

“Illegal”: A Musical Reimagines the Chinese Diaspora

[ASHLEY FAN](#) 2:44 AM, APR 19, 2019

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“Jook songs” — a wordplay on jook-sing, a Cantonese term for Chinese Americans — is the first song in the musical “Illegal” and a hybrid word that encapsulates what it means to be Chinese and American. Last summer, Skyler Chin ’19 was inspired to write a jook song of his own after

reading poetry by Angel Island detainees. What was a single song has since bloomed into a fully fledged passion project, a 26-song musical about Chinese immigrants during the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The musical “Illegal,” is directed by Olivia Facini '19 and features a talented seven-person cast: Skyler Chin '19, Sophia Dai '20, Jason Kim '21, Kathy Min '21, Ananya Parthasarathy '20, Jisu Sheen '20 and Daniel Flesch '19. It is a musical blending rap and spoken word, an original combination of genres that parallels the theme of dual identity throughout the play. “Illegal,” inspired by the real experiences of Chin’s grandparents, follows the immigration journey of several young Chinese immigrants attempting to enter San Francisco through Angel Island at the height of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923. The script is a balance of light-hearted humor and powerful emotion, and is always heavy with meaning: “Illegal” asks the timely and timeless question, ‘What does it take to be(come) American?’”

Illuminating Ellis Island’s lesser known West Coast counterpart, Angel Island, Chin tells history with his own twist. By writing and performing “Illegal,” Chin seeks to “carve out a space for untold stories and diverse performers to shine.” He takes Chinese stories into his own hands, blurring the line between history and fiction. Though the characters are fictitious, they were inspired by Chin’s family as well as the countless immigrants who were detained, dehumanized and deported at Angel Island, but who were never properly recorded in history.

Laced within the story are shocking details of experiences at Angel Island. The musical portrays the lengths that immigrants went through to pass inspections that were rigged against them: detainees endured violating physicals, “paper sons” who borrowed identities memorized coaching books filled with details of other people’s lives and the few women who attempted to immigrate were all assumed to be prostitutes. Each disturbing “fun fact” is delivered through enthusiastic song; the musical entertains nonstop, all while serving biting criticism of the inhumane methods employed at Angel Island to push out Chinese immigrants.

In addition to strong messages imparted in rhymes, the implications of this musical’s very existence cannot be lost. The entire conception of “Illegal,” from its inspiration by Chin’s grandparents in 1923 to its performance at Yale in 2019, is a unique product of the Asian diaspora,

and in particular, the Chinese diaspora. Central elements of the musical, including its setting on the West Coast and references to the invention of boba, nod to both historical and contemporary Asian diasporic culture. Chin tells a story of Chinese immigrants in English — with rap and spoken word, no less. This crossover of cultures would not have been possible without decades of cultural development within the Asian diaspora.

Chin's blending of Chinese and American identities in "Illegal" is remarkably bold. Common principles in Chinese culture, from filial piety to honor, both clash and mesh with American values of freedom and allegiance. The most complex character in the play, the Chinese-American translator for Angel Island inspections, experiences an identity crisis when confronted with the moral dilemma of his cruel job, and his split loyalties to his country and his people.

A goosebump-inducing scene near the end of the musical alludes to the poetry that inspired Chin to write "Illegal" — a Cantonese voice-over melds with the voices of the cast as they recite translated verses that real immigrants had carved onto the walls of Angel Island detainment centers, the weight of each word they spoke striking along with the beat of the drums. "Now the history is mine to write," says Chin's character, a line that seems to refer to his own writing of history in the form of the musical. As the program notes, "Illegal" may be your introduction to this history, but do not let this be the end of your exploration."

Catch "Illegal" this weekend on Friday, April 19 at 8 pm or Saturday, April 20 at 2 pm or 8 pm.

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