

# YOUR AMERICAN DREAM

To The Teachers:

Two years ago, my wife, Lilly, and I established the Merage Foundation for the American Dream. We believe its mission is important to the nation and its citizens. The Foundation is dedicated to promoting expanded opportunities for immigrants. It hopes to inspire young immigrants to achieve their American Dream. It hopes to help promising immigrant leaders contribute to their communities and to the nation. It hopes to encourage Americans to understand and celebrate the contributions of immigrants to America.

The Foundation's initiatives include:

- The development of award-winning DVDs and educational materials (The American Experience) concerning the history of immigration and the lives of successful American immigrants for use in high schools throughout the nation.
- The provision of stipends and the creation of a Merage Fellows program for outstanding graduating immigrant students nominated by 21 universities throughout the country.
- The development of occasional papers and the convening of Forums concerning the impact of immigration on America and issues concerning immigration.

We are delighted that you want to use the DVDs and educational materials in your classrooms. Paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American author, the Merage Foundation hopes that the American Dream Experience will help students walk with their feet, work with their hands, speak their own minds and reach their own aspirations.

Paul Merage  
President

To The Teachers:

The Merage Foundation for the American Dream is pleased to send you DVDs and related educational materials for The American Dream Experience. Both describe in vivid terms the history of immigration to America and the lives and contributions of living American immigrants. Both reflect an effort by the Merage Foundation to create a library of DVDs and educational materials for high school teachers and principals throughout the U.S. Based on use of both in over 1200 classrooms last year, the Foundation believes that the American Dream Experience will inspire students—including immigrant students and students from immigrant families—to define and achieve their American Dreams.

We hope that teachers will incorporate the DVDs and educational materials in their lesson plans over a period of several weeks. We encourage teachers to invite local immigrant leaders to watch the DVDs and discuss their content with students. We urge teachers to involve all students, whether immigrants or not, in the planned activities related to the DVDs. Students, if they are not immigrants or children of immigrant families, are likely to be able to trace their roots back to immigrant grandparents, great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents. The Foundation welcomes teacher feedback concerning the impact of the American Dream Experience in the classroom.

Marshall Kaplan  
Executive Director  
Merage Foundations

Elliott Rebhun  
The New York Times  
Upfront/Scholastic Inc.

Donna Dewey  
Dewey Obenchain  
Film Inc.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM EXPERIENCE

JENNY MING:

Blazing Her Own Trail to Success



Jenny with daughters  
Kristin and Kameron

### BACKGROUND: THE CHINESE AND AMERICA

Few immigrant groups have encountered as much discrimination and overt racism as the Chinese. In the late 19th century, high government officials openly denounced the Chinese as “an inferior race.” Newspapers ran scathing editorials about “the Chinese problem.” Employers only offered Chinese Americans the most menial jobs, and then paid them less than they paid immigrant laborers of European extraction. And crimes were committed against the Chinese, including the burning of property and even the killing of innocent people.

U.S. policies that actively discriminated against Chinese were not fully reversed until the 1960s. In the five decades since then, Chinese immigrants and their descendants have finally been able to pursue the American Dream more freely. And by their successes, they have proven how misguided and how unjust the oppressive policies of the past were.

### CHINA CIRCA 1850

The Chinese began coming to America in large numbers around 1850. At that time, China was in the throes of its worst political crisis in centuries. The Industrial Revolution had passed it by, as had the democratizing trend that swept through Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. Corruption ran rampant within the 200-year-old Ming Dynasty, leaving townspeople at the mercy of their often-ruthless local magistrates. This proud, ancient civilization—the oldest on the planet—seemed to have fallen far behind the times.

The nation's troubles were felt most keenly in the south, China's most commercial and urban region. Here, in cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, there existed a nascent middle class of merchants, artisans, and trades people. China's economic stagnation fell hardest upon these people, and hatred of the Ming Dynasty and their capricious rule ran highest among them. Dissatisfied residents of the southern provinces would constitute the majority of Chinese immigrants to the United States.

