UNDERGROUND AMERICA
UNDERGROUND AMERICA
NARRATIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED LIVES

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VOICE OF WITNESS
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MR. LAI

AGE: 40
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: China
OCCUPATION: Cook
HOME: New York, New York
Born in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian, Mr. Lai ran into problems when his family violated the one-child policy.¹ He paid smugglers to provide passage out of China and arrived in the U.S. as an EWI² after a year-long journey, which took him through Thailand, Cuba, and Mexico. Mr. Lai has since traveled around much of the U.S. working as a cook to pay off the huge debt he owes his smugglers. He also sends money when he can to his wife and two sons back in Fujian. We first met in the Chinatown offices of a nonprofit serving the local New York Fujianese community. It was there that the polite, reserved Mr. Lai showed us the extent of a recent injury, unwrapping his bandages to reveal a reddened, swollen hand with a deep v-shaped scar. Over several more meetings held in a nearby Korean restaurant, Mr. Lai, now forty, speaks slowly in Mandarin, explaining more about his life and the events that brought him here.

¹ China’s one-child family policy, first announced in 1979, generally restricts couples from having more than one child. The policy emerged from the belief that economic and social development would be compromised by rapid population growth.

² Entry without inspection. Refers to immigrants who enter the U.S. by avoiding official scrutiny.
The place I grew up was called *Cheung Lok*—Long Happiness. It was a very small farming village. People grew rice and sweet potatoes. There were only about three hundred families, a population of about a thousand. My whole family were rice farmers. I have five siblings—two older sisters, two older brothers, a younger sister. I’m the fifth child.

I was a simple kid. Nothing really bothered me. As long as I had food to eat I was fine. I didn’t think about whether I was happy or not, whether my parents were rich or poor, if I had good clothes or not; those things didn’t concern me. I went to school until third grade, and then I had to quit. My parents said, “Don’t study anymore. We don’t have the money.” So I left school and started looking for work. There were too many people, and not enough food and work to go around. Everyone was a farmer, but nobody had more than a small piece of land to work. It wasn’t enough. My siblings weren’t going to school, either. My older sister went to school for five years but had to quit for the same reason.

So I went in search of work—herding cattle, making bricks. I was about ten years old when I started looking after cattle. I’d take them up to the mountains, herd them so they could graze on the mountainside. Thinking back to it now, it was kind of fun, always being up in the mountains, running around with the cattle. As I got older I found work making bricks. I was seventeen years old then. After that I worked various jobs in construction, which I continued to do until I came here.

Of all my siblings, I’m the only one who came over. By this time, I was married, with my own family. We were still very poor. There still wasn’t enough money coming in, and I wanted to find a way to make more. Also I thought that America would be more free. You can say whatever you want in this country, but China is so strict in so many ways.

The one-child policy, for example. When I was a kid, there wasn’t
such a thing. People could have as many children as they wanted. But later, population control was very strictly enforced. Officials would go to homes and check up on people, put them under surveillance if they suspected them of “illegal pregnancies.” They came to the house one day and warned me about having more than one child. Luckily my wife wasn’t at home, as she was heavily pregnant with our second son at the time. We wondered if they already knew, if someone had told them. We’d heard a lot of stories about bribery, forced abortions, forced sterilizations. This seemed to happen more in rural places—I don’t know if it was because more people in these areas broke the law, or if it was easier to get away with those kinds of methods there.

People found ways around it, like not registering the birth of their first child, quickly having a second one and then registering them as twins, which are allowed. We couldn’t do that, as we’d left it too long—our first son was already five. We were scared they would come back. There weren’t too many roads open to us. We decided we had to run. My older sister took us in. She has an old house with an upstairs; my wife and I just hid up there all day, too scared to go outside. If her neighbors found out, they would have reported us and officials would have come for us. We were in hiding for a little over two months. My wife had the baby at my sister’s house. Later I found that officials knew about our second pregnancy and had come looking for us. When they couldn’t find us, they went to our house and destroyed it, just tore the place down.

