

OCI Public Talk

Hugo Wong: *The Chinese Diaspora's Fight for belonging and Survival in America*

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[Edited transcript]

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Welcome to our public talk series organised by the Online Confucius Institute.

I'm KAN, Qian. I'm Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University. I'm Senior Lecturer at the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. It's my pleasure to introduce you to our speaker of today's talk, Hugo Wong.

Hugo grew up between Paris and Mexico City from the early 1990s. He lived for 15 years in Greater China, including Beijing, where he worked on the founding of various Sino-Foreign joint ventures, including China's first investment bank, he's the author of the book *America's Lost Chinese, the rise and fall of a migrant family dream*. His book tells a fascinating story of his great-grandparents as teenagers. Hugo's great-grandfather's fled poverty in China for California. A decade later, they were excluded from the States. They helped establish a Chinese settlement across the border in Mexico, led by a world-famous dissident in exile with visions of the new China overseas. They would be among the first successful Chinese businessmen meeting with generals, missionaries, living through astonishing victories and humiliating defeats.

So, let's warmly welcome Hugo to give us the talk: *The Chinese Diaspora's Fight for belonging and Survival in America*, which is based on both his family's story and his extensive research. So, I pass on to Hugo.

Hugo Wong

Well, thanks Qian and The Open University for inviting me today.

As you know, there are thousands of stories about the struggles of Chinese migrants in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the life of the lives of my two ancestors, which I tell in my book are unique in three ways. First, they move back and forth between three countries, China, the US and Mexico; second, they interacted with high level Chinese and American politicians; and three, they both dreamed of building a new China in America. Foon Chuck and Leung Hing led parallel lives. Both were born in Guangdong province, South of China in the 1860s, when they were 12 and 14 years-old, they both moved to the US. They both were fleeing poverty, but Foon Chuck was a bit better off, and he attended a missionary school in San Francisco, while Leung Hing worked as a simple laundryman. Ten years later, in the 1880s, they both left the US for Mexico, pushed out by

racism and the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#), the first law of its kind which banned Chinese immigration in the United States.

in Mexico, both married local women and made vast fortunes. Foon Chuck even partnered with [Kang Youwei](#) (康有为), a famous Chinese politician, reformer and thinker. Both became amongst the first Chinese magnates in America, and both lost their fortunes at the end. In the 1920s, the next generation, descendants of those two families, married, uniting those two families and becoming my grandparents.

The talk today, though, is not about these two migrants, but instead about the migrant societies they witnessed and also, they dreamed of building. However, I will make references to both Foon Chuck and Leung Hing throughout the talk.

So first I'm going to talk to you about the ties of those migrants with their homeland. The Wong family village, the village of Foon Chuck, is located 30 kilometres from the city of [Kaiping](#), a typical migrant city from where the first Chinese migrants left for America in the 1850s. The region is known for its thousands of [diaolous](#) (碉楼) or watchtowers, with a distinct blend of western and Chinese architecture. Now, those towers are on the UNESCO heritage list. The photos on the left show examples of those *diaolous*, the top left being taken in Foon Chuck's village. The village was wealthy because it was near a river. It was fertile. It was covered in rice paddies, which can still be seen today. And also, another reason for being so wealthy is because the migrants were bringing wealth back with them already. The *diaolous* are the symbol of that wealth brought back by those migrants in America, and also of their mixed culture. The Chinese in America, we're not all migrants; many of them were sojourners, meaning they only stayed a few years, make money, and then go back to China. Many wanted to follow Confucius advice to stay close to one's elderly parents. This attitude resulted in even more exclusion for the remaining Chinese in America, who were seen as people not wanting to settle permanently. Those *diaolous* were there to protect against floods, bandits, and also rebellions as [Guangdong](#) province was a dangerous place, unlike today. On the bottom left is a picture of the *bas relief* which I took depicting a boat crossing the Pacific, showing that migrant's pride in the voyage he had made. Today, Kaiping is a protected area and still an agricultural zone, and hence it's relatively poor. Leung Hing's village, 30 kilometres from [Jiangmen](#), is another migrant city, however, unlike the Wong village, the region has become a bustling industrial region today. The irony is that the Leung village before was poor and now is wealthier than the Wong village because of all that industry. The right photo shows Leung Hing when he returned to China in 1930, fifty years after his first departure. Leung Hing had been in exile all his life. Because of revolutions, wars, racism, laws, he was not able to make the trip back to China. There's a very famous saying that says, 'Falling leaves always land near the roots of the tree', it's a bit similar to the saying in English, 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree', but those two sayings, the English one and the Chinese one, have very different meanings. The Chinese one means that as they grow older, Chinese migrants always want to go back to where they grew up, while the English saying means that sons look like their fathers. The bottom right photo shows the new [Jiangmen Museum of Overseas Chinese](#). That museum shows the importance of those migrants in Chinese history today and the pride the region still feels towards them even 150 years after the first voyage.

