Our country’s history is filled with stories that are ignored: the Japanese Americans who were held against their will in internment camps during World War II, African-American pilots who fought bravely for our country during the second World War, Native Americans who sacrificed their lives in defense of territory that was rightfully theirs, and Chinese immigrants who toiled to build the western leg of the transcontinental railroad in the nineteenth century. Typical of this silencing of stories in American history is the exclusion of Chinese “paper sons”—young men, many in their early teens, who came to this country with papers that fraudulently established their family relations to an American-born or naturalized father.

The “paper son” phenomenon is not unusual in the history of the Chinese in America; it was a common way to get around the discriminatory immigration laws that prevented many Chinese from coming to the United States. Thus, the stories of “paper sons” should be told as we examine the racist attitudes and policies toward the people who built, shaped, and changed America alongside European immigrants. As former U.S. Congressman Norm Mineta so eloquently puts it, “When one hears Americans tell of the immigrants who built this nation, one is led to believe that all our forebears come from Europe. When one hears stories about the pioneers going West to shape the land, the Asian immigrant is rarely mentioned” (Takaki 6). We need to acknowledge the contributions of extraordinary individuals—“paper sons” such as my uncle, Stanley Hom Lau, who left their families and homeland behind to establish new roots and who made America the unique salad bowl it is today.

Stan Hom Lau was born Lau Hak Khen in the village of Lungdu in South China on August 5, 1932, as the second child of Lau Zhong Kiem and Lee Pui Hong. Stan had four brothers and five sisters—a typical size for families in China, because the Chinese believed that more children meant more hands to help with farming. But this also meant more mouths to feed. Stan’s father was a moderately successful rice shop owner who inherited money and property from his father, a sojourner in Australia during the late nineteenth century. Although not wealthy, the Lau family was better off than most people in their village. Young Stan was an athletic child who often swam in the ponds near his village with his friends and played basketball for his champion elementary school team. Stan was an independent and brave child: at the age of nine, he lived with an uncle in the family’s rice shop to safeguard it against bandits because, as he recalled, “no one else wanted to.” “It was really scary spending the nights there because it was so dark and we didn’t have many lights back then. Once, I heard this scratching noise and I thought someone was trying to break in, but it turned out to be our store cat clawing on my bed frame” (Personal Interview). This quality of independence that his parents saw in their second son later reassured them that he would be a good choice to send to America.

How and where does the writer blend elements of narrative, informative, and/or argument writing?
the very traits that facilitated survival in a strange land.

The changing policies of the U.S. toward the Chinese during World War II enabled the Lau family to send their second son to America. The alliance with the United States against Japan resulted in a change of attitude and policies toward Chinese immigration to America. The Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 ended almost six decades of involuntary exclusion of Chinese laborers, who had been blamed for taking jobs away from European Americans; the 1947 amendment to the War Brides Act enabled Asian GIs to marry in Asia and bring their brides back to the United States (Chan 140). These laws opened the doors for immigrants from the Pacific coast: they allowed John Hom, a Chinese-American soldier during the war, to bring the woman he had married on a trip to China (Stan’s father’s younger sister) and their children to the United States. John Hom had reported earlier to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) that he had a wife, five sons, and a daughter in China; in truth, however, he only had two sons and a daughter. Three other “slots” were intended for “paper sons”; one of those was reserved for 13-year-old Stan.

The “paper son” method that enabled Stan to come to the United States was a common way to get around the exclusionary laws that denied the Chinese access to the immigration rights their counterparts from Europe enjoyed. The Page Law, passed by Congress in 1875, forbade the entry of Asian contract laborers, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law suspended the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years. Chinese exclusion was extended in 1892, again in 1902, and made indefinite in 1904 (Chan 54-55). To overcome the legal obstacles that discriminated against them, some fraudulently claimed Chinese-American citizens as their fathers. Even when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by Congress in 1943, it allowed only a low quota of 105 Chinese per year, making it no better than the original exclusion law (Chan 122). Thus, the “paper son” system continued for those who wanted to come but were still “excluded.” Most of the “paper son” slots were given or sold to relatives, cousins, or friends; some were sold to neighbors or strangers.