## TO CALIFORNIA AND BEYOND

Before the California gold strikes of 1848, very few Chinese had ever seen America. A tiny Chinese population became established on the East Coast during the early 1800s. Many of these were students who left America after completing their studies.

The first Chinese who went to California carried the same dream everybody else did: to find gold. And they succeeded in about the same proportion as others—that is, not very often. The Chinese who failed to find fortune either went back home or stayed in California and found another line of work. Some remained in the mining business, working as wage-earning laborers; others found jobs as teamsters, domestic servants, carpenters, or farm hands. Many ran restaurants, laundries, groceries, and other small businesses.

California at that time was already very ethnically diverse, with a large Spanish-speaking population (California was Mexican territory until 1848) and large numbers of Germans, Irish, Jews, Scottish, and free African Americans. Even so, the Chinese stood out. By 1880, nearly a quarter of California's work force was Chinese-born, and the state's Chinese population had swelled to more than 100,000.

Thousands had come at the urging of recruiters (some recruiters were Chinese themselves) who promised good jobs and high wages in America. In reality, the jobs were menial and the wages far from generous—but times were so hard in China that the recruiters had no trouble filling their rosters. Many of these jobs were on railroad construction crews—particularly the transcontinental railroad, which was completed in 1869.

## The “Chinese Problem”

In the ensuing decades, the Chinese moved inland to Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Montana, as well as back east to Chicago, New York, and elsewhere. Wherever they settled, they tended to live in urban enclaves known as “Chinatowns.” They banded together to share their common language and customs and to protect themselves against resentment and discrimination.

As the Chinese population in the United States increased, so did suspicion and hostility against them. Much of this can only be explained as racism: some Americans hated the Chinese simply because they looked and sounded different from white people. Newspapers regularly ran editorials denouncing the Chinese as an inferior race, while politicians and other public leaders wrung their hands over “the Chinese problem.”

To some people, the “solution” to the problem was violence. Anti-Chinese riots in the late 1870s and early 1880s caused millions of dollars in property damage and sometimes resulted in loss of life. Three days of rioting in 1877 left San Francisco's Chinatown in ruins; similar incidents ensued in Denver (1880) and Seattle (1886). In Rock Springs, Wyoming, arsonists set fire to the entire Chinese district and killed nearly 30 people in 1885; two years later some 31 Chinese were brutally murdered at Hell's Canyon, Oregon.

This violence was accompanied by hostile government policies. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law to specifically bar a class of immigrants based on ethnicity. The law, which remained in force for 61 years, virtually impeded Chinese immigration (it allowed a few exceptions for wealthy and well-educated persons).

## Exclusion

After passage of the Exclusion Act, the 100,000 Chinese who were already in the United States faced intense discrimination. They were barred from attaining citizenship, owning land, or returning to their

*Friends gathered at the Hong Kong Airport to say goodbye to Jenny and her family as they left for the United States.*



American homes if they left the country for any reason (to visit relatives in China, for example). There was even a law that revoked the U.S. citizenship of American women upon marrying a Chinese man.

Chinese American communities endured despite these harsh policies. Though largely excluded from better-paying occupations, Chinese succeeded as family farmers, small businessmen, domestic servants, and entertainers. A few became doctors, lawyers, and professors. The rise of tourism provided another niche, as urban Chinatowns became popular destinations. To cater to travelers, Chinese Americans opened restaurants, theaters, and shops.

Outright violence against the Chinese had long since ceased by the Depression, but racism remained—particularly in federal government policy. During the Franklin Roosevelt administration, members of Congress began lobbying to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act; they succeeded in 1943. Chinese Americans thus regained the right to become U.S. citizens, but federal immigration laws—particularly the National Origins Act of 1924, which set quotas that barred most Asians from immigrating—continued to pose prohibitively high barriers to Chinese immigration. The “Exclusion” effectively remained until passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Amendments (the Hart-Cellar Act) in 1965–83 years after the Exclusion Acts.

## The New Chinese Americans

The Chinese who began arriving in the United States after 1965 left behind a country far different from the one their ancestors had left in the 1850s. China was now a Communist nation, defined by many as an enemy of the United States. The two countries had fought each other during the Korean War, and the subsequent Vietnam War occurred in part because U.S. leaders believed China sought to spread communism throughout southeast Asia.