So, while in America, migrants kept and felt strong bonds with their homeland, even if they were poor - as most of them were - they made sure they saved enough money for the

repatriation of their bones after their death. Chinese believed in the afterlife, a time when they would be connected in an endless chain with their ancestors. It was essential for them to be buried in their ancestral village, to be revered by their descendants. They had to avoid becoming hungry ghosts, unfed and unloved, in a foreign land, as America was known then to be a land without ghosts. There's another famous Chinese saying that says, 'Life is like a dream, death is like returning home', showing how life and the afterlife are connected in Chinese culture. Importantly, going abroad did not mean losing one's place in the family tree. The migrants kept an obligation to have the family back home and also kept a share in the family's inheritance. For over a hundred years, thousands of ships carrying Chinese corpses made those voyages across the Pacific until the revolution of 1949. Americans found the custom of exhuming bones three months after the burial barbaric, and they tried to legislate against it. The irony is that foreigners had not been allowed to be buried in Chinese soil for hundreds of years. The soil was reserved for the Chinese, showing its symbolic nature.

When I visited the Liang family village a few years ago, the Party Secretary, or the equivalent of the mayor here in the West, felt moved by my book project and desire to find the graves of Leung Hing's ancestors. He told me that he too was named Leung and drove me to the neighbouring hills where Leung Hing's ancestors' graves had been relocated after the new industrial zone had been built twenty years earlier. On the right-hand photograph you can see the Party Secretary helping me look for Leung Hing's family graves. This episode showed me that [ancestor worship](#) had not become irrelevant yet in that part of Guangdong province.

All Chinese who landed in America arrived via the port of San Francisco, and at its peak San Francisco had thirty thousand Chinese, or ten percent of the city's population. It was the de facto capital of the Chinese in America. Many Chinese never left San Francisco or saw anything else of the United States. In some places in California, the Chinese would account for up to a quarter of the labour force, creating later resentment, especially in times of economic crisis. This was the first time ordinary Americans and Chinese were meeting - a clash of cultures for the Chinese. It was a voyage in space and also in time. In space because it took two months to make the trip from Hong Kong to San Francisco, but also in time because arriving in San Francisco felt like a voyage into the future as in many parts of rural China, things have not changed much in hundreds of years. As I mentioned earlier, many Chinese did not settle and hence did not take the local habits and instead kept their traditions. A journalist visiting Chinatown in those days said. 'I never saw a foreigner population so utterly, and one might say unalterably isolated from all the native community around him as he and his fellow Chinese here seem to be.'

Americans thought Chinese did things the wrong way. For example, men wore robes and women wore pants, as you can see on the photographs on the right. Also, men wore pigtails, like in China, a sign that they would be back in China one day. Food and writing were also completely different. There are two reasons the Chinese did not assimilate in the US in those early years. One was, as I mentioned, they wanted to keep their traditions, but also there were a lot of restrictions put upon them preventing them from assimilating. First of all, they couldn't become Americans, they were banned from gaining American citizenship, unlike the European immigrants. Second, in California and other states, they were also banned from marrying white women. They were banned from taking Americans to court, and they were also banned from certain trades, and we're not allowed to buy land. For many of those reasons the Chinese lived together in Chinatowns, like a ghetto. Also, the Chinese didn't

have any wives in the US, only one out of twenty-seven Chinese in the US was a woman. The Chinese were married in China, but they did not bring their wives to America. As you can see on the left photo, there were only men in San Francisco in those days. Some of those laws, for example, preventing mixed marriages, would still exist in the US in the 1960s. In some states. The only way for the Chinese to become American in those days was by birth and slowly, future generations of Chinese in America became American. By 1900 already, ten percent of them were American citizens.

As many of you may know, China in those days was a society that was not only rural but also had many collectivist features. This was way before the communist revolution of 1949. A lot of village life was organised around clans or families, and those families or clans used to own things together like schools, dams, wells and temples. In the village, people often had the same surname. Those villages were always surrounded by walls to protect against rebellions and bandits, but also against rival clans. The Chinese arriving in the US were surprised to see that no city in the US had walls. Even within the same province, there are often dozens of different dialects. For example, my two ancestors from Guangdong province spoke the [Sze Yap](#) dialect, very different from the Cantonese dialect spoken in the nearby city of Guangzhou. Abroad, the Chinese reproduce the village structures by joining native guild, also called native home organisations. ([huiguan/會館](#), in Chinese). They did that for belonging and community reasons, but also for work protection. Those societies abroad were like extensions of the villages back home. Once they disembarked from the boat on San Francisco harbour, those migrants were welcomed by the representatives of these native guilds. Importantly, all their life abroad, those migrants would try to keep their reputations pristine, as if they had never left their home village. The left photograph shows the 'Six Companies' of San Francisco, representing the Chinese coming from the six districts around the city of Guangzhou. Those six companies were responsible for the remittances of the Chinese back to their families. They were responsible for the corpse repatriation, which I mentioned, and also social security. The six companies were the *de facto* representative of the Chinese with the US government before a Chinese consulate was open. Ironically, because often justice was denied from the Americans to the Chinese, those six companies also rendered their own justice system within Chinatown. But there's another Chinese quote that says, 'To forget one's ancestors is like being a brook without a source, a tree without roots.'