Uncle John offered the Lau family the opportunity to bring someone over to the U.S. because he had an open slot for a son around Stan’s age. Stan’s older brother was too old, and his cousin, who was the right age, didn’t want to leave his family. Since Stan “didn’t care much and no one else wanted to go then,” he volunteered. His father had told him it would be disrespectful to refuse such an offer from a relative, and Stan did not want to disregard his father’s wishes. Stan’s parents felt that he was independent and intelligent enough to survive on his own. Besides, it was a rare opportunity for someone in the family to go abroad; four other sons at home could help with the family business.

The factors that affected Stan’s decision were as strong as the factors that had pushed and pulled Asian immigrants before him. One of the major factors pushing him to leave south China was his parents—they wanted to give at least one of their five sons the opportunity to
live in another country and to bring over the rest of the family some
day. Some families considered this as “casting the anchor out,”
hoping that some day this “anchor” would bring the rest of the
family to the new land. Another push factor was the instability of the
time: China had a long history of dynastic conquests and foreign
intervention, and many people predicted that with the Communist
takeover in 1949, another period of uncertainty was on the horizon.
As a safety precaution, it was best if someone in the family was
away, even if present conditions did not seem so bad. The image of
the U.S. as a place full of opportunities and rewards for those who
were willing to work hard became a strong pull for many
immigrants. That was the image of America conveyed to Stan by
those in his village; his barber, for example, said to him, “Oh boy,
you sure are lucky to be going to America. It is Tien Tong
(Heaven).” This image of Tien Tong, reinforced by the postcards and
pictures of the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge and “a beautiful
white house” sent to his family by Uncle John, further allured the
hopeful young adventurer. The possibility of living in a grand house
and the promise of adventure in a new country attracted many young
men like Stan. Despite the uncertainties and hazards, the opportunity
to become a “paper son” in America was an opportunity too good to
pass up.
Like many others before him, Stan spent six months prior to the trip
studying the Hom family background and village information to
prepare for the intense INS interview that awaited him once he set
foot in America. Stan recalled that he had to “study tedious details
like how many steps were in the Hom family house, the birthdays of
each member of the family . . . and [other] small details. They even
had these books made by others who had gone through the process
that detailed some of the questions that might be asked” (Personal
Interview). He remembered that he studied day and night because he
could not afford to make any mistakes. He felt great sadness about
leaving his family and the life he knew, but also new optimism—and
great hope—when he finally arrived in San Francisco as an
“assumed” son of the Hom family.
Before he could begin a new life, Stan first had to establish his new
identity with INS officers through an intensive interview process. He
remembered that he had to stay in the government office building on
Sansome Street in San Francisco for fourteen days. He recalled that
some of the other Chinese there had to stay for weeks, months, even
years. He fondly remembered a “fat guy” everyone called “Number
One” because he had been there the longest who helped him with the
translation during his interview with an INS officer. Stan felt as
nervous as any young person faced with a tough situation; yet,
because he knew the consequences of failing, he overcame his fear
and passed the interview. Stan was finally “released” to join his aunt
and uncle to begin a new life in America. Not everyone was as lucky
as Stan; many were caught falsifying documents and were deported
back to China, where they had to face their families in disgrace.
Those who could not face the shame sometimes even went as far as
to commit suicide rather than disappoint their family; others, like
Stan’s friend Number One, filed lawsuits against the INS in hopes of
convincing the U.S. government to allow them to stay.

Fortunate enough to begin his new life with his aunt and uncle, Stan’s transition to life in America was made less difficult by having relatives who provided him with shelter and food to eat. But life was, nevertheless, hard for young Stan. He characterized his elementary school experience as “extremely difficult” because he was older than most of the other students in his sixth grade class. He had not yet learned his ABC’s, and already the school was pushing him to learn as much as he could so he could be moved to the seventh grade. Because the school district in Richmond had few immigrant children, there were no ESL (English as a Second Language) programs to help him learn English.