The United States had witnessed transformations of its own. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s opened Americans' eyes to the evils of prejudice and discrimination. While Chinese-Americans continued to encounter racial stereotypes, many were able to overcome lingering prejudices and succeed in the United States. During the 1970s, some 125,000 Chinese immigrated to America—the largest number since the 1870s. The figure tripled in the 1980s and rose again in the 1990s to nearly half a million. To put these figures in perspective, consider:

Since 1820, the United States has welcomed 1.4 million Chinese immigrants—1.1 million of them since 1965.

How ironic that the Chinese, who for nearly a century were denied basic rights in the United States, now come here to find the freedoms they are denied in the homeland.

## CLASS DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The Merage Foundation assumes that teachers will view this DVD and read the related materials as part of their development of lesson plans. Before teachers show the DVD and begin the planned activities, they should:

1. Review the important events in Jenny Ming's personal and professional life. Ming was born in Canton in 1955. To escape communist China, her family moved to the island of Macao when she was three months old. Jenny's father worked in Hong Kong, so he only saw his family on weekends. Her parents realized that the family would have more opportunities to succeed in the United States, so when Jenny was nine years old, they all emigrated to San Francisco together.

None of the Mings spoke English when they arrived in America. Jenny and her siblings picked up the new language quickly by watching

television, but her parents were slower to learn English. Her parents made her go to Chinese School after regular school, where she kept up her knowledge of the Cantonese language and other Chinese traditions.

After graduating from college, Ming became a buyer for Mervyn's clothing store, and soon thereafter was hired away by Gap as a merchandise manager. Her career has been on an upward spiral ever since. She excelled at Gap, which asked her to be part of a team that was developing an entirely new line of lower-priced stores called Old Navy. Three years later, she became Old Navy's president. She was named one of the country's Top 25 Managers by Business Week in 2000, and one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in American Business by Fortune in both 2003 and 2004. Ming resigned from Old Navy in 2006.

2. Help students understand the significance and meaning of people, terms, and legislative acts referred to in the DVD, including Chinese Exclusion Act, National Origins Act, minority, becoming American, opportunity, buyer, merchandise manager, executive training program, collaboration, discrimination, and Cantonese.

3. Ask students if they can define their American dreams. If it is difficult for students to do so, teachers should ask students about their hopes concerning their education, jobs, career, marriage, children, family, and contributions to community. Teachers should encourage students to think about and develop their American Dreams as they continue their education. Teachers should ask students to define Jenny Ming's American Dream.

## THEME ONE LEAVING BEHIND MEMORIES AND PLACES

Jenny Ming was born in Canton in 1955, but her family fled Communist China a few months later to go to Macao, a small Portuguese colony off the coast of China's Guangdong Province. (Macao is now a part of China). The Ming family, including her four-year-old sister and two-year-old brother, walked most of the way. Jenny's parents carried her. Jenny's father worked as a printer in Hong Kong, so he only saw his family on weekends.

Her parents realized that the United States presented more opportunities for them to succeed, and better educational opportunities for their children. In 1964, they all immigrated to San Francisco together, where they lived with an aunt in Chinatown until they moved into their own home in North Beach. Ming recalls the move as a "happy event," because they were all together and because they expected to do well in their new home. It wasn't until later that she realized how much her parents had to give up to immigrate to the United States.

## PLANNED ACTIVITY

Jenny Ming has always thought being an immigrant was an advantage because you look different, you have a different point of view, and because people remember you. Ask students to write a short essay agreeing or disagreeing with her opinion. Some of the subjects they might talk about in their essays should include:

- Discrimination. Many immigrants face racism and discrimination because of their appearance. How do the students feel about this fact?
- Barriers. Language and cultural obstacles can make it much more difficult for immigrants to succeed. How can they be overcome?
- Appreciation. Do immigrants appreciate aspects of life in the U.S. that native-born Americans take for granted?
- Work ethic. Do more recent immigrants have to work harder than people who have been in the U.S. for generations? If the answer is yes, why?

