

National Archives Prologue Magazine

Spring 2004, Vol. 36, No. 1

An Alleged Wife

One Immigrant in the Chinese Exclusion Era

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Quok Shee, age twenty, endured nearly two years of detention on Angel Island. (Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, NARA Pacific Region [San Francisco])

Chew Hoy Quong and his "alleged wife," Quok Shee, crossed my path quite by accident, two among thousands of Chinese would-be immigrants who had tried to enter the United States in 1916. Their experience was one of hardship, tenacity, and sadness. It was unusual, and it was puzzling, for through it runs a thread of mystery.

Their story begins in the thirty-fourth year of the Chinese Exclusion Act. It is a tale now more than eighty years old. Today it seems dramatic; back then it surely passed unnoticed. No newspaper headlines, no memoirs. Only the public record remains, a folder of documents in which brief portions of their lives were written down, assembled, and preserved with bureaucratic thoroughness: Investigation Case File no. 15530/6-29 at the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region (San Francisco) in San Bruno, California.

Quok Shee's "investigation case file" is more than an inch thick, begun in September 1916 and not closed until August 1918. That startled me, for it meant that for almost two years Quok Shee had been held in detention at the Angel Island Immigration Station. As I leafed through her file, the dry and dated pages jumped to life. She had been repeatedly interrogated, denied access to a lawyer, plagued by depression, subjected to smallpox, isolated from a husband she scarcely knew yet who was her only contact in America, pulled this way and that. One hundred and fifty

pages of legalistic maneuvering, inquisitorial interrogations, medical evaluations, intrigue, and court orders—all over the attempt of one little Chinese woman to enter the United States.

Her case was not ordinary, but then neither were the times, the place, nor the other characters. Scandal was not a stranger to Angel Island, populated by a spectacular assortment of honest and dishonest immigrants, officials faithful or corrupt, an ambitious investigator-knight errant, smugglers, lawyers of every stripe, racists, and do-gooders. Such a setting, with its rancid undertone of moral ambiguity, was part and parcel of enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its equally racist successors.

Here is the story of Quok Shee and her "alleged husband" (as the Immigration Service always referred to him), Chew Hoy Quong—or at least the part we can document. The official record is stored safely in the National Archives: their testimony, the memorandums of immigration officials, and the lawyers' appeals. If we listen carefully, we can imagine their voices, sense the times, and feel the dramas that once swirled around Angel Island.

Coming to America

In 1916, entering the United States was relatively easy for most would-be immigrants. Only in 1875 had the federal government begun to regulate immigration, prohibiting the entry of members of "loathsome classes" as undesirable immigrants. By 1916 the list of undesirables had grown to include those with all sorts of physical or mental defects that might prevent one from earning a living, paupers and those likely to become a public charge, contract laborers, assisted aliens, criminals, prostitutes "or females for any immoral purpose," persons with contagious diseases, felons, polygamists, anarchists, and the illiterate. And those debarred under provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The Chinese were the only race of people to be singled out by the United States for special treatment through immigration legislation. The Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, was intended to end the arrival of Chinese laborers into the United States and to bar Chinese from naturalization. Only certain classes of Chinese were even allowed to enter the United States. They included merchants, teachers, consular officials, tourists, and the wives and children of such exempt individuals. Chinese residing in the United States before 1882 were also allowed to leave and return. The act was initially effective for ten years, but it was renewed once and then, in 1904, made permanent. It was finally repealed in 1943.

How effective were the Chinese Exclusion Acts at excluding the Chinese? For the last half of the 1870s, immigration from China had averaged less than nine thousand a year. In 1881, nearly twelve thousand Chinese were admitted into the United States; a year later the number swelled to forty thousand. And then the gates swung shut. In 1884, only ten Chinese were officially allowed to enter this country. The next year, twenty-six.

By 1916 the numbers had inched upward; a total of 1,762 ethnic Chinese were officially admitted as immigrants, about average for the decade. Still, the Chinese population of the United States was shrinking. In 1880, it had been over 105,000; by 1916 it had dwindled to around 65,000.

Chew Hoy Quong had first come to California as Congress was debating the Chinese Exclusion Act. He arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong in 1881 and immediately went to work in his uncle's store on Washington Street. When the uncle died in 1896, Chew inherited the business. Like many other merchants, he saw his store destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906. He

told immigration authorities that he had run a company near Stockton until 1915, when he joined the Dr. Wong Him Company, a Chinatown firm dealing in herbs and medicines.