Americans often blamed the Chinese for their lack of families and spiritual life, but the resentment mostly came from the lower wages that Chinese workers were willing to accept. The left image is taken from a magazine, and the caption reads as follows, 'A picture for employers: why Chinese can live on four forty cents a day and Americans can't.' There was a contrast between how the Chinese were perceived by Americans as servile, effeminate, lacking family values, while the reality was the opposite: many Chinese were in America sacrificing themselves for their families back home. But that sacrifice was invisible to the Americans.

Those were the days when the idea of a '[yellow peril](#)' was born. A New York Times journalist wrote, 'If there were to be a flood tide of Chinese a population before the with all the social vices with no knowledge or appreciation of free institutions or constitutional liberty [...] we should be prepared to be farewell to republicanism and democracy.' This was written in the 19th century and it is worth noting the similar language some sometimes used today. However, because of their lack of family life, it's true that many migrants succumbed to bad

habits like gambling, prostitution and opium. A lot of Chinese also joined the local mafias, which fought with each other for control of those lucrative trades. By doing so, they reproduced the violence back home and the lack of unity between villages in China. The photo on the right shows some Chinese members of those mafias that had been arrested by the police in the New York Chinatown. These fights between Chinese mafias would continue until the 1930s, what a historian called 'self-inflicted wounds' for the Chinese community. For that reason, Chinese politicians and thinkers had harsh views on Chinese migrants. [Liang Qichao](#), for example, thought that his countrymen were unable to organise and had a slave mentality, they lacked ideals, and Ambassador [Zhang Yinhuan](#) exhorted his countrymen to live like people from the same community. Foreign diplomats were also critical of those Chinese migrants, like the Japanese Consul, for example, who said, 'It is their ignominious attitude which brought upon the Chinese the Exclusion Act.' In those days, a lot of people thought that the Chinese were 'like a sheet of loose sand', unable to unite. As I explained in my book, that racism, but also that disunity and lack of morality in Chinatown, were the reasons why Foon Chuck left San Francisco for the South of the United States and later Mexico to seek his fortune.

So, Leung Hing had borrowed money for his ticket to America, and he had to reimburse his debt. The first job he took in San Francisco was to work in a laundry, and as his children recall, he kept terrible memories from those times. It was a very hard job. All the clothes had to be washed manually, and the clothes were terribly dirty. Sometimes they had been worn for weeks, if not months. The irons also were very heavy and weighed up to 8 lbs. Ironically, there was not one single laundry in the whole of China and there were 2000 laundries in San Francisco alone. The reason was California was a land of pioneers only recently acquired from Mexico, and only eight percent of the population in California were women. This was an ideal job for the Chinese migrants: it required little capital and not much language was needed. Left is a caricature with a racist depiction of Chinese washing clothes. An historian wrote the following, 'Gold is not in the mountains of California, but in the mountains of dirty clothes.' This is a reference to the early migrants who came to California during the [gold rush](#) thinking they were going to find gold. Hence, San Francisco is still called today the [Gold Mountain](#) in Chinese (or JiuJinShan/舊金山). Soon, all over the US, laundries opened, run by Chinese migrants. In San Francisco, the government tried to get rid of its Chinese laundries, imposing legislation like limiting their working hours or banning work in wooden buildings. Many of those legislations would be opposed by the [Guild of Laundrymen, who fought back](#).

Many Chinese also worked in railway construction. Like laundries, railroads had not developed in China yet. In those days, many Chinese were suspicious of the railroad; they thought it would affect the fengshui of the land and disturb their dead. [Empress Cixi](#) (慈禧太) thought that the railroad was a way for foreigners to penetrate and invade China. That was the opposite of what was happening in the US and Mexico, where the railroad was a tool to colonize new land and grow trade between the two countries. Ninety percent of the workers of the [transcontinental railroad](#) were Chinese. They had been hired because they were disciplined, cheap and resilient. People said that Chinese workers fell ill less often than other workers from other countries because of their habit of boiling water and drinking tea. Mark Twain wrote of the Chinese the following, 'They are quiet, peaceable, tractable, free from drunkenness. A disorderly Chinese does not exist and a lazy one is rare, so long as a Chinaman has strength to use his hands, he needs no support from anybody. He always finds

something to do.’ On the right is the official photograph showing the linkage between the lines coming from the East Coast and the West Coast of the United States. Although the transcontinental railroad had been built by Chinese, that photograph only shows two Chinese people, as if they had been erased from history. However, in 1870 an economic crisis started in the US, and also because the rail had been finished, thousands of jobless Chinese people started to compete for jobs with Americans, and the jobless rate increased to thirty percent. Hence, the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) was passed in 1882, the first legislation of its kind, and the Chinese became the first illegal immigrants in United States history.

