

Race, Immigration, and Chinese Exclusion

1. Tyrus immigrated to the U.S. during Chinese Exclusion. What was **Chinese Exclusion**? What is a **paper son**? How was Tyrus's immigration history typical of many ethnic Chinese and Asians during that time?
2. Tyrus was one of the founding members of the Oriental Artists Group, an informal organization of ethnic Asian artists in California during the 1930s. Yet today "Oriental" is a term we are discouraged to use. **Why is "Oriental" such a controversial term** for Asian American art and history? How does Tyrus's life complicate this history?
3. Tyrus and his wife Ruth had multiple connections to **pathbreaking immigration attorney Y.C. Hong**. Who was Y.C. Hong, and why is he important?
4. **World War II** was a turning point in Chinese and Asian American history. As Japanese Americans suffered mass internment, Chinese Exclusion was finally repealed. How did WWII affect Tyrus's personal and professional life?
5. What were the **Alien Land Laws**? How did New Chinatown differ from China City? How did Tyrus's **construction and renovation** of his and Ruth's Juanita street rental, his daughters' playhouse, and the family's Sunland home compare with his signature artistic style?
6. The "**model minority**" term was coined in the mid-1960s, when Tyrus was already in middle age. Compare and contrast the model minority concept with other stereotypes about ethnic Chinese and Asians. What were the issues during the nineteenth century, in the "**Chinese Must Go!**" rhetoric leading up to Exclusion? What changed by the middle of the twentieth century, when Tyrus became a citizen?
7. Part One of *Background Artist* focuses on Tyrus's entry into the U.S., and throughout his life we see how his birth name and personal history was modified due to migration and cross-cultural adaption. Why did so many Chinese undergo **changes in their name, age, and family history**? How is Chinese and Asian American genealogy different from European and African American immigrant history? How do these conditions complicate historical and biographical understanding?
8. *Background Artist* concludes by mentioning anti-Asian violence during the **Covid-19 pandemic** and **anti-immigrant sentiment** at the time of Tyrus's passing in 2016. How does Tyrus's life—which started in China a century earlier—speak to these twenty-first century developments?

Art, Animation, and Hollywood

1. Tyrus is best known today for his role in *Bambi*, but his time at Disney was only a few years in an unusually long and diverse career. What qualities of Tyrus's *Bambi* work can we see in his **art from before and after his brief time at Disney**?
2. *Background Artist* details Tyrus's diverse artistic practices, from **fine, commercial, and decorative art**, print illustration, animation and **motion picture sketch art** and concept art. What are the distinguishing attributes of these different artistic practices? What is more valued by art critics, collectors, and curators? How does **prestige** shape art history and popular culture?
3. From Van Gogh and many other famous artists it is common to associate creative genius with a tortured personality. In his life and career, Tyrus knew many actors and artists, from actress Anna May Wong and fellow ethnic Chinese Disney artist, Cy Young, who died prematurely. Meanwhile Tyrus himself lived 106 years. How does **race complicate an artistic or creative career**? How can art and creativity **cultivate happiness, connection, and longevity**?
4. As an artist, Tyrus worked in many different media and artistic practices. Does **researching** his life and career require any **special knowledge or skills**?

Friends and Family

1. **Tyrus's wife Ruth** was an enormous influence in his life, both as his spouse and mother of their children, but also as an essential professional and social support. What roles did Ruth play in Tyrus's personal and professional life? How is Ruth's family history also typical of Asian American history?
2. In Chapter 27, Tyrus's daughter, Kim Wong, mentions seeing the film adaptation of Amy Tan's bestselling novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, which was an important milestone in Asian American culture. Yet Lisa See's family history, *On Gold Mountain*, seems to have a much more important role in Tyrus's life. Why?

Writing Biography (questions for the author)

1. How did you **first learn about Tyrus**? Why did you want to write a biography?
2. What were your **influences** while writing this book?

3. In recent years we've seen widespread pressure to **diversify publishing**, filmmaking, and other kinds of stories and media. Was it easy to get support for this book?