

## PAPER SONS

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was designed to bring an end to Chinese immigration. However, certain groups of Chinese were exempt from the immigration restrictions and were still free to enter the United States. Exempt groups included merchants, government officials, students, teachers, and visitors, but none were eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship.

According to the 1790 Naturalization Act, only “free white persons” were eligible for citizenship. After the Civil War, the Naturalization Act was rewritten to allow persons of “African descent” to apply for citizenship, but worded specifically to ensure that Asians would not gain eligibility. The only Chinese eligible for citizenship were those who were born on U.S. soil or those who were born in China to American parents. The 1870 citizenship law recognized the right of citizenship of Americans born abroad.

By 1900, there were 6657 American-born ethnic Chinese citizens living in the U.S. In 1906, the fires following the earthquake that devastated the city of San Francisco destroyed the office containing birth records. This allowed many Chinese residents to successfully claim citizenship because the government could not dispute their claim. As American citizens, these Chinese were entitled to bring in wives and children from China.

It was common for Chinese immigrants to return to China from time to time to visit their families. Upon returning from such visits, Chinese men would falsely report the births of son or daughters whom they claimed to have fathered while in China. This practice created immigration “slots” by which Chinese could enter by claiming that they were the offspring of an American citizen. Many of these “paper sons” paid Chinese American “fathers” to sign false birth papers for them. The Immigration Service officials believed catching these “paper sons and daughters” was part of their job.

When the Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, an old warehouse on the San Francisco wharf was turned into a processing station for immigrants. In 1910 a new Immigration Station was opened at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Here immigrants from China were given medical examinations and then housed in dormitories to await hearing on their applications. The immigration officials, known as *luk yi*, or “green-clothes men,” grilled the immigrants for hours at a time, attempting to determine whether the applicant was truly the son or daughter of the man who had created the slot and signed the birth papers. In the first two decades of the 20th century, only one in four individuals questioned at Angel Island was allowed to leave the island and enter the United States.

As you read the following documents, consider the purposes of the *luk yi* in asking their questions.

## Immigration Inspector's Statement

“Around about the 1890s many, many Chinese began to return to this country and they claimed to be coming back as natives. As a matter of fact, it would have been humanly impossible for most of them to be citizens because there were not many Chinese women over here. Most of them were denied admittance by the Immigration Service and they took their cases to court on *habeas corpus* proceedings and were landed by court order as citizens of the United States. From time to time, the Chinese went back to China and claimed to have been married and established a family, at least on paper. About 90 per cent boys and 10 per cent girls (*laughs*). They would return on re-entry certificates. From time to time, they would bring in their alleged children. That was the basis of all our work on the Board of Special Inquiry, testing the right of these new applicants to enter and remain, because they were coming in as alleged or potential citizens, not as aliens.

I was a lot more thorough than most inspectors. I gave them a pretty good examination, and that involved a lot of different angles. We started by getting the data on the applicant himself: his name, age, any other names, and physical description. Then we would ask him to describe his family: his father—his boyhood name, marriage name, and any other names he might have had, his age, and so forth. Then we would go down the line: how many brothers and sisters described in detail—names, age, sex, and so forth. Then we would have to go into the older generations: paternal grandparents; then how many uncles and aunts and they had to be described. Then the village: the district, how many houses it was composed of, how arranged, how many houses in each row, which way the village faced, what was the head and tail of the village. Then the next door neighbors. Then describe the house: how many rooms and describe them. What markets they went to. Find out about the father's trip: when he came home, how long was he home, did he go to any special places, and describe the trip from his village to Hong Kong. In describing the home, we had to get the details of the main things in it and how the family slept, what bedroom each occupied. Sometimes it would take three or four hours to examine each one.

We usually examined the applicant first. If there was any chance of a misunderstanding, we would call back the applicant and alleged father or brothers and try to reconcile them if possible. I found it an impossibility to get the applicant to change his testimony. He had learned that by God, he was going to stick by that testimony, right or wrong. Major discrepancies would be cause for deportation. For example, if an applicant said his village consisted of ten houses and five rows, two houses in each row, and the alleged father said 30 houses and ten rows, or if they gave entire different circumstances about a trip they supposedly made together to Hong Kong, or if the applicant said his

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father had three brothers and the father said one brother. It was a question of testing them on family history. I couldn't see how it could have been handled any other way in the absence of all documentary evidence.

When a person came in from a little village, who would know them? There was just one way of finding out if the family belonged together as it was claimed and that was by testing their knowledge of their relationship.”

Source: R.D. McKenzie, *Oriental Exclusion*, University of Chicago Press, 1928, p.50.

## Excerpts from the Interrogation of a Young Chinese

Applicant reminded that he is still under oath.

*QUESTION. What is your name?*

ANSWER. Leong Sem.