Strangely, it was the railroad that brought both Leung Hing and Foon Chuck to Mexico as it was still in construction in that country. After being a laundryman, Leung Hing worked as a railroad worker in Mexico and Foon Chuck as a foreman or supervisor for the railroad, because he could read and write Chinese and English, a crucial skill.

There were new trades but also old trades that the Chinese were doing in the New World, and one of them was agriculture. An historian writes that the Chinese, ‘The Chinese in America dedicate themselves to green gold and truck gardening. They introduce vegetables into local diets and turn wasteland into productive plots.’ That historian found this phenomenon across the US, Australia and Latin America. It's ironic to think that even today, Chinese food influences Western tastes being the most popular takeaway food in many Western countries. The left photograph shows Foon Chuck’s Farm. It was a huge farm more than twenty thousand hectares. Foon Chuck introduced the first tractors into Mexico at the start of the 20th century. He built dams and canals, still visible today in that part of Mexico. Foon Chuck was key in transforming that region in Mexico, and soon the community he built turned into a village with hundreds of Chinese farmers. He called his farm, the ‘Canton Farm’ or Guangdong Yuan/广东园 in Mandarin. As an historian wrote, ‘the first step by Foon Chuck had been more important for that region than the Mexican Revolution.’ The top right photo was taken in California a few years earlier. It shows how the Chinese also started the citrus industry in California, as the Chinese knew how to pack and grow those fruits from China. The bottom right photograph shows caravans of vegetables transported by Chinese from town to town and the bottom left photograph shows the statue of a Chinese farmer. In a park in the Mexican city of Torreón, where the Chinese had extensive farms. Torreón was a boom town in the north of Mexico. The Chinese population had grown from less than five people in the 1880s to more than seven hundred thirty years later. Foon Chuck and the Chinese owned what were called the ‘Chinese Garden’, and they controlled the whole food supply in the city. In many cities in both the US and Mexico, the Chinese would control the food supply. In Torreón, in Chinese it was called Caiyuan/菜园 or City of the Vegetable Garden.

Many Chinese in America also became merchants. In Mexico, in the beginning, the Chinese had more freedoms than in the United States: they could become citizens; they could buy land; they could marry; and they could go to court. But Mexico had much lower wages than in the US, one fifteenth of those in the US, and hence many Chinese decided to open their own businesses. Soon, they left their farming and mining jobs which they had when they had arrived in Mexico. Many of them became merchants. There was also less competition in Mexico than in the US. Many migrants in the US came from Europe and already had a mercantile mindset, where many settlers in Mexico were farmers. Soon, forty percent of the Chinese migrants in Mexico became merchants, versus only ten percent in the US also. I saw a documentary recently about a descendant of a Chinese in the state of Texas, and he

remembers how his grandfather could speak Spanish because a lot of the customers were Mexicans.

Then an incredible thing happened in Mexico. By 1930, the Chinese had managed to build a monopoly over the grocery trade in the north of Mexico, meaning that all the grocery stores in Mexico, in that part of the country, were owned by Chinese. There are many reasons for this success. One was because, as I mentioned, it has those transnational networks of contacts across different nations, which enabled them to buy goods quite cheaply. Also, they were able to carry more inventory in the store, something that the Mexicans didn't do. They also used to give credit to the customers, something again that had never been done in Mexico. And finally, they also introduced itinerant trade in Mexico, selling the products from city to city and house to house.

The three photos in the slide show various types of Chinese groceries and businesses. The top left is in San Francisco. It shows a Chinese grocery store, but mostly for Chinese people. The top right is a grocery store, but this time in the north of Mexico, and it was not only for the Chinese but was also a store for the local people. And finally at the bottom right is Leung Hing's flagship store in Mexico City. In the 1920s, Leung Hing became the largest seller of Chinese furniture and curios in Mexico, he introduced Chinese luxury products for the first time to many places in the country.

The Chinese ambassador to Washington in 1906 compared the situation of the Chinese in the US and in Mexico and he wrote, 'The Chinese stand much higher in Mexico, the Mexicans being inclined to receive them as equals. The Chinese are not restricted to narrow limits for their livelihood ... in Mexico, every venue is open.' Another historian mentioned how the Chinese had created a new middle class in the north of Mexico, which did not exist before. But all that created resentments. Locals did not understand how the Chinese had become so successful so quickly, and a journalist compared them to ants and call them 'more cunning than the Jews'.