Having lived in the heart of the San Francisco Chinese community for nearly thirty years, Chew Hoy Quong probably knew the procedures for immigrating to the United States. He would have known that if Chinese merchants wanted to leave the country and re-enter, their firms were required to register with local authorities. The Dr. Wong Him Company had done so. On February 2, 1915, Chew joined the firm, investing a thousand dollars to buy out the share of one of the founding partners. As part owner of a legitimate business, he could now apply to the Immigration Service for a Form 431, which he did on March 25. When this was approved, he became entitled to leave the United States. More important, he became entitled to return—and to bring with him any wife or children he might have.

Carefully, Chew had laid the groundwork for the next, and perhaps last, big change in his life: to find a wife and get married. On May 15, 1915, at age fifty-five, he boarded the SS Manchuria for Hong Kong. He later testified that, using a go-between, he met a Hong Kong woman named Lee Shee who had a daughter whom she hoped to marry off: Quok Shee, age twenty.

Chew subsequently testified that on February 21, 1916, he and Quok Shee were married. We do not know when Chew told his bride that they would be going to Gan San ("Gold Mountain"—i.e., the United States). Perhaps her mother told her that the prospective husband resided in the United States. Or perhaps Quok Shee only found out after the wedding. But she had over five months to adjust and prepare for the future, five months during which she and Chew said they lived in rented space on the third floor of a Hong Kong building.

It was probably in June or July that Chew arranged for passage back to America on the Japanese ship Nippon Maru. Ship owners in the business of transporting immigrants clearly understood that should a passenger be turned back or delayed at the U.S. port of entry, the shipping line would incur additional costs—the immigrant's upkeep on Angel Island and, should the would-be immigrant be refused entry, the responsibility of transporting that person back to the country of origin.

Thus the Toyo Kisen Kaisha line, owner of the Nippon Maru, had an incentive to see that their passengers' documents—especially their evidence of good health—were in order. In Hong Kong, Quok Shee was taken to the TKK office, where she presented her photograph and obtained a certificate stating that she was free of hookworm and trachoma.

On August 3, 1916, the Nippon Maru sailed from Hong Kong, arriving in San Francisco on September 1. From the ship's passenger list, signed by Captain Nagano as required by American law, we know that she carried 188 passengers: 90 Japanese, 75 Chinese, and 23 others of various nationalities (mostly Europeans and Americans). Among the Chinese were Chew Hoy Quong and his wife of six months, Quok Shee. Quok Shee had crossed the Pacific, but in many ways her journey to America had just begun.

Arrival

For most non-Asian passengers, whether immigrants, returning citizens, or passengers in transit, passing through the port's health and immigration controls would have been done quickly. Visas were not necessary, and there were few formal requirements for entry. But for Chinese like Quok Shee and Chew Hoy Quong, the process was quite different. Along with the

Nippon Maru's other Chinese passengers hoping to enter the United States, they were taken to Angel Island, several miles away in San Francisco Bay.

Perhaps 300,000 persons passed through the Angel Island Immigration Station between 1910 and 1940. For Chinese, it was the principal place of entry into the United States. Perhaps 75 percent of the Chinese entering through San Francisco were detained there for some period. Compared to the tens of millions who passed through Ellis Island in New York, Angel Island was a small operation. But it figures large in the history and folklore of immigration to California, a very visible reminder of the ordeals of those who passed through it, and of the country's determined efforts to keep them out.

As an outpost of the Immigration Service, Angel Island led a short and rather unhappy life. It had long been considered unsatisfactory by the time it was closed, following a fire, in 1940. From the beginning it was a source of dissatisfaction for both immigrants and immigration officials. The island was assigned the role of enforcing the grossly unfair Chinese Exclusion acts, and that this was done in a callous manner only compounded the injury and resentment. Firsthand testimony—some carved into the very walls—of former detainees speaks of injuries physical and emotional. Quok Shee and her husband were about to enter that labyrinth.

"Twenty Questions," Played for Keeps

The next day, September 2, J. P. Hickey, acting assistant surgeon of the U.S. Public Health Service, examined Quok Shee. He would have found her to be four feet, nine inches tall, able to read and write, and without a penny to her name. He signed her "Medical Certificate of Release." One hurdle had been cleared, but the couple was still held in the island's detention center.

On September 5 Quok Shee and her "alleged husband" were interrogated by the Chinese Division of the United States Immigration Service. The interrogation was an expected—and dreaded—part of the entry process for most Asians. The standard interrogation always contained a minimum of fifteen to twenty questions; Chew was asked more than one hundred.

Chinese immigrants complained bitterly about the interrogations, whose unnerving, inquisitorial style were liable to trip up even the most honest immigrant. Immigration inspectors were convinced that many of the Chinese trying to enter as children or wives of resident Chinese were, in fact, fraudulent. These suspicions were not unfounded; many entering males were "paper sons" (i.e., fictitious sons), and there probably was a trade in women being brought in for "immoral purposes." Chew Hoy Quong would certainly have been aware of the interrogation that loomed before them, and surely he and his wife used the long trip from Hong Kong to prepare for it.

