing their heritage and cultural practices with the need to be viewed as complete US citizens. Luo concentrates on the wide range of strategies Chinese Americans employ to merge into American society while maintaining their cultural identity. These efforts were most often a response to exclusionary practices that sought to marginalize them from community organizations to cultural celebrations. This narrative explores how, in the face of seemingly endless obstacles, Chinese

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Americans have generated major inputs to shape the whole of the American cultural palate and better redefine American identity.

Overall, the book is an important contribution to the discourse on race, immigration, and identity in the US. It is a vital read for anyone seeking to understand the historical complexities and contemporary relevance of the Chinese American experience, as well as a call to action for societal change and acceptance. Through Luo's compelling storytelling, readers are left with a sense of hope and a belief that, despite historical injustices, the quest for belonging continues to unfold, paving the way for a more inclusive future. The Chinese became America's first undocumented hounded, counted, suspected, surveilled. Today, there are more than 22 million people of Asian descent in the US and yet the label "*Stranger*" remains. ■