The Chinese migrants in America are not known for owning infrastructure projects, but there are a few exceptions. One of those was the Chinese colony of Torreón I mentioned earlier. As I said, Torreón was a boomtown and Foon Chuck started his business there in the 1880s and soon with other Chinese they managed to build a food monopoly., Foon Chuck also owned hotels in the city as you can see in the photograph in the left, and a lot of Chinese in the city own large department stores, property all around the city.

The success of Foon Chuck was due to three things. First, he had an education; second, he had freedom to do what he wanted in Mexico; and the third reason for his success was his mastery of foreign languages. Now he could speak English, Chinese and now Spanish in 1905, a Chinese opened a bank and also even a tramway company in Torreón, as you can see on the right photographs. Foon Chuck partnered with Kang Youwei for many of these projects, including the bank and the tramway. Kang Youwei had been a Mandarin in Beijing and an advisor to the Emperor, and he had started a reform movement, the '[Hundreds Days' Reform](#)' in 1898. He wanted China to be like Japan, a constitutional monarchy. However, his movement was ended by Cixi. The Kang family was murdered and Kang Youwei was forced into exile for fifteen years, until the fall of the Empire. While in exile in North America, he created a political party trying to unite overseas Chinese worldwide. At its peak, its movement would have a hundred thousand members worldwide.

Torreón wasn't like any other Chinatown in America. It was also an international city with many entrepreneurs from many other countries, more numerous than the Chinese, even. In Torreón, never had Chinese exercised such power over Western territory. Because of that, it created some resentments from the locals. Many locals did not accept that the Chinese were so successful. It was okay for many western foreigners, like, for example, Americans or French or Brits to be successful, but not the Chinese. A Mexican politician wrote the following, 'Mexican hospitality, indolence and indifference have allowed the Chinese to enter the country and prosper to the point that they now menace the economic and cultural strength of Mexico.' Because of this racism, in 1911 the [Torreón Massacre](#) happened, when half of the Chinese population of the city was murdered: three-hundred-and-three Chinese in less than a day and a half. The largest of such massacres in North American history. The Chinese had been criticised thirty years earlier in the US for stealing jobs and now in Mexico thirty years later, they're criticised for being too successful economically.

As I mentioned earlier, many Chinese kept their traditions in America. A way for them to maintain their links to the homeland was through reading. San Francisco Chinatown counted five daily newspapers in Chinese. In those days, even in remote places like the north of Mexico, where Foon Chuck lived, the Chinese communities learned about what was going on in China via those papers. Each single copy of those newspapers was read hundreds of times passed by one immigrant to the other until they became illegible. Not all workers were literate, but Chinese continued studying the Chinese characters in calligraphy, even when they were abroad all their life. This was the case of Foon Chuck. There's a Chinese saying that says, 'Live till you're old and study till you're old.' There's also another tradition in China, which was to separate written papers to be disposed of from the common garbage to be burned later separately. This shows Chinese people's reverence for culture and education. This is shown on the image on the left, a Chinese collecting old papers to be burned. An historian writes that in San Francisco in those days there were boxes in many streets to collect those old papers, to be burned and thrown into the sea. That shows that the Chinese in America kept their traditions far from home, including the respect for literature.

In those days, mixed marriages were frowned upon. They were seen as unnatural in both east and West. Unlike the US, though, Mexico had fewer Chinatowns. As I mentioned to you, the Chinese could buy land, they could become citizens, and also there were more intermarriages with the locals. A professor from the University of Chicago wrote the following, 'Mixed marriages are an essential feature of some overseas Chinese communities around the world, from Mexico to Peru and Malacca to Hawai'i.' He also added that the lack of mixed marriages in the US, Canada and Australia is an anomaly due to white racial prejudice. Another reason for the difference was not only the anti-marriage laws that existed in many U.S. states, but also the fact that Mexico was already a mixed-race country between Spaniards and Indians, and for that reason was maybe more accepting. And like other former European colonies, mixed people in Mexico already represented fifty percent of Mexico's population by 1900. Also in Mexico, the Chinese merchants were relatively more successful and then it was easier for them to find a local companion.