There were two initial interrogations: one for Quok Shee and a separate one for Chew Hoy Quong. Both were conducted by Inspector J. B. Warner (through interpreters) and stenographer H. F. Hewitt. Quok Shee's case file contains the verbatim transcripts of both interviews.

Whereabouts in Hong Kong did you marry this woman?

C: Number 20 Wah Hing Street—west.

How was the bedroom lighted?

C: From a window in the hall.

Q: The bedroom was lighted from a window in front of the building.

How was the parlor lighted?

C: From a window facing the street.

Q: From a window in front of the building.

How was the parlor furnished?

C: One table, two chairs, one mantel clock; that is all.

Q: Clock and round table, 4 chairs, American, one cuspidor and looking glass.

Did you ever visit your home village after you married this woman?

C: Yes. I went home once.

Q: Yes. A number of times. I don't remember how many times.

How long did you remain?

C: Altogether six days, that is, including the time it took to go back and forth.

Q: 10 some odd days—a number of times.

Have you any children who you claim as yours?

C: My blood brother, Chew Kai Quong, gave one of his sons to me, who I adopted. I now, at this age, will probably have no children and therefore he gave me this boy to look after the ancestral service at home. . . . My brother brought him to Hong Kong to bid me good bye before I left for the United States.

Did he visit your home?

C: Yes.

How long did he remain there?

C: They stayed in the same building during his visit, on the second floor—Sun Chung Co.

Q: I don't know. They never mentioned it.

Are you positive this woman is your wife?

C: Yes.

You were married according to the Chinese custom?

C: I was married according to the Chinese new custom.

What is the Chinese new custom?

C: Chinese custom except there is no worshipping.

Are you positive you are not bringing this woman to the United States for an immoral purpose

C: Yes.

Inspector Warner must have entertained some doubts about their story. Later that same day, he and stenographer Hewitt recalled Chew for further questioning. He was "cautioned to be careful in his answers."

I want to know how many times you visited your village after your marriage

Only once.

Are you positive of that?

I am positive I only made one trip. . . .

Were you away from your village at any other time?

No.

Are you positive of that?

I was in Macao; a friend of mine invited me to a celebration there, for two days, on two different occasions.

Were those the only times you were ever away from your wife?

Yes.

Later that day, Inspector Warner made a favorable recommendation: he, at least, was convinced, and Quok Shee was on her way to being admitted to the United States. Or so it seemed.

More Questions

In fact, the Immigration Service did not release Quok Shee. Chew Hoy Quong was already a legal resident and free to enter the country, which he did on September 5. But something was amiss, and Quok Shee remained in detention on Angel Island. More ominously, the Immigration Service wanted to talk to Chew again.

On September 13, Chew took the 8:45 a.m. steamer from pier 7 back to Angel Island. He and his wife were again subjected to extensive questioning: 115 questions were put to Chew, 65 to his "alleged wife." As before, they were questioned separately and given no chance to talk to each other. This time, the interrogation was conducted by "Law Officer" W. H. Wilkinson. Again, only the stenographer and an interpreter were present. The same questions were asked again and again, each time in a slightly different way, brusquely jumping back and forth. The point was to catch them out and "prove" that they were not husband and wife.

This time, the interrogations explored how the "alleged husband's" story diverged from that of his "alleged wife." Wilkinson's questions focused on three areas: Quok Shee's knowledge of the furnishings and other occupants of the building they inhabited in Hong Kong, Chew's visit(s) to his native village, and the matter of getting onto the ship in Hong Kong. For example:

What kind of a clock did you have in your parlor?

C: We had a metal case clock on the table in the parlor (indicates about six inches square).

Q: It was a large clock hanging on the wall . . . in the parlor. . . . Wooden.

Wilkinson was more than skeptical. After the interrogations, he wrote a "Memorandum for the Commissioner." In it, he emphasized the following discrepancies, in addition to the number of visits made by the alleged husband to his home village:

The husband and wife disagreed on the nature and number of occupants on the second floor of their Hong Kong building.

The husband said that their apartment on the third floor was on the top floor, while the wife stated that there were people living above her.

The husband testified that the apartment had a metal clock, while the wife said it was made of wood.

Chew's adopted son lived on the ground floor during his visit, but the wife never saw him.

The husband and wife disagreed about the number of men accompanying them from the house to the steamer (SS Nippon Maru).

Wilkinson's conclusions were brief but brutal: "In view of the fact that the above contradictory statements appear incompatible with the relationship claimed, I recommend that the applicant be denied admission."

