

STUDY & DISCUSSION GUIDE

FORBIDDEN CITY U.S.A.

an Arthur Dong film



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BECOMING AMERICAN

Refer to DVD chapter numbers 3) Old Chinese Ways, 4) Born American, 5) Inspirations, 7) Getting Started, 9) Forbidden City Opens, 10) Chorus Girls, 15) Toast of the Town, and 24) Concentration Camps

Chinese immigration to the United States began at the outset of the California Gold Rush in 1848-1849. The immigrants worked in mines and in stores, and some even opened their own businesses. During the 1860s, thousands more came as laborers on the railroads. Chinese immigration was so important to the American West that a special 1868 treaty between China and the United States protected it.

After a while, however, a backlash set in. Chinese merchants were accused of unfair business practices. Occidental workers became angry when Chinese workers accepted lower pay rates. Other, more outlandish charges were made of criminal behavior, immoral acts, and unsanitary habits. This prejudice even led to mob violence, especially during the economic hard times of the 1870s. Demands that Chinese immigration be halted finally led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years. The ban was renewed for another ten years in 1892 and was made permanent by Congress in 1902. It was not lifted until World War II, when China and the United States became allies in the fight against Japan.

Prejudice made life in the U.S. difficult in other ways for Chinese immigrants. *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* shows that racism and stereotypes often hampered Chinese Americans who tried to make a living in their chosen occupations. Deep-rooted conservative Chinese cultural traditions also kept some Chinese Americans from the entertainment world; it was a radical choice for many Chinese Americans to become a performer in an American nightclub, particularly in the 1930s and 40s. *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* documents an era when Chinese American entertainers attempted to bridge the gap between "Chinatown" and the rest of the country.



1. Why did some Chinese and Chinese Americans oppose these entertainers? Do you think they would oppose such entertainers today?
2. How do you think Charlie Low's nightclub ultimately helped or hindered Chinese Americans' quest to be accepted as Americans
3. Research other ethnic groups that have used entertainment as a means of advancement. Make a list of these groups, as well as the names of individual stars and their contributions to entertainment and to their own group.
4. Chinese Americans have made contributions in virtually every field of endeavor. Choose a career field and identify some of its leading Chinese American members.
5. Compare the Chinese immigrant experience with others from different parts of the world. What are some similarities? What are some differences?
6. What is the difference between Chinese and Chinese American? What is an American?

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APPENDIX



The Performers

Sentimental Journey: The Making of *Forbidden City, U.S.A.*

Bibliography:

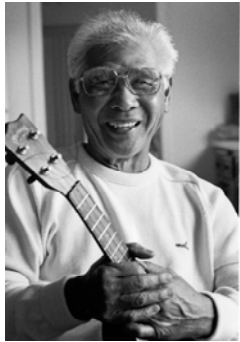
Forbidden City & Chinese American Nightclubs
Chinese & Asian American
Chinese American History Books for Children and Young Adults

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THE PERFORMERS



LARRY CHING: Singer, the "Chinese Frank Sinatra"; born in Hawaii:

"The white guys would come in and say, 'That Chink can't sing. That Chinaman, that slant-eye.' And being in the business we had to take some of that. We're supposed to take some of that...but we don't."

After quitting show business, Larry drove a delivery truck for the San Francisco Examiner Newspaper Company for 25 years. He continued to sing at weddings and recorded a CD, produced by Rolling Stones writer and editor, Ben Fong-Torres, just before his death on July 5, 2003. He was 82.

FRANCES CHUN: Singer; born and raised in San Francisco:

"The first time I went down south I was with a show. I got off at the train station and wanted to go to the ladies' room. And then I saw the sign, 'Black and White'. So I stood there and said, 'Now where do I go? Where do I belong?!'"

Frances married into the Kan restaurant family and left Forbidden City to raise a family in Chicago, and then in Oakland, California. She passed away February 3, 2008 at age 88.



CHARLIE LOW: Owner, Forbidden City; born in Winnemucca, Nevada:

"The old-fashioned Chinese in Chinatown had no foresight. They're satisfied in their little herb businesses and run it for 30-40 years...but I'm a little different."

After selling his club in 1962, Charlie sold insurance and tours to Reno. He died August 2, 1989, just three months prior to the world premiere of *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* Charlie was 88.

MARY MAMMON: Dancer; born in Clifton, Arizona:

"I've heard people say, 'Chinese dance? They don't have any rhythm.' And, 'Their legs, they're terrible. They've got terrible legs. I think they're bow-legged'."

Mary was one of the first dancers at Forbidden City and also one of the last. After leaving Forbidden City in 1961, she worked 20 years as a super market clerk. Mary passed away September 12, 2002.



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