I was really angry about this, but I couldn’t do anything, couldn’t say anything. The whole family would have been in trouble. You had to be careful. You couldn’t offend the party. You just can’t criticize

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3 Varying provincial laws determine what constitutes a legal pregnancy. Generally, population authorities determine legality based on family history—if the family’s first child was a girl or disabled, the family is allowed to have a second child—and whether or not the area’s yearly child quota has been reached.
the government there. If you do, you’ll get thrown in jail. There was also the six thousand RMB fine,\(^4\) for having a second child. We were poor—we couldn’t pay it. It was during this time that I first started having ideas about going to America. I’d been hearing people talk about how democratic America was, that there was freedom of speech. At the time I thought I could go over, and then send for my wife and my sons, and then we could have two or three more children! I love kids, I really do. But after I left, the government forced her to have a hysterectomy. If you refuse to do what they say, they’ll throw you in jail, or demote you at work. Or if they can’t find you they’ll destroy your house.\(^5\) That’s what they do. That’s what they did to us.

The feeling that I had to find a way out for myself and my family grew stronger and stronger over the next few years. We just couldn’t go on like this. This was no way to live. And I had so much anger toward the government that I really got to thinking, if I didn’t get out then I’d probably just end up in jail. I just had no faith in China. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I knew I had to go to America.

**I’D JUST EAT, SLEEP, EAT, SLEEP**

I can’t remember much about the journey. I started in Fujian. I was given a Thai passport. The person in the photo is me, but the name is not mine. This was all arranged by the snakeheads.\(^6\) I was intro-

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\(^4\) RMB (short for Renminbi) is the official currency of China. Six thousand RMB was approximately $725 U.S. in 2000.

\(^5\) In May 2007, riots broke out in Bobai, Guangxi, in the wake of a new crackdown by the provincial government on families that break birth-control regulations. Financial penalties increased and, at the behest of Beijing, parents who failed to pay were punished by having their property confiscated or destroyed.

\(^6\) Snakeheads are human smugglers, generally from China. The term has also been used to describe anyone involved in any aspect of a human smuggling operation, either locally or overseas. See Appendix B for more information on Chinese immigration.
duced to them by some people from my town. I didn’t really know who these people were, the ones who introduced me. Just people you come into contact with, when you go out, to a bar or something, they’ll say, “You have this problem? Why don’t you contact so-and-so?” They were just people who were like me, in a similar position. We’d get to talking and they’d say, “I know someone.”

The snakehead I met said he would take care of everything, but that it would cost me thirty thousand dollars. The deal was payment upon delivery—I would arrange to borrow this amount from loan sharks in China, then pay off the big snakehead when I got to the States. The money would go to collectors back in China, who would then give the money to the big snakehead.

It didn’t matter if I trusted these people or not. I just had to try it. I agreed to everything. I got my Thai passport, and went to the airport with this guy. We stood in line together at the border control and I was supposed to follow him. I was nervous, but nobody stopped us, they just let us through. We got on the plane to Thailand. I traveled with this guy, just the two of us. The whole flight I was very excited, very happy to be making the journey. Somebody came to fetch me from the airport in Thailand. I was a little scared at that point—what was I going to do if I got caught and put in jail? But the guy said I wasn’t going to get caught, that everything would be fine. I was happy to believe him—my mind was set on getting to the States, the sooner the better.

I spent about three months in Thailand. I was locked in someone’s house, I don’t know where. I was told it was Bangkok. Everything was provided for. I’d just eat, sleep, eat, sleep. There were about twenty of us. There were about two, three people who kept order—the enforcers. All men, Chinese; they spoke Putonghua.

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7 Law enforcement authorities in China and many transit countries are often paid to aid illegal immigrants entering and exiting their countries.
They were average-sized, young, about twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Very fierce. They told us we couldn’t go out, it was too dangerous, we might get discovered. They kept saying, “You’d better stay in line, or you’ll be beaten.”

They treated us fine, as long as you kept quiet, as long as you didn’t say anything. If you started saying the wrong things or started getting jumpy, they might come and beat you. I saw this happen to some guys who talked too much or said the wrong thing. They beat them right in front of you. If you fought or argued, they beat you. They treated the women the same as the men.

We slept on the bare floor. Just a blanket, one underneath, on the ground, and one on top. There were about two bedrooms and one lounge, about ten people sleeping in each room. We could go anywhere within the house, but not outside. It wasn’t that big, about twenty square feet. There was no furniture, nothing in the house. There was a kitchen. There were two people in there who cooked; we weren’t allowed to make our own meals. Whenever it was time to eat they’d shout, “Food’s ready!” We ate quietly. The food was Chinese style: rice congee. It was okay. As long as we had something, we didn’t complain.