Charles Meehan, inspector-in-charge of the Immigration Service's Chinese Division, immediately informed Quok Shee that she had been refused admission: a form letter was drawn up and read to her through interpreter Chin Jack. The next day, Commissioner White wrote to both Quok Shee and the Chinese consul general, informing them that her application to land had been denied. The brisk "Notice to Rejected Chinese Applicant, Under Rule 5" was thoughtfully printed in both English and Chinese. Quok Shee was advised that she had two days to launch an appeal.

Detail of letter denying admission to US

Detail of letter denying Quok Shee admission to the United States. (Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, NARA Pacific Region [San Francisco]) [full image]

Two days for a poor immigrant to get a lawyer? Who would take such a case? Had she known what lay in store for her, she might have resisted engaging one. She surely had no idea how long and how tortuous her struggle would be.

Enter the Lawyers

Quok Shee's being denied admission was a setback, but Chew Hoy Quong was not unprepared. As soon as he sensed that something was amiss—probably when he was called back for further questioning—he immediately engaged the services of the San Francisco legal firm of McGowan and Worley, well known as specialists in the problems of Chinese immigrants. There was also a whiff of the less-than-respectable about them. Alexander Worley had frequent run-ins with the Immigration Service and with the courts, and neither he nor George McGowan was shy about taking on unpopular cases.

These were competent lawyers, and it was not at all unusual for them to be defending Chinese clients. The Chinese in California had a long history of using American lawyers and the American legal process to fight the Chinese Exclusion Act and its various successors, as well as discriminatory local ordinances. They also launched many legal actions against specific instances of unfair application of the exclusion laws. In the first ten years of the Exclusion Acts, more than 7,000 legal appeals were filed by Chinese, and between 1891 and 1905, an additional 2,600. There was plenty of work, and no shortage of able and willing white lawyers to earn the fees.

McGowan took charge of Quok Shee's case and went right to work. On September 11, acting on behalf of Chew as the "alleged husband," he requested Quok Shee's records, including the report of the examining inspector and the review of the law officer. These, however, were withheld by the Immigration Service because "said report does not contain any evidence whatsoever." Eventually, this refusal would be used against the government, but its initial effect was to keep Quok Shee on Angel Island.

McGowan and Chew kept testing the government's resolve to exclude Quok Shee. On September 22 they filed a sworn affidavit in which Chew states his background as a law-abiding citizen, provides details on his marriage to Quok Shee and their stay in Hong Kong, and shows how discrepancies in their interrogation testimony could be easily explained.

The affidavit was forwarded to Commissioner White on September 23, along with two other documents: a request to interview Quok Shee and a nine-page "Application to Re-open Case: Misunderstanding of purport of questions propounded and mistake of effect of Chinese customs bearing upon competency and relevancy of certain inconsistencies on the face of the record."

McGowan tried to use to his clients' advantage existing notions of how alien and incomprehensible were the ways of the Chinese. He quoted at length from *Things Chinese*, a book first published in 1892, to demonstrate how Chinese customs are different from "civilized" ones, especially those that concern the status and treatment of women. In trying to explain discrepancies in their testimony, Quok Shee's lawyer argued that Chinese women were sheltered, uneducated, unworldly, and basically, incompetent: "Matters of this kind only go to

show that too much has been expected in this examination of the testimony of this Chinese wife."

Commissioner White was not in the least persuaded. On September 26 he notified McGowan and Worley that their request to reopen the case was denied. Further, the request that Quok Shee be able to confer with her "alleged husband" and with her lawyer was also denied. The next day McGowan tried appealing to whatever sense of compassion the Immigration Service might have:

This applicant having been held incommunicado at your station since the 1st day of September, 1916, she having been kept separate, apart, and away from her husband during all of that time, the husband now desires to request that he be permitted to see, talk to, comfort and console his wife, who journeyed with him to this country on the same boat and to whom you have denied admission.

The Immigration Service was not in the compassion business. Permission was denied.

For McGowan and Worley, the next stage was to appeal to higher-ups in Washington: to the secretary of labor. On September 28, Commissioner White in San Francisco forwarded a copy of Quok Shee's file to Washington. In the dossier was all the Immigration Service's information on Quok Shee that had been shown to McGowan—and some that had not.

This administrative appeal, too, was rejected on November 21, 1916, when the secretary of labor ordered that Quok Shee be deported, "said deportation to take effect Saturday, the 25 day of November, 1916." It seemed that Quok Shee's attempt to enter the United States had failed and that, after three months in captivity on Angel Island, she would be forced to return to China.

An Alleged Wife: One Immigrant in the Chinese Exclusion Era, Part 2

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