- Support. Having the support of your family is very important. Being far from your family can be difficult, or it can be a motivating factor. How does being close to your family help or limit your opportunities in America?

## OPTIONAL:

Jenny Ming got her ideas about the All-American family from watching television. Shows like "Father Knows Best" depicted a happy family where the father worked as a doctor or lawyer, the mother stayed home and had cookies and milk waiting when the kids returned from school. "That's not really reality, but that's what you see on TV and you think that's reality," Ming says.

Ask students to talk about the way television depicts the all-American family today and how that depiction compares with reality. Make two columns on the board and note some of the differences between "TV reality" and "real reality."

If there are many recent immigrants in the class, ask them to talk about how they imagined America before immigrating and how that vision compared with actual life in the United States. Where did they get their first impressions of America? What were some of the biggest differences between their visions and the reality?



## THEME TWO BUILDING A NEW LIFE IN THE U.S.

Jenny spoke no English on her first day of school. She followed the example of the only other Chinese girl in the class, and even wrote the other girl's name on Jenny's own paper. She improved her English by watching American television, and by taking intensive English as a Second Language classes. But her parents also demanded that she go to Chinese school for two hours after the end of each regular school day. She didn't like it then, but in retrospect, she's glad because it enabled her to retain something from her Chinese heritage.

Throughout adolescence, Ming tried to become as American as possible, to embrace all things American. "I wanted to be American so badly," she once said. "I loved the food. I loved Halloween: I couldn't believe there was a holiday where they gave out candy." "It wasn't until she reached college that she realized that she didn't have to reject her Chinese heritage to be an American."

She graduated from San Jose State University in 1978 with a degree in clothing merchandising. Despite her mother's wish that she become a pharmacist ("because nice Chinese girls become pharmacists"), she pursued a career in retailing. She became a buyer at Mervyn's Department Stores within five years, and was hired by Gap Inc. in 1986 as a merchandise manager.

## PLANNED ACTIVITY

When Jenny Ming first went to college, her mother hoped she would become a pharmacist, but instead she chose home economics, a major that isn't often considered prestigious or useful for students pursuing a career. "As Asians and women, we tend to underestimate ourselves," she told Chief Executive Magazine. "We were taught to be humble, instead of tooting our own horns, to stay more in the shadow."

Her boyfriend Mitchell (he's now her husband) at the time persuaded her that her love of clothes could be valuable in a career in retailing. "Thinking back, that was a really big turning point," Ming says.

Begin a discussion about jobs for men and jobs for women. In the United States, women are encouraged to pursue any job that interests them, but stereotypes persist about which jobs are appropriate for

women. For example, police officer, fire fighter, and president (of a company or the country) are usually considered jobs for men, while nurse, receptionist, and teacher are typically considered jobs for women.

The discussion should address topics such as:

- Do women usually work in your home country? Did your mom work in your home country? Does she work now that you live in the U.S.?
- Are there some jobs that men or women are physically unable to do in this country (or other countries), such as professional hockey player or surrogate mother?
- Should women serve in the armed forces? Why or why not?
- Are there careers you wouldn't pursue because you don't think it's appropriate for someone of your gender? For example, until relatively recently, most men probably wouldn't pursue a career in ballet. Years ago, cooking was considered women's work.

Teachers should ask students to make a list 10 jobs that are usually done by men in their home countries, and another 10 that are usually performed by women. After students make their lists, each student should read one or two jobs from each list aloud, but do not say which gender is typically associated with that job. The other students in the class should guess whether it is a male or female job.

Teachers should ask students whether being both a woman, a minority and an immigrant adds obstacles to their education, and likely career choices. Teachers should subsequently ask students to discuss ways America can reduce obstacles based on discrimination against women, minorities and immigrants.

### THEME THREE: ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

At Gap, Ming introduced a line of 85% cotton fleece sweats. The product was so successful that they made her a vice president. In 1996, when Gap introduced Old Navy, its lower-priced line of clothing, the company asked Ming to be Executive Vice President of Merchandising, overseeing practically everything about the new chain of stores. Three years later, Ming was elevated to President of Old Navy. Because she believed in being part of a team, she asked her colleagues how they felt about her accepting the position. They all agreed she should become president.