The others in the house were all from the same province, Fujian. Many from Fuzhou.¹ We would talk about what we used to do when we were back home, what we were going to do when we got to the States. It was mostly men. Some of them grew up in cities, some were from farms like me. Some were older, some were younger. But mostly men. They were all single people there. Nobody was with their family. There were a few women, but I didn’t really get to know them. The women were all by themselves, too; they didn’t come with their families. The women were grouped together, the men were grouped together. The men would spend the

¹ The capital city of Fujian.
days playing Chinese chess, poker, chatting with each other. We were really bored, but there was nothing we could do.

I didn’t know I was going to be there for such a long time. I didn’t know it was going to be like this. I was thinking, I wanted to go to America to be free, but here I am, locked up like a prisoner. It didn’t make any sense to me. Whenever I asked the enforcers how much longer we’d have to stay, they always said, “In a few days. We’ll let you go in a few days.” I got tired of asking. I felt helpless. Eventually I became numb.

It was difficult to think clearly about anything. I wondered how my wife and children were. Once or twice I was able to call them, but I didn’t get to talk with them for long—the enforcers didn’t let us make long phone calls. And I didn’t have money to make too many calls. When I spoke to my wife I just told her to take care of herself, the kids. That I was in Thailand, everything was fine. Even if things were bad I would always tell her I was fine. I didn’t want her to worry. I didn’t want her to think this was a mistake. I knew she was very worried about me, but I kept telling her, “Everything’s fine, everything’s good. I’m doing well. I have food to eat, I have a roof over my head, so don’t worry about me.”

When I spoke to my sons, I told them, “Your dad really misses you.”

They asked me, “When are you coming back?”

And I said, “Dad isn’t coming back. He’s going to America, and in the future you’ll come too.”

BE QUIET AND WAIT

One morning in September, the enforcers woke us up and told us to go. They didn’t even give us time to get our things together, just told us to leave with the clothes on our backs, but I was quick, and managed to take a small bag with me. Five of us were flown to Cuba
on fake visas. The other people, some had already left here and there. You could say I made some friends there, but I haven’t seen them or stayed in touch with any of them since I got to America.

It was bad in Cuba because there was still more waiting. Just as in Thailand, we couldn’t leave the house. The Cuban enforcers said it was even more risky here, because we were more obviously foreign. They weren’t as fierce as the enforcers in Thailand; they didn’t beat us, just told us to be quiet.

Including the five from the Thailand house, there were a couple more Chinese people, so in total there were six or seven people in the house. We stayed on the second story of the house and slept on the floor. It was a bit better than in Thailand because there was carpeting. In general the place was okay, reasonably clean. At least here we could make our own meals, since none of the enforcers could cook. We ate chicken, rice, things like that. We requested the enforcers buy groceries for us. We told them what we wanted, gave them some money, and they went out and bought the food. But since they were Cuban, we couldn’t really communicate all that well. A lot of hand gestures and miming, “We’re hungry, we want to eat,” and they’d say “Okay” by nodding their heads.

We were told to be quiet and wait; there was another snakehead in Cuba who was arranging the next step of our journey. We were there for three months, until one day we were told to pack our things—we were being taken to the airport to go to Mexico.

So this was already six months of traveling, stopping, traveling. I really had no idea it would take so long, and still I hadn’t reached America. Back in Fujian, the snakehead told me it would take ten or so days to get to America. Maybe I would have reconsidered if they’d told me the truth about how long it was going to take. Maybe I still would have done it. I don’t know.
AS SOON AS I GET TO AMERICA, I’LL BE AMERICAN

We got to Mexico by plane. All of us were really happy. I kept telling myself, “I just have to keep going. It’s my last hurdle. And as soon I get to America, I’ll be American.” We spent four months in Mexico. The same kind of thing, locked in a house. But this place was really big. Outside there were pigs, chickens, sort of like a farm. There was corn growing in the middle of the land. There was so much that you could just go in there and pick it. The whole place was fenced in. We could wander around, but not beyond the fence.

So it was a bit better than before—at least you could walk outside in the fresh air—but it was very quiet. Very dull. There wasn’t much to do at all. The same as before: sitting around, chatting, playing chess. We were prisoners still. By this time, though, I had become used to this kind of situation. I had become used to the waiting. I wasn’t frustrated in the same way.