The photograph on the left is one of my favourite photographs of my family. It shows Leung Hing's family in 1909. You can see the little girl at the bottom left corner with the ribbon in her hair is actually my grandmother, and this photograph shows a mixed family's pride in their origins. My great-grandmother is dressed in Chinese dress and all the children look happy and proud of their origins, which is quite remarkable. In 1909. The right photo shows

the family of Foon Chuck, also a mixed family a few years later. The photograph in the middle is a photograph of Frank W Lee, the Chinese ambassador to Mexico in the 1930s, and that photograph was given to my grandmother, with whom they were friends, and he was a very good friend with Leung Hing the same way. Foon Chuck had been friends with Kang Youwei a few years earlier. This time it was Leung Hing who was friends with the Chinese ambassador to Mexico. He had an interesting story. He was one of the few mixed-race children in the US when he was born in 1890 in the state of New York, where mixed marriages were allowed. He was the son of a rich Chinese restaurant owner and a migrant from Germany. He attended NYU, became a lawyer, and then renounced his US citizenship and moved to China. Later, he became [Sun Yat Sen's](#) secretary and then a diplomat for the nationalist government. In the US, echoing Frank Lee's experience until World War Two, many American-Chinese decided in those days to teach Chinese to their children because they knew that their children would not be able to get jobs outside of Chinatown. That means they could only work in Chinatown or back in China. This was less the case in Mexico because Mexico had more mixed-race children. But like in the US today, it is impossible to find 3rd or 4th or 5th generations of pure Chinese in Mexico; they all blended. In Mexico as there are so few remaining Chinese, and because there are less fewer Chinatowns, the Chinese were condemned to assimilate in the end and fully blend into Mexican society.

At the start there were very few Chinese children in the US and many of those young children, like Leung Hing, actually had to work and they couldn't go to school. So the first Chinese students in America in the 1870s and 1860s attended missionary schools as no public schools accepted them in those days. The left photograph is a book written by Reverend Loomis, a book for learning Chinese. Reverend Loomis ran the first church for Chinese in America and became Foon Chuck's teacher. Loomis had graduated from the Princeton Seminary and had been a missionary in [Zhejiang province](#). The American missionaries in those days thought that it was their duty to convert the Chinese, not only in China, but also the Chinese migrants in the US. However, because of all the racism in America, they were not successful in their work, and only two percent of the Chinese in America converted in those days. Tragically, because of that lack of conversion, the US Congress used that as an excuse to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act saying that because the Chinese were not converted, that meant they were not willing to assimilate into American society. The first segregated public school for Chinese opened in San Francisco in 1885 and the first non-segregated school admitting the Chinese would only open in 1947. The photograph in the middle was taken four years after the US Exclusion Act and it shows how traditional and segregated the education for Chinese was in the United States in those days.

China itself was still under the [Imperial examination](#) system. It would be twenty years before it would be dismantled and replaced by a modern education system by Empress Cixi in the early 20th century. The right photograph shows the school founded in Mexico by Kang Youwei's political party in 1905. All the students are in military-like uniform, and this shows the patriotic project that Kang Youwei had for the Chinese in America. My great-grandfather is actually shown at the back of the photograph with the hat. He was a director of the school. That school that Kang Youwei founded had a bilingual programme. It included science and technology, mirroring the educational reforms now happening in China. When visiting the school in 1907, Kan wrote the following poem, reflecting his aspirations for the Chinese overseas: *Keep our home country in our thoughts, Keep Confucius' teachings as our aspirations, Be focused, be strong, Be sharp, intelligent, and erudite, Be kind with a*

noble character, Do not forget your origins, Do not only worship what is foreign, Explore new land, expand the colony, Let a New China's development be your responsibility, Is this possible?

Like today's migrants, lives were affected by events happening in Asia. The year 1900 marked the bottom of public opinion on China. In the West, the [Boxer Rebellion](#) was an anti-colonial uprising. The Western imagery of that event depicts Chinese killing Christians and then being saved by colonial forces which acted with equal violence as the Chinese. That same year, a world epidemic of [bubonic plague](#) killed millions in Asia. It spread through ships and ports travelling from Hong Kong to San Francisco. Its first victims in America were often Chinese migrants in Chinatown. People were ignorant about the disease and that it was spread by rats. On the right you can see the how the Westerners burned the Chinatown in Honolulu think it would stop the pandemic. Thinking they would control the disease, they also had a quarantine of the San Francisco Chinatown and white people were ordered to evacuate, which outraged the Chinese population. The San Francisco mayor said, 'Chinese Americans are unclean, filthy and a constant menace to public health'. Chinese were also banned from exhuming their dead and decided to hide them from Western doctors, further alienating themselves. For those reasons, two years later, the Exclusion Act was made permanent by President Teddy Roosevelt.

The experience of Chinese migrants across America in those years was marked by exclusion. A Chinese pastor from the East Coast named [Huie Kin](#), who also married a white American Christian, wrote of his youth, 'The Chinese were in a pitiable condition in those days. We were simply terrified; we kept indoors after dark for fear of being shot in the back. Children spat upon us as we passed by and called us rats. However, there was one consolation: the people who employed us never turned against us, and we went on quietly with our work until the public frenzy subsided.'