In addition, Stan still worried about the financial situation of his family in China, so he decided to work as soon as he was old enough. He found a job as a bagger in a grocery store in San Pablo that provided a monthly salary of $40 and boarding above the store. Stan sent $25 of his salary each month back to his family in China, who in the early 1950s under Communist rule experienced some hard times. His family had written about needing money because the government fined landowners, believing that “all landowners were evil and took everything from peasants and so they deserved to be fined” (Personal Interview). Stan had to borrow money from his uncle because he did not have enough and “had to promise to repay him little by little.” At a very young age, Stan took on the responsibilities of an adult without his parents to support him. His sense of independence—one of his strongest traits—convinced him never to give up.

The letters from home were vague about what was really happening in China at the time, because the Chinese government monitored mail going overseas. Stan had little idea about the harsh conditions his land-owning family faced under Mao’s Communist regime. Although Stan knew vaguely about the political chaos in China in the 1960s through news reports, he could only speculate about what was actually happening to his family until a few decades later, when he discovered that his own mother had been forced to sit under the blazing sun for a full day and suffer verbal and physical abuse from Red Guards—political extremists who believed that all landowners and small merchants victimize peasant farmers. Cut off from his family physically and knowing little about the conditions they lived in, Stan realized that he was “truly alone” in a strange new land and could rely only on his memories to remain closely attached to his family. Asked to characterize how he felt at the time, he replied: “Life . . . wasn’t easy.”

The changing relations between China and the United States in the 1950s again affected the fate of Chinese immigration to the U.S. “The Red Scare” caused concern among the American public about Communist infiltration through illegal entry to the United States. The Drumwright Report in 1955 charged “wholesale fraud practices by the Chinese immigrant community” (Lai and Choy 96). Many in the U.S. government believed that “Communist agents were slipping into the country under various guises” (Chan 141). During the
National Conference of Chinese Welfare Council in 1957, Chinese community leaders and the Justice Department worked out a plan which called for an individual to reveal his true identity; in return, he would be granted immunity from prosecution and deportation (Lai and Choy 96). Among the 8,000 who confessed between 1959-1969, Stan became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1970. After almost twenty years of living under an assumed name, he once again faced the world as Lau Hak Khen, or Stanley Hom Lau; after many years of living in fear of the INS finding out his real identity and deporting him, Stan no longer hid behind a mask of shame.

Once Stan became a naturalized citizen, he was finally able to begin to fulfill his, and his parents’, lifelong dream of bringing his family over to the U.S. Stan brought his 65-year-old father and second-youngest sister to live in his home in Oakland in 1972. He remembered the joy of finally reuniting with his father in America, and how his father always reminded him to bring over his brothers and sisters and their families. Although his father passed away before he could see his wish come true, Stan kept his word and brought the second wave of the Lau family to San Francisco in 1983. The task of helping them settle down, finding them their first jobs, and assisting their adjustment to life in America all fell on the tired shoulders of Stan. In 1989, when the third and last wave of the Lau family came to the United States, Stan again carefully orchestrated their smooth transition to American life.

A grand total of thirty individuals immigrated to the U.S. by the efforts of one amazing individual. When asked how and why he did this, Stan modestly replied, “I was only doing what my parents wanted me to do. I could not forget my family and not bring them here when I had the ability and resources to do so. My reward from this effort was being able to fulfill my father’s wishes and see that my nieces and nephews succeeded in America by getting a good education and having a good career.”

Stanley Hom Lau began life in America as a “paper son” so that he could live the American dream and live in Tien Tong (Heaven). He discovered that life was not always easy for a young man living in a foreign land without the support of his own family, yet he remained as strong as bamboo that bends in the wind; he did not forget his roots or his family. Although he lived under a false identity, he was true to himself. Because of one man’s bravery and dedication to his family, an entire family could relocate from one side of the Pacific to the other and have opportunities they never dreamed possible. The voices of “paper sons” like Stanley Hom Lau should not be silenced; they should be included in history books because these people are an important component of U.S. history—as important as the Irish, German and Russian immigrants were to this country at the turn of the century. For, as Americans, we originally came from many “different shores” (Takaki)—Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia.
Works Cited