Sometimes I was quite happy; other times I felt that my heart was far from being at peace. I felt that I was getting closer to America, but until I actually got there, I couldn’t be at peace. Sometimes I thought, I can’t believe I’ve been gone for so long. But I had a lot of faith in myself. I had no regrets. I knew I would get there in the end.

One morning we were told to get in this big truck with about a hundred other people. There were only about ten or so Chinese; the rest were Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran. As soon as we got on, we were moving. We spent sixteen or so hours in the truck. It was very difficult, very uncomfortable. We were standing or leaning the whole time. There were no windows, except for a small one above us in the roof. It was very, very hot. Very crowded. We didn’t make any stops, not once during the sixteen-hour journey. We were given plastic bags to go to the bathroom with. The smell was really bad. I thought, This is just too much. This is too harsh. This is not how you treat human beings. But I also thought, If this is the only way to
get to the States in one piece, I have no choice but to tolerate it. At some point it will be over.

Eventually, we arrived somewhere with a lot of cornfields. It was about one in the morning, very dark. We were told, “At the other end of the cornfield is America.” Then we were told to get out and go into the corn and follow some people. The corn was very tall, taller than me. All I could see was a railroad track running alongside us, about one hundred meters away, so whenever a train came by we would squat down. Next to the railroad track was a road. There were police cars driving back and forth, patrolling the border, so you didn’t dare make yourself seen. We were just walking and hiding the whole time, following the leaders. We spent about five hours walking. I didn’t get tired, though. All I was thinking of was, “America, America.” I could see it at the other end. Eventually we got to a wire fence. One of the leaders cut a hole in it. He pointed to the cornfields and said, “This is Mexico.” Then he pointed to the other side of the hole in the fence and said, “This is America.”

I crawled through that fence and got to the other side. I can’t tell you how happy I felt at that moment. The first thing I saw on the other side was a railroad, and a police post. So we had to hurry up and stay down, especially since the sun was starting to come up. Further along the railroad there were three cars—before we went through, we Chinese were told the cars would be waiting for us. We ran to the cars, got in, and were driven away.

We were traveling for five, six hours with two Chinese guys—the driver and another guy. They didn’t tell us where they were taking us. They just said, “This is America. But we’re going to go farther.” Somebody said New Mexico, but I didn’t know for sure. We stopped at a motel on the way. It was good to have a break—get showered, brush our teeth, change our clothes. The second night, I was driven to L.A. When we got there the guy with the driver said, “You’re really in America now. Give me the money.”
What the snakehead told me back in Fujian—he was a liar. He lied about the time it would take. He also lied about the fee. He told me it was going to cost thirty thousand dollars. But when I finally got here I was told that I owed sixty thousand dollars. He said it was more because it took a lot longer than it was supposed to. I thought this was really unfair. But they wouldn’t let me go until I gave them what they wanted.

I had only been prepared to borrow thirty thousand dollars from the loan sharks in China, so there was no way I could come up with the extra money just like that. Those snakeheads, they just tell lies, they never tell the truth. But one thing is true: if you don’t pay up, you’re not going to live.

At the time, I was staying with three others in an apartment near a Hawaiian supermarket. One woman and two men. They hadn’t paid the snakeheads yet, either. The people guarding us were young men; one of them was younger than me by five or six years. They were Chinese. If these enforcers went out, sometimes they would take us out with them. If they didn’t go out, we didn’t go out. We were never allowed to leave the apartment by ourselves. It was better than being locked up before, because they took me out a few times. I didn’t see much though, as I was only allowed short trips to the supermarket to buy fruit, vegetables, that kind of thing. Most of the time we were indoors, watching TV and videos all day.

It was the three of us men in one room, and the woman in her own room. The enforcers stayed in another room downstairs. We slept on the floor. They gave us blankets, but we still had to sleep on the floor. We couldn’t really talk. If you spoke loudly, the enforcers would hit you. They kept saying, “Hurry up and get the money. If you don’t get the money, we’ll beat you to death.”

I was constantly phoning home to try and raise more money. I called family, friends, whoever, to get them to help me. I was desperate to pay off the snakeheads and start my life in the U.S. After a
month or so I managed to borrow forty thousand dollars, but it still wasn’t enough. By that time the others had all left; they’d found the money and paid up. Eventually my older sister was able to get hold of some different loan sharks who lent me the extra money. After two months in L.A., I had the sixty thousand dollars to pay off the snakeheads. When the L.A. snakeheads had received confirmation from the China snakeheads that the fee had been paid, I was free to go.