*Q. Has your house in China two outside doors?*

A. Yes.

*Q. Who lives opposite the big door?*

A. No house opposite.

*Q. Who lives opposite the small door?*

A. Leong Doo Wui, a farmer in the village; he lives with his wife, no one else.

*Q. Describe his wife.*

A. Chin Shee, natural feet.

*Q. Didn't that man have any children?*

A. No.

*Q. How old a man is he?*

A. About thirty.

*Q. Who lives in the first house in your row?*

A. Leong Yik Fook, farmer in the village; he lives with wife, no one else.

*Q. Describe his wife.*

A. Wong Shee, bound feet.

*Q. Didn't that man ever have any children?*

A. I don't know.

*Q. How many houses in your row?*

A. Two.

*Q. Who lives in the first house, first row from the head?*

A. Yik Haw, I don't know what clan he belongs to.

*Q. Why don't you know what clan he belongs to?*

A. I never heard his family name.

*Q. Do you expect us to believe that you lived in that village if you don't know the clan names of the people living there?*

A. He never told us his family name.

*Q. How long has he lived in the village?*

A. For a long time.

*Q. What family has he?*

A. A wife and one son, his wife's name I don't know, released feet.

*Q. Who lives in the second house in the third row?*

A. There is no house there.

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*Q. Isn't the second house in the third row opposite one of your doors?*

A. The house opposite my door is in the second row.

*Q. Didn't you say your house was in the second row.*

A. I have been counting from the front of the village, the house opposite my door is the third row, second house.

*Q. Who lives in that house?*

A. Leong Doo Gui.

*Q. How many houses in the fourth row of the village?*

A. No homes in that row.

*Q. According to your testimony today there are only five houses in the village and yesterday you said there were nine.*

A. There are nine houses.

*Q. Where are the other four?*

A. There is Doo Chin's house, first house, sixth row.

*Q. What is the occupation of Leong Doo Chin?*

A. He has no occupation; he has a wife, no children.

*Q. Describe his wife.*

A. Ng Shee, bound feet.

*Q. Who is another of those four families you haven't mentioned?*

A. Leong Doo Sin.

*Q. Where is his house?*

A. First house, fourth row.

*Q. What is his occupation?*

A. No occupation.

*Q. What family has he?*

A. He has a wife, no children.

*Q. Describe his wife.*

A. Toy Shee, bound feet.

*Q. There are two families, who are they and where do they live?*

A. Chin Yick Dun, fifth row, third house.

*Q. What is his occupation?*

A. No occupation.

*Q. What family has he?*

A. He has a wife and a son; his wife is Chin Shee, natural feet.

*Q. Did you ever hear of a man of the Chin family marrying a Chin family woman?*

A. I made a mistake; her husband is Leong Yick Dun.

*Q. What is the name and age of that son?*

A. Leong Yick Gai; his house is first house, fourth row.

*Q. You have already put Leong Doo Sin in the fourth row, first house.*

A. His house is first house, third row.

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*Q. You have already put Leong Yick Gai first house third row.*

A. I am mixed up.

(Applicant is requested to draw a diagram of the village together with the names of the people living in the village houses and does so, marked Exhibit "A", and signs his name thereto as "Leong Dow Sem.")

*Q. Have you named everybody now living in the Gong Ling village?*

A. Yes.

*Q. Is there a shrine near that village?*

A. Yes, there is one at the tail end of the village.

*Q. Is there a fish pond near that village?*

A. No.

*Q. Is there a school house in that village?*

A. No.

*Q. Describe your school experience.*

A. Started when I was seven to study. See Ak Hock How, located about two li<sup>1</sup> south outside my village.

*Q. Did you eat and sleep in the school house or at home?*

A. I slept in the school house and ate at home. I studied in the school for nine years.

*Q. How old are you?*

A. Sixteen.

*Q. Who was your last teacher?*

A. There were three teachers, Leong Yo Wah, Leong Bing, and Leong Yee On.

*Q. When was the picture taken that is on your affidavit?*

A. When I was ten years old.

*Q. Was your father in China then?*

A. No.

*Q. Was the picture on the affidavit when you received it?*

A. Yes.

*Q. How did your father get that picture?*

A. My mother sent it to him.

*Q. How long ago did she send it to him?*

A. I'm not sure.

*Q. Why are you so excessively nervous during this examination?*

A. I am not at all nervous.

*Q. How long have you had that gold tooth?*

A. About three years.

*Q. Was that tooth fixed that way while your father was last in China?*

A. I had it crowned while my father was in China.

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<sup>1</sup>A "li" is a Chinese unit of measurement for distances. Although it can vary, a "li" is most often equal to about a third of a mile, or half a kilometer.

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*Q. Where was the work done?*

A. In the Ai Gong market.

*Q. Do you know how much it cost?*

A. A little over \$4 Chinese money.

*Q. Who is going to testify on your behalf besides your father?*

A. Leong Seung.

*Q. Have you any changes or corrections you wish to make in your testimony?*

A. No.

*Q. Have you understood all the questions?*

A. Yes.

*Q. Is there anything further you wish to say?*

A. No.

Source: R. D. McKenzie, *Oriental Exclusion*, University of Chicago Press, 1928, pp. 53-57.

● **WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR “PAPER SONS”**

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For the “immigration inspector”:

Write a brief report for the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s records regarding the interview you just completed with the young Chinese man. Do you believe that his claim to citizenship is legitimate? Your report should include a summary of the young man’s claim to citizenship and your reasons for awarding or denying him citizenship.

For the “young Chinese man” (Leong Sem):

What are your thoughts regarding the interrogation? Write a brief letter to your family in China describing how you felt being interrogated and whether or not you think the inspector believed you. What do you think your chances are of getting U.S. citizenship? What will you do if you are admitted to the United States, and what will you do if you are deported back to China?