Under Ming's leadership, Old Navy turned a profit in the first year and reached \$1 billion in annual sales in less than four years—two unprecedented accomplishments. In 2000, Business Week named her one of the country's Top 25 Managers; she was listed by Fortune Magazine among the 50 Most Powerful Women in American Business in both 2003 and 2004. Ming resigned from Old Navy in 2006.

### PLANNED ACTIVITY

At every stage in her life, Jenny Ming has made conscious choices about her future. "When you are conscious of what you want to do next, you are really in control of your own destiny," Ming says. She got that spirit from her parents, who made the choice to come to America to find increased opportunities for themselves and their children. Jenny's mother wanted her daughter to be a pharmacist, but Jenny chose to go into the clothing business instead. She opted to start a family with her husband while she began to build her career. "I really believe that you have choices and that's the best part about being an American. I think that's really a privilege and a luxury."

Divide the classroom into two teams for a debate about choices and success. Write the following statement on the board: "Anyone in America can choose to succeed." One team defends this statement. The other team argues the opposite position: that success is not always a matter of choice.

Each team discusses its position for 15-20 minutes, then chooses a speaker to present its best arguments for the debate. At a minimum, some of the arguments might touch on subjects such as:



Jenny's first Working Woman magazine cover in 1998.

- Nationality. Is freedom of choice a uniquely American notion? Do people have the same opportunities to succeed in other countries as they do in the U.S. ?
- Judgment. Does the freedom to choose guarantee that people make good choices?
- Chance. Can individuals make smart choices and still fail to succeed?
- Competition. Everyone can't be successful. In any contest, there are winners and losers. Did the losers choose to fail?
- What is success? People define success differently. For some people, succeeding means making a comfortable living in a job they don't really like. For others, success means doing something you love while struggling to make ends meet. Does your definition of success

include contribution to your community? To America? Do you have to make lots of money to be successful?

The Jenny Ming DVD and planned activities are designed to help students talk about their own American Dreams. Teachers should conclude the planned activities by encouraging students to discuss their own American Dreams. If some students still find it difficult to participate in the classroom discussion, teachers should ask them to talk about their hopes concerning their future education, jobs, marriage and children, family, contributions to the community. Teachers should foster a classroom dialogue concerning student role models. The discussion should focus on what makes a good role model, focusing on the qualities that Jenny Ming displayed (e.g. ambition, hard work, humility, etc.).

### RESOURCES:

#### Print:

- The New Americans*, by Michael Barone (Regnery, 2001).
- Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, by Roger Daniels (Visual Education Corporation, 2002).
- Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*, by Laurie Olsen, (New Press, 1998).
- Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to Be American*, by Tamar Jacoby (Basic Books, 2004).
- The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*, by Iris Chang (Viking, 2003).
- Chinese Immigration (Changing Face of North America)*, by Marissa K. Lingen (Mason Crest Publishers, 2004).
- Chinese Immigrants, 1850-1900*, by Kay Melchisedech Olson (Capstone Press, 2001).
- A Century of Immigration: 1820-1924*, by Christopher Collier, and James Lincoln Collier (Marshall Cavendish Inc., 2000).
- At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, by Erika Lee (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
- The Columbia Documentary History of the Asian American Experience*, by Franklin S. Odo (Columbia University Press).

#### Internet

- [www.notablebiographies.com/news/Li-Ou/Ming-Jenny.html](http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Li-Ou/Ming-Jenny.html)
- [www.wilconference.org/2003/keynote.html](http://www.wilconference.org/2003/keynote.html)
- [www.fastcompany.com/magazine/83/fasttalk.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/83/fasttalk.html)
- Library of Congress: American Memory  
[www.memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/chinese.html](http://www.memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/chinese.html)
- Becoming American: The Chinese Experience  
[www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ap\\_prog1.html](http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ap_prog1.html)
- General Immigration Information  
[www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)