

FEATURE

Searching for Needles in Haystacks Tracing Chinese Immigrants to America

By John Jung

Based on a Keynote Genealogical Lecture and Symposium *We Are America: Asian Pacific Americans in the U. S. South* National Archives Southeast, Morrow, Ga. May 1, 2010.

The National Archives are a national treasure, especially for Chinese Americans seeking information about their immigrant parents and other relatives. Today, I will describe the process of my own search for my parents' immigration files at the National Archives in San Bruno, highlighting some of the difficulties as well as some of the discoveries.

Search by Name

One might think that it would be a simple process to locate immigrant records using a search by "name." But, as shown below from 1880 census records for Salinas, Ca, immigration officers did not understand Chinese names as they mistakenly assumed that the surname of many Chinese was "Ah," which was added in front of a name of someone close to you to make it less formal just as in English, Jim might be converted to Jimmy.

Compounding the problem, many Chinese

immigrants acquired "paper names" to gain entry after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. They were listed in the archives under these false, rather than their real, names. Moreover, sometimes members of the same family had different "paper names."

Some names, like Sing Lee, as seen below were very common making them difficult to distinguish. The reverse name, Lee Sing, was also common. In some cases, Sing Lee may not have even been the person's real name, but the name he gave to his laundry, which translates to "Victorious Profit."

Other problems in locating Chinese by name occur as Chinese have several names: a family or clan name, a generation name, and an infant name or nickname.

Last Name	First Name	Middle Name	Ship	Port	Date of Arrival	Date of Birth	Country of Birth	Gender	Other Last Name	Other First Name	Other Middle Name
LEE	SING		PRESIDENT JEFFERSON	San Francisco	4/8/1931		CHINA	M			
LEE	SING		TAIYO MARU	San Francisco	8/13/1930	1910/03/12	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING		PRESIDENT JEFFERSON	San Francisco	7/28/1927	1868	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING		PRESIDENT LINCOLN	San Francisco	7/11/1924	1907/07/23	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	WING	PRESIDENT LINCOLN	San Francisco	2/23/1924	1904/12/22	CHINA	M	LEE	CHUNG	YOU
LEE	SING	YUK	PRESIDENT WILSON	San Francisco	2/5/1924	1882/01/01	CHINA	M	LEE	DONG	
LEE	SING		PERSIA MARU	San Francisco	10/1/1922	1904	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING		PRESIDENT WILSON	San Francisco	8/18/1922	1909	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	FONG	EMPIRE STATE	San Francisco	6/17/1922	1891/05-31	CHINA	M	LEE	CHONG	FOO
LEE	SING		SHINYO MARU	San Francisco	5/25/1921	1898/10/23	CHINA	M	LEE	KWONG	YIN
LEE	SING		CHINA	San Francisco	3/21/1921	1870	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	THOON	TICKERBANG	San Francisco	11/26/1920	1862	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	NEE	TJISONDARI	San Francisco	10/11/1920	1970	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	TONG	NILE	San Francisco	8/27/1920	1894	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	WEE	TENYO MARU	San Francisco	6/23/1920	08/28/01	CHINA	M			
LEE	SING	YOU	TENYO MARU	San Francisco	6/23/1920	12/09/99	CHINA	M			

Search By Port of Entry

Knowing the port, ship, and date when the immigrant departed or landed is also valuable information for locating archival records. Looking in the wrong place guarantees failure as illustrated by several examples I know about.

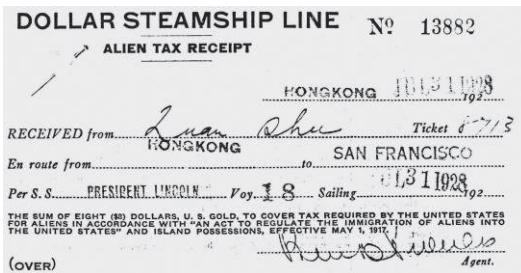
One immigrant was assumed by his descendants to have landed in San Francisco, as the majority did, but he had entered at San Pedro.

In another case, descendents assumed their immigrant father initially landed in Seattle, as he had on several subsequent occasions, but his original entry was at San Francisco.

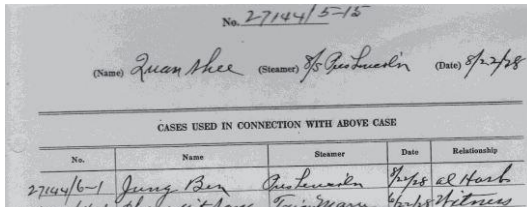
The opposite error was made by descendents of another immigrant who assumed he landed in San Francisco but in fact he entered at Seattle. (They were able to locate his file eventually because it was one of the rare ones that also listed his true destination)

An Archive Search for my Parents' Files

In my search in 2004, I was fortunate that my mother had saved her passage receipt from 1928 (she never discarded anything), which made the search easy.



I did not find my father's file as easily because I did not know his Chinese name. However, since his file was linked with my mother's, I was able to retrieve it and learn for the first time that his paper name was Ben Jung.