I DIDN’T KNOW WHERE SOUTH CAROLINA WAS

I was given a plane ticket for New York under someone else’s name. It didn’t even match the fake Thai passport I was carrying, but nobody checked when I came in. I knew nobody when I arrived in New York, nobody. Nobody came to pick me up when I arrived. I was all by myself. I just got in a cab. I’d been told to just say, “Chinatown.” And so I did. The driver said, “Okay.” When I started seeing Chinese letters on shop fronts and street signs, I told the driver, “Stop here.”

I had no idea where I was going to live. I asked some people in Chinatown where I could find a hotel. The people there said there were several hotels nearby. That’s how I found the Wu Shing Hotel, which had rooms for fifteen dollars a night. I stayed in my own room, but it was tiny, with a very small bed. You pretty much just walked in, took your shoes off and lay down.

At the hotel there were a lot of people staying there who had also come from Fujian. I got to talking to one guy who said he said he was from Wang Tau. I told him, “I’ve only just got here. I want to look for work tomorrow. Where should I go, what should I do?” He told me not to worry, there were recruitment agencies nearby; he’d take me to one in the morning. So that’s what happened.

The agent there said I could start working right away, in a Chinese restaurant. I didn’t have to sign anything, but I had to pay them thirty dollars for finding the job for me. I was given a phone number
for the job, area code 803. They said it wasn’t in New York, that I had to take a bus there. They told me how to get to the bus station on 42nd Street. When you get there, they said, buy a ticket on a Greyhound bus to South Carolina.

I didn’t know where South Carolina was, but after buying the ticket I had only two dollars left in my wallet, so I thought, Okay, it must be pretty far. Still, I didn’t expect to be traveling for hours and hours and hours. In the end it took about seventeen hours, almost a day, to get there. But I didn’t mind. I was excited about getting my first job in the States, excited about getting my first wage and sending money back to my family. I wanted them to see I was doing all right, and that it was the right decision to come here.

PEOPLE IN MY SITUATION

It didn’t work out well in South Carolina. Straightaway the restaurant boss said, “You don’t know how to cook!” And it was true. At the time I didn’t know anything, I had no experience. I thought I would be given the chance to learn. Instead he got me to do basic kitchen work like cutting meat, vegetables, that kind of thing. He just kept me on for three days and then told me to go back to New York. I was really upset. I’d gone all the way down there and only managed to earn $180. I had to spend half of that to get back to New York. I felt unhappy, really defeated.

Then the recruitment agency found me another job, at another restaurant. This one had a 914 area code: Westchester, New York. Thirteen days at this place, doing more menial kitchen jobs. Philadelphia after that. The longest job I had was in Florida. I spent two years there. I’d been fired five or six times before I ended up in Florida. I also worked in Virginia, Queens, North Carolina. A few days here and there, generally menial kitchen work. Also a few days in Ohio. Texas. Alabama. Massachusetts. New Hampshire. Indiana.
A lot of places! Seattle was the farthest. I don’t know why the bosses fired me after such a short time. I worked hard, did my best. But maybe they got impatient with my lack of experience. Maybe they thought there were plenty more people like me.

Some places were okay, in terms of living standards. The owner of the restaurant would say, “Sleep in the basement,” or “Sleep in the lounge.” I don’t remember a lot about the places. It was all pretty much the same to me. I spent all my time working—a kitchen is a kitchen, that’s what you see, what you do. Queens had a lot of black people. North Carolina was very clean, not a lot going on. I felt very comfortable in Houston; it had a Chinatown, with Hong Kong supermarkets, Vietnamese restaurants, a lot of Asians. I was there a little over a month. In Kentucky, I lived up on a mountain with the other restaurant workers. Every morning we would get picked up and be driven down the hill to go to work. We lived in a very old house, about one hundred years old. The wood was rotting, the whole place was unhygienic; it wasn’t comfortable at all.

When I worked longer at jobs I would make about $1,600 a month. The recruitment agency would tell us beforehand how much we’d be earning. So, $1,600 sounds good, but you’re working very long hours. I’d work about twelve to thirteen hours a day, six days a week. You’re on your feet the whole time and have to work really fast, otherwise the bosses yell at you. The money I sent home would go to my family. I’d send the money in U.S. dollars. My wife would change the money into RMB and put most of that toward paying off the loan sharks.