In the US after the Exclusion Act of 1882, it would take years before a proper immigration department would be set up, and then American people decided to take matters in their own hands with riots and explosions of Chinese happening across the US West Coast as seen on the left image. After being initially welcomed, the same happened in Mexico. The Torreón Massacre, which I mentioned, was followed two decades later, by racist laws and mass expulsions like in the United States - those are shown in the right image.

How did the Chinese respond to that exclusion? First, mainly by continuing to work hard as mentioned by Huie Kin. Second, many Chinese opposed those laws in the courts and used civil disobedience in the streets. And finally, many Chinese also appealed to the governments in America and Mexico, writing to American and Mexican politicians. I give an example in my book of a lot of those letters and memorandums. There was one for example, written by the Six Companies, to US President Grant. The migrants acted how they would petition their mandarins back home. There was also a strong response against the Exclusion Act back in China, with boycotts of American products. A journalist wrote that for the first time, all Chinese were developing a conscience as a nation by rallying around the Cantonese excluded in America. And indeed, it is no coincidence that some of the first Chinese political parties would be born out of that Chinese diaspora.

The most dignified response against the exclusion was given by Kang Youwei himself, who wanted to show the Chinese people's common humanity with the Westerners. While abroad, Kang worried that China would disappear and become like a giant Western colony.

He thought that there was a risk that Chinese would become like the Jews: the civilization without a country. He wanted to unify the diaspora, but also dreamed of a unified world, one without borders and races. He dreamt that South America and Mexico in particular, including his Torreón colony, would become places where his vision of a unified world would become reality. In response to a journalist who had asked Kang about a 'yellow peril' on his visit to Mexico in 1907, his reply was the following, 'There is no yellow peril, there is no white peril, there is no black peril, or brown or any peril, of a particular colour. [...] Basically, all races of men are similar if not identical. The great question that is presented to civilized nations today is not whether their unimportant differences will lead them to clash, but rather whether their inherent similarities and oneness will inspire them to unite in the great global work that needs to be done'.

I want to end the talk today with this quote by one of the most remarkable and prescient Chinese reformers, Kang Youwei. Thank you very much.

KAN, Qian

Thank you, Hugo, for a fascinating talk, and also that last quote by Kang Youwei; it's so relevant to today's global situation, so thank you very much. Let's give Hugo a round of applause.

Rosina, please.

Rosina Marquez-Reiter

So Hugo, thank you for a wonderful talk. Most inspiring, and I've I think I've learned a lot. I've got to digest it and watch the recording to ensure that it captures everything you've said. Really, really super interesting. I wanted to ask you a question, but it's actually for a project that I'm working on. You mentioned at one point that one of your ancestors set up itinerant vending in Mexico going from shop to shop.

Hugo Wong

Yes, yes.

Rosina Marquez-Reiter

Selling goods.

Hugo Wong

That's right, that's how, that's how Leung Hing started his business. He was a railway worker, then he left the railroad and he started ... Itinerant trade was very prevalent in China in those days but was completely unknown in Mexico. He started his business just knocking at Mexican people's doors and asking them whether they wanted to buy his products and later...

RosinaMarquez-Reiter

You mean door-to-door selling?

Hugo Wong

Yes, yes. That's what a lot of Chinese were doing in the in those days. A lot of Chinese merchants were just knocking at people's doors and selling their wares.

Rosina Marquez-Reiter

OK, great.

Hugo Wong

And only later, when he would become, you know, much wealthier, he opened physical stores. But I think for ten or twenty years his initial business was just an itinerant business. You know, he was travelling throughout Mexico selling his products. And Mexicans were actually very surprised because that they're not used to see, you know, merchants and let alone Chinese merchants knocking at the door and selling the products.

Rosina Marquez-Reiter

So, this is why I asked you, because I found that quite interesting because going back to pre-Hispanic roots, you know, in the life of the Aztecs in particular, in Mexico there was a lot of ambulant vending, itinerant vending until there was ... well, they were even regulated by Aztec chiefs, you know, to make them into squares. But, of course, they wouldn't go into houses and knocking on the doors because those didn't exist. So ...

Hugo Wong

This happened in the north of Mexico. The Aztecs were in central Mexico, were around Mexico City, and it was in cities, right. I'm talking about just moving from town to town with, you know, caravans, and that was in the north of Mexico. There were not actually many Indians in those places. And another historian actually said they created a middle class that didn't exist before.

KAN, Qian

OK, I can see several hands up. Thank you. Rosina. Emma, I can see your hand out. You're the first one, and then I'll have Patrick next. Emma, please.

Emma Brown

Thank you, Hugo, for the talk. It was really, really interesting; I got a lot out of it. I'm actually a mature student. I'm half African-American and half Welsh, and I've been brought up in Britain. So, in my own time I've done a lot of study on African-American history and the oppression, mainly the oppression, and the good bits too, but I had no idea before I watched this lecture that the amount of oppression and, unfairness that the Chinese went through during that time, so I'm really glad you've illuminated that for me. I don't know if that's your book on the screen: Hugo Wong, *America's Lost Chinese*. I'd like to get that book.

