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Source: *Ploughshares*, Vol. 35, No. 2/3 (Fall, 2009), pp. 116-120
Published by: Ploughshares
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40355141
Accessed: 10-08-2019 17:57 UTC

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I am a child of a Confessor, born in 1956, the same year the McCarthyesque Chinese Confession Program was sanctioned. Its purpose, simply put, was to seek and flush out Chinese—arriving or already landed—who held derivative citizenships.

America began with an open door policy that admitted everyone but "lepers, prostitutes, and morons." The Chinese were added to the list with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first piece of legislation directed at an ethnic group. After the 1906 earthquake burned San Francisco's City Hall, my ingenious bunch of forefathers claimed lost records and registered many many sons, developing a system of derivative citizenship that circumvented the Exclusion Act. In 1940, my father paid four thousand dollars and bought the fictitious slot of fourth son to a farmer in California's Central Valley. He was sixteen. To Have Trust was his new name.

To Have Rage was the new American Man my father became. Rage was common among the men of my childhood. I thought all men were Barkers, Yellers, Spitters, Cursors, and Seethers. My father and his friends, Old Yee, Tex, Cow-Man, and Young Mr. Yang, left a China that was bleak and broken. The mid 1800s were filled with natural and man-made rebellions. There were at least two droughts, five famines, seven typhoons, twice that in floods, then the epidemics, cholera, yellow fever, and the plague. Wars between the Canton Locals and Hakka Nomads lasted more than a decade and left over thirty thousand dead. The Ching Dynasty was overthrown and then came the flip-flopping between the Communists and Nationalists, ending with Japan's invasion in 1936, but a mere sneeze.

Like many, my father arrived to interrogation and internment on Angel Island. Unlike many, he missed some outlandish taxes: Chinese Head Tax, Chinese Cubic Air Tax, Chinese Laundry Pole Tax, and many others too inane to waste words on except to say that injustice builds, and my father stepped onto shore, primed for rage.

The Chinese Confession Program wasn't an amnesty program and the legal provisions were unclear. Posters were tacked onto lampposts (I translated, I tried). My mother read ads in the local papers. The women debated at the sewing shops while the men gathered at Portsmouth Square and argued with community leaders. Every family banquet was twelve courses and as many rounds of debate. Everyone argued. Every dinner ended in typical Chinese fashion, no dessert, brother enraged at brother.

There was no clear reason to confess and no clear safety in not confessing. For over a decade, the Confession Program undermined loyalty among families and friends. Distrust was our plague. A co-worker, a neighbor, or even a teahouse waiter could inform on your bought name. My father could not write his mother to explain that sending a letter to China—much less money—equaled cavorting with the enemy. Equally confusing, the Confession Program promised immunity from prosecution and deportation; the Confessor had to surrender his passport, agree to be "amenable to deportation," and was required to name all members of his false and true family. One lone Confessor could ruin the entire clan.

Deport. This was the only English word my father spoke with solemnity. My mother terrified me with stories of men who were stopped by agents in the street and, without proof of confession, deported immediately. I learned to recite: "I call him Father; that is his name."

At the movies, Chinese magistrates yelled at the long-haired criminals, "Confess!" and I was thrilled to think of my father as an outlaw. Chinese outlaws were romantic. But I was always afraid he might be deported; American law was that terrifying. So I followed my father more obsessively than the FBI. On Dupont Avenue, when he stopped to talk with other fathers, I eavesdropped.

"You?" he asked and was asked, "You! You confess?"

When I asked what he was confessing, my father answered, "You ask too many questions." That's why I became a writer; I couldn't get a straight answer out of him.

My father entered the Confession Program for the marriage. My mother had grown up in a house without men. My grandmother was widowed at twenty-two, so my mother became the sacrifice at seventeen and was wed to a stranger, surrendering land, landscape, and language. Her memory of girlhood was of running from the Japanese. At the fork in a road, she was unsure whether to go right, toward the Nationalists, or left, toward Communists, so she stood still and risked being taken by the Japanese. She told me, "Sometimes it's best not to choose, to stay in the center, where you'll be safer than dead."