All Chinese immigrants had to answer an intense set of detailed questions about the physical characteristics of the village from which they allegedly came as well as questions about relatives, and events related to any previous trips back to China. My father's transcript was almost 100 single-spaced pages, of which a small segment appears below. Several times he was told that his answers did not agree with those of his "alleged father." I noticed that not once did he change his answer, always saying that he was "telling the truth."

Q Why was JEW VILLAGE forbidden to stationery in the morning? A No.
 Q While you were in the JEW VILLAGE last did anybody die there? A No.
 Q While you were in the JEW VILLAGE last was anybody born there? A I never heard of any.
 Q Which way does JEW VILLAGE face and which direction is the head? A It faces south, the head is east.
 Q Counting from the east where is your father's house located? A 4th house, 2nd row.
 Q Are the houses in that row all dwelling houses? A Yes.
 Q Have they always been dwelling houses? A No the first house is a lantern house.
 Q How did you happen to make the mistake of saying they were all dwellings? A I misunderstood.
 Q You were asked that same question when you were an applicant for admission and you have answered it precisely in the same way you do now. You first stated that they were all dwellings and then you changed as you did now. Are you memorizing the answer or are you stating facts? A I am telling you facts.
 Q Do the houses in your row, or your father's row, touch each other? A Yes, they all touch.
 Q Are there any bamboo hedges surrounding JEW VILLAGE? A Yes, on the back and a little on the two sides.
 Q Are there gates to JEW VILLAGE? A Yes.
 Q How far is JEW VILLAGE from the nearest hill? A A little over a li to the west.
 Q How far is JEW VILLAGE from the nearest river or stream of water? A A little over a li to the rear or north of my village.
 Q Do boats ply on that stream or river? A Yes, small boats.
 Q Is it possible to travel on a small boat on that stream to CHUCK HOI MARKET from JEW VILLAGE? A Yes.

My mother also faced a barrage of detailed questions aimed at detecting whether she was the person she claimed to be. She had been carefully coached and managed to pass the interrogation.


Unlike men, women were also asked specific questions directed toward determining their moral character, as illustrated by the questions below, because officials suspected that many women were prostitutes.

27144/5-15 9-16-26 Page 18
 Q Have you ever been in the U.S. before or deported therefrom? A No.
 Q Where and with whom will you live in the U.S. if admitted? A With my husband. My husband told me the American name of the place but I have forgotten it.
 Q Have you ever been arrested? A No.
 Q Have you ever been supported by charity? A No.
 Q Have you or either of your parents ever been insane? A No.
 Q Do you believe in polygamy or its practise? A No.
 Q Do you believe it is right for a female person to have two husbands living at the same time? A No.
 Q Are you an anarchist or opposed to an organized government? A No.
 PERSONAL DESCRIPTION OF APPLICANT: Height in American shoes 5', black hair, dark brown eyes, complexion light; ears pierced; small pit mark on right cheek bone.

My father, even though he owned his laundry, was not considered a merchant, a category that was not excluded from entry. Like many other Chinese, he became a 'paper merchant' by purchasing a partnership in a real merchant's business, which enabled him to bring a wife and any children over.

I also searched for the files of other relatives. An archivist located the records of my uncle who settled in Atlanta where he operated a laundry that his grandson runs still. Uncle Joe was a paper son who supposedly came from Hong Kong. After reading the detailed transcript of his interrogation, I readily saw that he was unable to answer most of the questions about Hong Kong. I was not surprised, but still stunned, when I saw on the final sheet that he was denied entry but told he could appeal. The fact is that he did gain entry but exactly why is still a mystery. The only other item in his file was a telegram dated two months

COLONY OF HONG KONG
CITY OF VICTORIA
CONSULATE GENERAL OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



Affidavit of Jung Ben.

Jung Ben, being first duly sworn upon oath according to Law exposes and says:

That he is a Chinese merchant lawfully domiciled in the United States of America, being a member of the Jung Sen Co., at Hothead Milladeville Road, Augusta, Ga.;

That he holds a Form 658, Permit to Re-enter the United States No. 306764 issued by the Commissioner General of Immigration at Washington, D.C., November 28, 1927;

That he departed from the United States for a temporary visit to China at the port of San Francisco, California, per S.S. President Lincoln, December 23, 1927; and that he is now returning to the United States;

That during his temporary visit in China he married to QUAN SHEE, in the Jo Village, Hoi Fing District, Kwangtung Province, on the 18th day of the inter. 2nd moon, C.R. 17;

That the said QUAN SHEE, was born in the Tai Ng Village, Hoiping District, Kwangtung Province, China, on the 28th day of the 8th moon, S.T. 1;

That it is his desire to bring with him his said wife, QUAN SHEE, to the United States to reside with him there, and he makes this affidavit for the purpose of enabling him to secure passage for his said wife, QUAN SHEE, to proceed to the United States;

AND that for the purpose of identification, he attaches hereto photographs of himself and of his said wife, QUAN SHEE.