Hugo Wong

Well, thank you very much. I'm glad you enjoyed the talk. Thank you.

KAN, Qian

Yeah, the book is available on [Amazon](#) and various sites. You can Google that. Thank you. Emma. Patrick, please.

Patrick Sim

Oh, hello, Hugo. Thank you very much for your presentation, very, very interesting. You mentioned Sun Yat Sen, I believe Sun Yat Sen spent some time in America and I was just wondering, did that experience leave an impression with him and did he have a following amongst American Chinese?

Hugo Wong

Yeah. So, at the start it was really Kang Youwei who was the lead in attracting the attention of overseas Chinese, but with the death of the Emperor, I think in 1908, and also the fall of the Chinese empire, it became clear that that Sun Yat Sen had a better plan for China than Kang Youwei had and that's why his cause took over from that of Kang Youwei. I don't think Sun Yat Sen spent a lot of time in the United States, but certainly he became the leader of the [Nationalist Party](#) and Kang Youwei was forgotten very quickly after that.

So yes, Sun Yat Sen clearly took over and actually it is an interesting episode. Sun Yat Sen tried to approach Kang because Kang was a senior and was more experienced; he was a [Mandarin](#) in Beijing. And so he tried to approach him, but Kang was very dismissive of Sun Yat Sen. He said 'you're not real Chinese, you're like a Westerner, you don't support the emperor, you're a western doctor'. While Kang Youwei was a Mandarin, he had studied the exam, you know, he was a Mandarin in Beijing, so they had a very different plan for China, Kang Youwei and Sun Yat Sen, they had a very different vision for what China should be.

KAN, Qian

Thank you. Just last question because, we're running out of time. Also I want to use a few minutes at the end to talk about what's coming up. So, Thomas, the last question from Thomas please.

Thomas Purdy

Hi, thank you for the great presentation. I wanted to ask you about Chinese-language literature among the diaspora of Mexico, America. How was an appreciation for Chinese-language literature fostered with the diaspora?

Hugo Wong

It's very different today, but in those days the Chinese had to learn classical Chinese. So, if you were a Chinese kid in America or in Mexico in the 1880s, 1890s, you had to go to a classical Chinese school. Like in China, they only learned classical Chinese. After that in 1900, starting from 1905, there was a big reform in China and they completely changed the educational system, they adopted more modern, technical ... and I think that changed completely the way ... But certainly my ancestors, like Foon Chuck when he left China, when arriving in the United States, he only knew about Confucius and the classics. That's what he had studied in China. But obviously thirty, forty years later the experience of the Chinese

was completely different because the Chinese educational system had been reformed. China was changing very fast as well, and then in the US themselves, they were also allowed to go to American schools, so everything changed. So now today, I don't think American Chinese care that much about American or Chinese literature. But in the 19th century, they had no choice. That's the only thing they could learn. That's what they had to. They had to study Chinese literature and the classics, that's what they had to do. I don't know whether that answers your question.

KAN, Qian

Thank you very much. Thank you for the question. Thank you very much Hugo for a wonderful and informative talk, thank you.

I just want to use the last few minutes to tell us about the Chinese modules courses we offer. So we have a 30 credit [*Beginner's Chinese*](#). The registration will open very soon, actually around the 20th of March, and next year we'll have *Intermediate Chinese*, so any of your friends or contacts, if they want to learn Chinese, please spread the word for us. Or if you want to find out about this course, go to the [website](#) and read about all the content and what it is like studying with the Open University.

Also, we have some [short courses](#) in beginners and elementary level Chinese, and we also have an [*Introduction to Intercultural Competence*](#) and [*Chinese Business Culture Essentials*](#). Those are only 16 units, very short courses and cost less than £200 per course and it's completely online.

And then the last slide to inform you about two very interesting talks coming up.

On the 4th of April, we're going to have [Professor Louise Tythacott](#) from SOAS to talk about the [*Loot from China's summer palace in auctions, exhibitions and the museums*](#), and on the 6th of June we'll have [Doctor Frances Wood](#). She's a renowned psychologist and the former curator at the British Library to talk about, [*Seventeen Thousand Chinese Manuscripts and a dozen Printed Books - the Dunhuang Collection in London*](#). The session will be chaired by [Doctor Lars Peter Laaman](#) and he's Senior Lecturer in the history of Chinese at SOAS. Both of those events are open for registration on Eventbrite.

And finally, I just want to say another big thank you to Hugo for the talk and thank you all too, the audience, for your engagement and your enthusiasm. Thank you very much.

[Transcript ends]