In 1965, just before the Confession Program ended, my father confessed his derivative citizenship and became one of 13,895 confessors. In total, 22,083 people were exposed and 11,294 potential derivative citizenships were closed. My father was demoted to the status of Resident Alien. Every year, when I filled out his registration card, checking the same "Alien" box and giving the same Chinatown address, I couldn't help but wonder, was confession worth it? Then I spent a summer of love coaching my mother so she could become a naturalized citizen, fulfill her duty, and bring her mother to America.

Grandma arrived; no one got along. Would my parents' marriage have been less mercurial without his confession?

Our mother died, and now my sister and I take turns caring for our father. We enjoy his company but dread taking him anywhere. My merchant seaman father's plain English is like a drunken sailor's cursing rant on a three day shore leave. At eighty-eight, he still curses at bank tellers who ask for his ID, refuses to be fingerprinted at the DMV, barks at mailmen, glares at waiters, a barber once, an ER doctor recently, anyone in uniform, so we steer clear of cops. There is no public place where he hasn't cursed someone out; his cursing makes a felon sound like Mary Poppins.

His whole life, our father has railed, "America, called the Beautiful Country, is doomed because its name is bad!" He breaks down the ideogram "beautiful" into its components: sheep and big, and then rants, "When a sheep gets big, it gets slaughtered!"

My sister had always rolled her eyes at this. Recently laid off, she wonders, "Maybe Dad was right."

I wish I could put fear aside to take my father for his last visit to the ancestral village, but I dread walking him through another airport security checkpoint. I'll live with my guilt.

As a child of a Confessor, I have an inheritance of indecision. I live with The Confession Tic; I flip-flop. Like my father, *Yes* paralyzes and *No* terrorizes. The central theme of my novel, *Steer Toward Rock,* was about the devastating effects of the Chinese Confession Program on one family. Writing it took fifteen confusing years, not only because I was stupefied at the Program's destructive power on trust, I was also astounded at the simple heroism of men who ask little and exhibit supreme perseverance in a lose-lose situation.

Now I call it The Confusion Program. Like other children of Confessors, I have little trust. I am tortured with what I owe and what I want. I have had to learn that there is no safety in either feeling.

So I have my father's rage but I don't have the history that allows my rage to embody or engender compassion. My own rage is shallow as American history is shallow, which makes it self destructive. I know this: I become an American when I feel free to tell, not confess, my story. We are Americans when we can report to the authorities without signing over our lives.

Since 9/11, the changes in immigration reform revisit history. I've heard about the decades-long tribulations of families going through immigration hurdles. The forms are dizzying: K2, K3, H1B, I129, I130F, I551, G325A, J1. The program names are frightening: I.C.E., the Criminal Alien Program. The U-Visa invites comparison to the Chinese Confession Program; undocumented immigrants who are victims of crime can apply for a special visa that can lead to citizenship, but only if they report the crime and cooperate with the authorities. The U-Visa was enacted in 2000, but the regulations weren't set till October 2007, smack up to the early 2008 deadline, which came and went with only five thousand stepping forward. Would I have trusted that?

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 took away our forefather's freedom to procreate, to celebrate the body with sex, with family (Geary Act 1892, Act of 1924, anti-miscegenation laws not ruled unconstitu-

tional until 1967). Long story short, in 1940, eighty percent of the Chinese population were men from our Pearl River Delta region. Like killing the buffalo to deprive the Plains Indians of their staff of life, and interning Japanese Americans to deprive them of their rights during WWII, the creation of the Exclusion Act resulted in a bachelor society that interrupted the continuity of a generation of Chinese Americans.

The Confession Program took our names.

When I accompanied my father for his naturalization interview in 2001, I convinced the officer to let me in as the translator. I felt I was harboring a criminal, so terrified my father would throw a cursing fit. Then the questions came, about possible crimes committed for which he was not caught (here or abroad), wives he had (here or abroad). His name? His name again?

I held my breath as I felt it coming on. When asked to choose one name, my father said in clear, calm English, "I want both. Both names, mine."

The last time I touched my mother, I put an orange in her palm and asked if she remembered the year I forgot to bring a sweet new year fruit. She smiled, so deeply drugged, her "yes" was syrupy. I went into the other room; my mother had warned me, "If I see you cry, I won't be able to walk that road." I heard the caretaker say, "Your eldest has come," and then ask, "What is her name?" My mother's voice was clear when she spoke the name she herself gave me: "Her name is Ng Fae Myenne."