There wasn’t a definite time that I would send money home, because I wasn’t always working regularly. When I had a job, when I had money, I’d send money back. If I didn’t have a job, I wouldn’t send money back. I’d usually send about a thousand, two thousand dollars home each time. The loan sharks charge very high interest. For the sixty thousand I borrowed, every month I have to pay over a thousand
in interest. So even though I’ve been in the U.S. for a long time, I still have no money. And I have no job now, so… I hear the interest has been getting lower as people get wealthier in China. So if I borrowed sixty thousand dollars now instead of five years ago, the interest would only be about six hundred a month. A lot of people in my situation have killed themselves because they couldn’t pay back the money. They couldn’t even pay the interest. I’ve always thought I just have to keep going; I have to keep working and pay off this debt.

In between the jobs I always came back to New York. Whenever I got fired I’d come back, because it’s easy to find work from here. Sure, I got tired of working in so many places, but I had no choice, with so much debt to the loan sharks in China. I had to borrow from them to pay off the people who got me here—the snakeheads. So I was tired, really tired. But as I say, I had no choice.

Most every boss I had was bad. Out of every ten bosses, eight were bad. They were horrible to everybody who worked for them, but especially to people without documentation. They would keep saying, “If you want to keep this job, do your work properly. Otherwise, leave!” Or, even if you were dead on your feet from exhaustion they said, “Work faster! Don’t laze about!” Last year, in Indiana, there was an incident. There were two cooks. One of the cooks accidentally sprayed the other one’s face with oil while he was cooking. So the manager told the cook who sprayed the oil that he had to compensate the other. He had to pay. But the manager took the money and kept it for himself. It was $3,500. He took it out of the cook’s salary. Two months’ salary. And he told him, “Get out. We don’t want you here.” Both the cooks were undocumented. The manager said “I’ll go and get Immigration. I have documents, you don’t.” So the cook had to leave. He didn’t dare try and stay or fight for his pay.
I’d been working at this Chinese restaurant in Kentucky for about two months. I was one of five, six kitchen staff. I worked as a cook, a wok handler. It was a typical job—long days, twelve to thirteen hours in front of a hot stove. I kept to myself most of the time. I didn’t really socialize with the other kitchen staff. I’m pretty quiet with people I don’t know well; I don’t know how to drink or tell jokes. The boss was Cantonese-speaking, so we didn’t communicate well. Myself, I speak Putonghua. Sometimes he got impatient when I didn’t understand what he was saying, then another worker would translate and I would get it. But apart from that, things were generally fine.

It was a typical morning. There were several workers going in and out of the kitchen to the alley. The kitchen was small and cramped so we’d use the alley for things like peeling vegetables, washing dishes and pots, that kind of thing. I went out there a few times to throw out some hot water. There was another worker nearby, a woman, who was washing dishes. I didn’t really take much notice of her at the time, but I remember that at one point she left the tub of dishes. I wasn’t paying attention. She must have gone inside the kitchen or restaurant to get something. After throwing some water out, I went back inside the kitchen to my stove. Suddenly everyone heard screaming—the woman came inside the kitchen, holding her hands up and screaming that her hands were burning with pain.

Then she ran inside the restaurant and came back with the manager. He had a really angry look on his face. He started talking to the workers. I could understand, “Bleach… water.” So I guessed he was saying that somebody had put bleach in the woman’s bucket of dish water and he wanted to know who’d done it. Nobody said anything. Several times he pointed to me, saying “Was it you?” I could understand that much.
Of course I just kept saying, “It wasn’t me” and “I don’t know anything.” But he kept pointing and asking and I knew then he’d decided it was me. I didn’t understand why, I hadn’t done anything—but I noticed the woman had her eyes to the floor. The manager saw me looking at her and he waved his hands about and said what I thought was, “No, she wasn’t the one who accused you.”

Still, he kept pointing at me and asking, “Was it you, was it you?” Maybe he thought if he kept on at me, I’d eventually admit it. But I kept saying no, which made him angrier and angrier. He starting pushing me around, but I didn’t fight back. I just turned away and went back to my stove. I just wanted to get back to work.

