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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

Mott Street

A Chinese American Family's Story of Exclusion and Homecoming

By Ava Chin

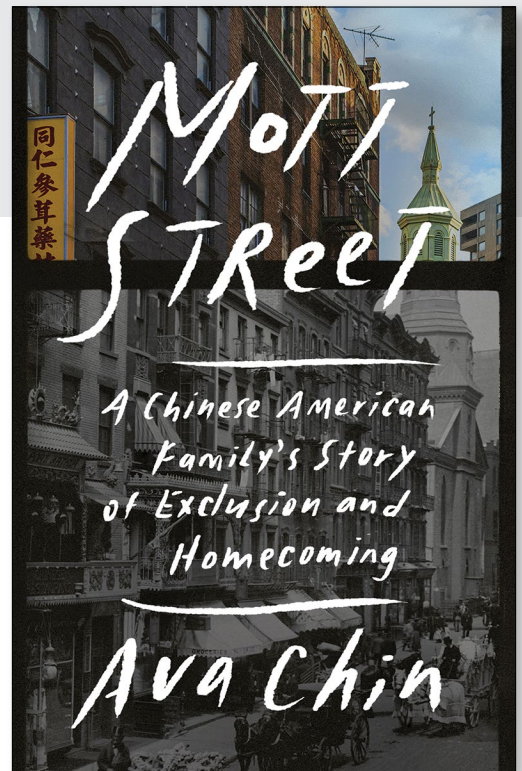
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Author Ava Chin's family has lived in the same building in the heart of New York City's Chinatown for over a century. What is the significance of the building and its tight-knit community to the larger story?
2. What was the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA)? What did the law do and what was its significance to the author and her Chinese American family?
3. The completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad was a crowning achievement of the 19th century. A projected 10,000-15,000 Chinese workers, including the author's great-great-grandfather Yuan Son, built the most difficult part of the railroad, under the harshest conditions. What happened after the completion of the railroad that paved the way for the Chinese Exclusion Act?
4. Aside from the specific CEA laws, what other legislation arose that also greatly impacted the author's family and other Chinese Americans in this period? What laws impacted Chinese Americans even *before* Chinese Exclusion was implemented?
5. Aside from Chinese Americans, who else was directly impacted by this restrictive immigration policy? Describe these people and how their lives were also affected.
6. How did CEA pave the way for other immigration restrictions that came after it? What other nationalities were greatly impacted in the 20th Century by this legislation?
7. Early residents of New York City's Chinatown, such as the author's uncle, worked alongside activist and writer Wong Chin Foo to fight for Chinese civil rights in 1892. What were they specifically attempting to do, and who ultimately joined them? What was at stake when Wong Chin Foo addressed Congress?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

8. What was the relationship between the author's great-grandmothers Chun and Yulan? How were their lives changed by living in the same community and the same building on Mott Street? How does that relationship change by the end of the book?
9. The author addresses the nature of contagion and how families were impacted by infectious disease from Hong Kong to New York City. What were the diseases that plagued New York City in the early part of the 20th Century, and what did Chun do to help her neighbors?
10. During the 1920s, violent clashes erupted between two major associations in Chinatown—the On Leong and the Hip Sing tongs. How did these tongs differ from one another? How was the issue of *immigration* conflated with the *Tong Wars* by the authorities back then? What was the impact of the immigration raids on Chinatown and the families residing on Mott Street?
11. Starting in 1870, Chinese residents in America were not allowed to become U.S. citizens. How did this disenfranchisement impact the author's family and others like them? What were some of the ways in which the author's family members sought to prove that they were patriotic Americans, despite the laws?
12. The author's relationship with her estranged father is a motivating factor for how and why she embarked upon telling this story. She states: "I learned early on how Exclusion isn't just a political condition, but a deeply personal one that exists even within families." List the many ways in which the echoes of Exclusion resound throughout the book.
13. How has the CEA impacted modern American society?
14. What important insights has the author gained by the end of the book? How has her family dynamic changed in certain ways, while in others it remained the same?
15. At the end of Chapter One, the author writes: "When you're Chinese in America, with roots that stretch back to the Exclusion era, it is the historical record that is a fabulist fabrication, and the oral stories, passed down from generation to generation . . . that ultimately hold the keys to the truth." What do you think the author means by this?
16. What stories fascinated you most about your family when you were growing up? Which ones pointed to something much larger than any single family member, and to something much larger in society overall?
17. What other societal movements were on the national consciousness during the same time as the CEA? How did they dovetail in unexpected ways with CEA?



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