Jung Ben
Subscribed and sworn to before me this 24th day of July, 1928.

Kenneth U. Trent
Kenneth U. Trent,
Vice Consul of the United States
of America.

CHINESE CONSULATE GENERAL
JUL 24 1928
WASHINGTON



Madame Chiang Arrives at Wesleyan

Documents from other archives are also valuable in unearthing family history facts.

For example, the Macon library had information about the 1943 stop by Madame Chiang Kai-Shek in Macon to receive an honorary doctorate from Wesleyan College. This was during her historic visit to the U. S. to garner support for China in the war against Japan, a visit thought to have been a key factor influencing the decision in 1943 to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act in effect since 1882.

Ironically, Madame Chiang had been denied admission to a public school 33 years earlier, when she lived in Macon because she was an "Alien." In the 1910 newspaper article below, her surname, Soong was even misspelled, Schoon.

later from Washington, D. C. ordering that he be landed, or admitted.

Signal Corps, United States Army

Received at

1HD 5 LAB 1 EX PRTY WASHINGTON DC 608PM OCT 19 1936 19

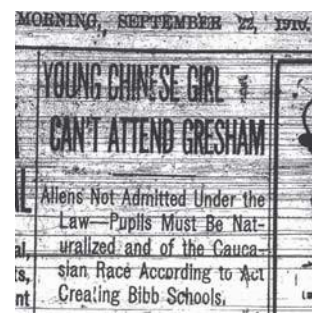
IMMIGRATION AND NATL SERVICE
SAN FRANCISCO CALIF

LANDER JEW SHIU DUN.
HAZARD
759PM

What Did I Learn About My Family History From the Archives?

While it was exciting to locate my parents' files, I had to remember that since father was a paper son, the 'facts' he gave did not reflect his own background.

Nonetheless, these files gave me a glimpse into how my parents maintained their poise under extreme duress. Reading these transcripts also gave me a firsthand look at the tortuous ordeal that they, and thousands of other Chinese immigrants, faced during interrogations.



Being Chinese, we four Jung children were invited to the event even though we never actually got to meet Madame Chiang. Nonetheless an article in the local newspaper made it seem as if the event was meaningful to us children.



Our Family Moves to San Francisco

Around 1950 when my two older sisters were reaching the age of dating, my parents decided that we needed to move where there was a Chinese community so that we could meet other Chinese people. We moved to San Francisco in stages, with my father remaining alone to run the laundry while mother took the children to California.

The local newspaper printed a column 'bidding us farewell,' an unexpected, but welcome touching tribute to father. I was also struck by the headline shown below because I had never known, or even wondered, whether any Chinese had lived in Macon before us. According to the article, a Chinese laundry had existed as far back as the 1880s at the same location where our Sam Lee Laundry stood.

Not a Chinese in Our Town For First Time in a Century

However, not until I was researching my family history 50 years later did I bother to verify that assertion by consulting City Directory listings. I then also discovered the postcard below from 1906 in another archive. This visual evidence was compelling as it showed the very building (near right side) where our laundry was located above which were our living quarters, complete with a sign hanging from the second

floor that read, "Sam Lee Laundry" when we lived there from the 1920s to 1950s.

How Chinese Gained Entry Despite the Exclusion Law

Chinese devised the "paper son method" and entered the U. S. despite the exclusion law by using purchased identities and by establishing themselves as "paper merchants" through forming partnerships with merchants although they were laborers.

Chinese soon realized that Immigration officials always used the same standard questions aimed at detecting paper sons. Knowing what questions would be asked, their chances of gaining entry were enhanced considerably by memorizing coached answers (Wong, 2004).



Judges, some in favor of exclusion, still upheld the Constitution and granted habeas corpus appeals to overrule many cases of denied entry (Salyer, 1995).

Closing Observations

Use of "Paper Sons" may be largely a thing of the past. Sadly, however, anxiety and stigma it created lingers to this day.

Fear among survivors and descendents is understandable, but it prevents disclosure that impedes documentation of its pernicious consequences and the prevention of future injustices that led to such past procedures.

The search for your immigrant roots may not be easy, but the rewards can be enriching and well worth the effort. Archives are more

accessible than ever, and expert archivists want to help you with your journey in exploring your past.

References:

Liu, H. (2005). *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family: Immigrant Letters, Family Business, and Reverse Migration*. New Brunswick, N. J. Rutgers University Press.

Pegler-Gordon, A. (2009). In *Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Salyer, L. E. (1995). *Laws Harsh As Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wong, M. R. (2004). *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

###

John Jung grew up in Macon, Georgia, where his family, the only Chinese in the city, lived above a laundry. After moving to California, he majored in psychology at U. C. Berkeley and went on to earn a Ph.D. at Northwestern University. He is an author of several academic textbooks, including Psychology of Alcohol and Other Drugs. He is a Professor of Psychology Emeritus at California State University, Long Beach where he taught for 40 years. After retiring in 2005, he wrote a memoir about his family's life in Georgia titled Southern Fried Rice: Life in A Chinese Laundry in the Deep South.