The next thing I knew I was getting struck from behind—at first I didn’t know what was happening, but then I turned around and it was the manager hitting my back, my arms. I tried to defend myself, push him away, but it was difficult—the kitchen was so cramped, I had no space to move. I couldn’t get out. I was scared. It seemed like a long time that he was hitting me. There were five or six other workers in the kitchen—some of them stood and watched. Others were carrying on with their work as if nothing was happening. I think they wanted to help me, but were too afraid. Even when you see something bad happening, you have to think of yourself. These are just people you work with; you get along just so you can work. All you really care about is keeping your job.

Then the manager grabbed a cleaver and started attacking me with it. I couldn’t believe what was happening. It seemed like he really wanted to hurt me, but when he actually cut my hand open and saw all the blood, he just looked really scared and ran away.

Maybe I passed out, because I can’t remember exactly what happened next, except that the police arrived, and then an ambulance, and then I was in a hospital bed. Everything after that is pretty vague, even now, months later. I just know that the whole time I was in the hospital I was afraid that I’d lose the use of my hand. At the
same time, I was hopeful that the law would help me. I thought, The police, they’ll do something.

The people at the Kentucky hospital were very kind. They didn’t ask me to pay any medical bills. They said it was a terrible thing that happened. The doctor there cut my hand open and reconnected something, maybe the bone. He warned me, “If you’re not careful, you could lose the use of your hand. And when it gets better, it’s still not going to be 100 percent normal.”

While I was in the hospital, someone, maybe the police, arranged for a Putonghua-speaking lawyer to come and see me. This lawyer said that the police had gone back to the restaurant and couldn’t find the manager. He also said the manager had a previous record, for assault, and that the police were still looking for him. I wondered if I wasn’t the first worker he had attacked. The lawyer said that for now, there was nothing else that could be done.

After about two weeks my hand was stabilized, but I still couldn’t move any of my fingers. I was in a bad situation. I had no job, and the police still couldn’t find the manager. This made me feel hopeless about getting any kind of compensation; it also made me feel unsafe. I didn’t know what the manager was thinking, if he wanted to get revenge or something. So I had no choice but to get my things together and buy a bus ticket for New York.

Back in Chinatown, the first thing I did was go and see a man called Mr. Chen. He works for a foundation that’s known for helping Fujianese people a lot. I told him about my problem and he said he’d try and do what he could. Hopefully he can help me somehow. Since the attack happened, three months ago, I’ve been out of work. I can’t handle a wok; I can’t do anything.

I can’t move my thumb. My whole hand is reddened and very swollen, very stiff. The scar goes down the wrist like a V. Two big cuts. That’s where the tendons are severed. I can’t tighten my fist. I use this brown stuff on the skin—Chinese ointment. I’ve been see-
ing a local Chinese doctor for this. He says I’ll only regain 50 percent 
of the use of my hand.

We’re all upset about the situation. My wife wants to be here. My 
sons are already eleven and fifteen years old, and don’t know when 
they’ll see their dad again. I still want to get them over here, but 
how can I afford it, how can I arrange it? All I wanted was to make 
a better life for my family, but instead I’ve missed my sons growing 
up, and I’ve been apart from my wife for five, six years already. But 
even with my hand like this, even if I have to do the worst kind of 
work for the worst pay, my chances of paying off my debts are still 
better from here than in China. And even if I did want to go back, it 
would be impossible—I have no money to get out of the States. So 
you see, I have to stay.

I’ve heard no news about the manager in Kentucky. I have no 
idea what’s happened. My lawyer, the one in Kentucky, has told me 
nothing new. I don’t even know if he’s helping me anymore. When he 
found out the restaurant wasn’t covered for liability, he said, “We’ll 
just talk about this later.” I don’t know what’s going on in his mind. 
Maybe he thinks he’s not going to get paid because the restaurant 
doesn’t have money, doesn’t have insurance. I don’t have any news 
about it. I don’t know if the manager was ever found, or if he was 
charged or not. I admit I still have some anger toward him. I don’t 
understand how you can treat another human being like this. I have 
thought about finding my own lawyer here in New York. So maybe 
I’ll ask Mr. Chen. Or maybe this is just the way it is. Maybe you just 
have to accept things and get on with your life.

DESPITE EVERYTHING THAT’S HAPPENED

My life now is very hard. Now that I’m not working, I stay at home, 
in a hotel. I share the room with five others. They’re also workers, 
immigrants, people in similar situations. Sure, you’re friendly, you all
come into contact, get to know each other, but then you leave. Nobody really stays anywhere for long, so it’s hard to make real friends. I can’t think of the future right now. My head’s full of troubles, full of worries. I can’t sleep. I owe the loan sharks a lot of money. I’m separated from my family. But despite everything that’s happened, I still don’t regret coming over. I really don’t. I still think it’s better being here, trying to sort out my problems from here, than going back to life in China.

