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Tun Funn Hom with his wife, Yoke Won Hom, and his daughter Dorothy at the reopened Museum of Chinese in America. Below, Mr. Hom as a younger man and during his military service, which eased his path to citizenship. At bottom, Mr. Hom, his wife and his daughter Mary after he became a citizen.

Immigration Stories, From Shadows to Spotlight

In Tales That Echo Today, Museum Recalls How Chinese Evaded Laws Meant to Exclude Them

By NINA BERNSTEIN

Frail and dignified at 88, the man leaned on his cane and smiled as the story of his immigration in 1936 flashed behind him on a museum wall. Like tens of thousands of others who managed to come to the United States from China during a 60-year period when the law singled them out for exclusion, the man, Tun Funn Hom, had entered as a “paper son,” with false identity papers that claimed his father was a native citizen.

For years, it was a shameful family secret. But Mr. Hom, a New York laundry worker who helped build battleships in World War II and put three children through college, outlived the stigma of an earlier era’s immigration fraud.

A narrow legalization program let him reclaim his true name in the 1950s. His life story is now on permanent display at the Museum of Chinese in America, which reopened last week at 215



Centre Street. And it illuminates an almost forgotten chapter in American history, one that historians say has new relevance in the current crackdown on illegal immigration.

“When we think about illegal immigration, we think about Mexican immigrants, whereas in fact illegal immigration cuts across all immigrant groups,” said Erika Lee, the author of “At America’s Gate: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943.” The book traces how today’s national apparatus of immigration restriction was created and shaped by efforts to keep out Chinese workers and to counter the tactics they developed to overcome the barriers.

The current parallels are striking, said Professor Lee, who teaches history at the University of Minnesota. And though some descendants of paper sons do not make the connection, many others have become immigrant rights advocates in law, politics or museums like this one, which hopes to draw a national audience to its new Chinatown space, designed by Maya Lin.

“In the Chinese-American community, it has only been very recently that these types of histories have been made public,” Professor Lee said. “Even my own grandparents who came in as paper sons were very, very reluctant to talk about this.”

For Mr. Hom, who was a teenager when he arrived to work in his father’s laundry on Bleeker Street, the past is now a blur. “It was so long ago

that I hardly remember,” he said, as his wife, Yoke Won Hom, 82, straightened the lapels of his suit for a photograph.

But when his memory was still sharp, his daughter Dorothy transcribed 48 pages of his taped recollections, which became the basis of a four-minute first-person narrative produced by the museum. It is one of 10 such autobiographical videos that form the museum’s core exhibit.

“To get into the U.S. under the laws back then, I had to pretend to be another person,” Mr. Hom wrote. His father had bought him immigration papers that included 32 pages of information he was to memorize in preparation for hours of interrogation at Ellis Island.

Such cheat sheets were part of an elaborate, self-perpetuating cycle of enforcement and evasion, historians say. The authorities kept ratcheting up their scrutiny and requirements for documents, feeding a lucrative network of fraud and official corruption as immigrants tried to show they were either merchants or native-born citizens, groups exempt from the exclusion laws.

Mr. Hom was allowed ashore as Hom Ngin Sing, a student and son of a native. In reality, his father had made it to the United States only about six years earlier, through a similar subterfuge, like an estimated 90 percent of Chinese immigrants of the period.

Like many poor families from Taishan, a region that sent many emigrants to California during the Gold Rush of 1849, the Hom family had deep ties to the United States. Mr. Hom’s great-uncle, for example, died in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

But unlike any other immigrant group, the Chinese were barred from naturalizing. That bar was part of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in 1882 after years of escalating anti-Chinese violence in the West spurred by recessions, labor strife and a culture of white supremacy.

The law was expanded in 1892 with a measure that required all Chinese to register with the government and subjected them to deportation unless they proved legal residency, which required the testimony of at least one white witness.

In a comment that reflected the tone in Congress, one senator asserted that the government had the right “to set apart for them, as we have for the Indians, a territory or reservation, where they



should not break out to contaminate our people.”

Lawyers argued that the law was repugnant to “the very soul of the Constitution.” But it was upheld in a sweeping Supreme Court decision of 1893, *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, which held that the government’s power to deport foreigners, whether here legally or not, was as “absolute and unqualified” as the power to exclude them. That finding reverberates today, said Daniel Kanstroom, a legal scholar and the author of “Deportation Nation.”

Long after exclusion laws were repealed by Congress in 1943, after China became a World War II ally, that vast power over noncitizens was deployed in raids against immigrants of various ethnic groups whose politics were considered suspect.

In the 1950s, Mr. Hom and his relatives, like many Chinese New Yorkers, suddenly faced the exposure of their false papers in just such an operation. The government was tipped off by an informer in Hong Kong as part of a cold war effort to stop illegal immigration.

“We were very scared,” said Mrs. Hom, who worked at the family’s laundry, first in the Bronx, then in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. “Everybody was very worried on account maybe they all be sent back to China.”

But in a government “confession program,” Mr. Hom and some of his relatives admitted their illegal entry; because Mr. Hom had served in the military, he received citizenship papers within months.

As someone who never made it to high school, he now beams over his children’s professional successes and his six multiethnic grandchildren. His son, Tom, is a dentist in Manhattan; his daughter Mary is a physician in the Syracuse area, and Dorothy, an interior designer, works with her husband, Michael Strauss, a principal with Vanguard Construction, which recently completed DBG Kitchen and Bar, Dapicel Boule’s latest restaurant.

At a time when debates about immigration often include the claim that “my relatives came the legal way,” referring to a period when there were few restrictions on any immigrants except the Chinese, the Hom family has a different perspective.

“One’s status being legal or illegal, it’s two seconds apart at any point,” Dorothy said. “For some, the process is more difficult than others.”