My wife and I don’t talk very often. I don’t have a lot of money to call her. She knows what happened, but she doesn’t have all the details, how bad things have gotten. I don’t want her to see the state I’m in. It’ll only make her worried and feel helpless. Sometimes we’ll call each other if something’s happened, here or back home with the kids or someone in the family, if something’s going on. If nothing’s going on we won’t call each other. But when we do talk, no matter what the situation is, we always end up saying the same thing to each other anyway, even if it’s not true: “Don’t worry, everything’s all right. I’m doing well. I have food to eat, I have a roof over my head, so don’t worry about me.”
Examining the Myths and Facts of Immigration

**Time Needed:** One class period and one homework session, or two class periods.

**Materials:** *Underground America*, Teaching Tolerance “Ten Myths About Immigration,” large pieces of butcher paper or large (poster-size) sticky notes, markers.

**Objective:** Through reading, analysis, and discussion, students enhance their understanding of U.S. immigration issues.


**Connections:** Lesson can also be used with the following narratives from *Patriot Acts*: Rana Sodhi, Usma Naheed Abbasi, Anser Mehmood, Farid Rodriguez; *Out of Exile*: Panther Alier, Abuk Bak Macham; *Nowhere to Be Home*: Law Eh Soe, U Agga Nya Na; and *Chasing the Harvest*.

**Essential Question:**
- How do the stories from *Underground America* complicate your thinking about immigration issues?

**Preparation:** Download and photocopy “Ten Myths About Immigration” from Teaching Tolerance ([https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2011/ten-myths-about-immigration](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2011/ten-myths-about-immigration))

Create reading groups for ten of the narratives from *Underground America* (to correspond to the ten myths/facts of immigration), using the following narratives: Diana (12 pp.), Mr. Lai (20 pp.), Roberto (19 pp.), Liso (18 pp.), Lorena (20 pp.), Jose Garcia (17 pp.), Desiree (18 pp.), Farid (18 pp.), Adela (19 pp.), and Estrella (16 pp.). Other narratives from the book can be substituted for the ones listed above.
Step One: Hand out copies of Immigration Facts and Myths to be read during class or as homework (20 minutes).

Step Two: Assign each group one of the ten selected narratives from Underground America. Groups can read their narratives silently, aloud during class, or they can be assigned as homework. While students are reading their assigned narratives, they should copy three to six direct quotes from their narrators that seem to align with or contradict the ten myths and facts of immigration (45 minutes).

Step Three: Groups should be given time to discuss individual quotes. Each group should assign a facilitator and should be prepared to discuss the following (10–15 minutes):
- Why quotes were chosen and how they specifically connect to particular myths and realities of immigration.
- How chosen quotes helped students empathize with the personal experiences of the narrators.
- How chosen quotes enhanced student’s understanding of immigration issues.

Step Four: On ten poster-size sticky notes or large pieces of butcher paper, write each immigration myth at the top and the fact at the bottom. Hang them up in various places around the room. Have several pens placed near each “station.” Give students time to move around the room, writing their chosen quotes directly on the particular myth/reality of immigration that it relates to (15 minutes).

Step Five: Class silently examines the quotes at each station (5–7 minutes).

Circle of Voices: Students return to their narrative groups. Using three minutes of silent time, each group considers their responses and reactions to what they have just viewed at each myth/fact station. Each group member then has three minutes of uninterrupted time to discuss his or her responses, reactions and questions. Then, members may react to the comments that have been expressed (15–20 minutes).
Step Seven (optional): Using the Circle of Voices format, have groups consider the following questions (courtesy of Teaching Tolerance):

- Where do you think these myths come from?
- Who benefits from these myths?
- Why are these myths untrue?

Possible Oral History Project: Using quotes from the narratives and responses during the Circle of Voices activity, students can craft potential interview questions for an oral history project focusing on immigration issues.

Media Option: Use Wordle (www.wordle.net) or Tagxedo (www.tagxedo.com) to create “word clouds,” which are visual representations of words that appear in a text. Words or phrases that are used more frequently appear larger. Class could create an additional representation of the myths and facts of immigration.