Reflections on the Chinese Immigrant Experience in Gold Mountain
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On January 24, 1848, gold was discovered at John Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California. The news caused great excitement upon reaching Hong Kong. As a twenty year old youth from Zhangwan village in the Xunwai prefect of Guangdong province, my great grandfather, Yee Ah Tye bravely boarded a junk to sail from China to California in order to find the fabled "Gold Mountain." Though he did not ultimately find a literal Gold Mountain, he was able, through back-breaking labor and his English language skills, to dig out enough gold to become a respected merchant, a Chinese Yee association chief, and raise a family of six.

This month, we join to celebrate civil and human rights. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss the experience that is near to my heart -- that of the Chinese community's struggle to attain civil rights in California. My family persisted despite tremendous racial discrimination. The fact that I am standing here, the first Asian-American FCC and CPUC commissioner, is a testament to the sacrifices of the three generations that came before me.

The impetus for the initial Chinese migration to California in 1848 came for many as a result of enticing visions of Californian gold, but for others, as a result of the oppressive conditions in China stemming from the Opium War. Hundreds of Chinese men boarded ships hoping for a brighter future in California.

This future, however, would be fraught with difficulty and danger. Even the journey itself was perilous. While at sea, two out of twenty two of my great-grandfather's fellow shipmates perished. Upon arriving in San Francisco, he discovered that no hotel or shelter would allow a Chinese person to sleep. His first night in San Francisco was spent huddled in a doorway with no place to stay.

Now, unlike his compatriots, Yee Ah Tye was different because prior to immigrating to America, he had learned to speak English in Hong Kong. This language ability set him apart from his fellow immigrants. Early on, my great-grandfather was befriended by three Christian missionaries who, in an unusual move, deeded to him a wooden shack on Pine Street at Kearny to be used as a

Chinese church or place of religious worship and moral instruction. He then in turn donated this shack to his benevolent association to assist others from their home province. The association upgraded the building to create what would become Kong Chow temple, a place of asylum for newly arrived immigrants who lacked shelter and needed help assimilating to a hostile environment.

It was indeed a hostile environment. Chinese men walking through the San Francisco streets often had garbage thrown at them, and were the subject of verbal taunting by Caucasians. Because the Chinese kept their own cultural dress and customs and looked different from Caucasians, the Chinese suffered from views that they were "alien." Because of his unique English skills, my grandfather became a leader of the Chinese community in San Francisco, interacting with the police to interpret, and settling disputes within the Chinese community.

Two years after he arrived in California, my great grandfather moved to Sacramento, where he helped to establish the Sze Yup association on I street, between Fifth and Sixth Street. This area later became "Little China," the center of trade for Chinese miners and residents. Little China included numerous Chinese stores, gaming houses, lodging houses, and a theater. In July of 1854, Little China burned to the ground, and was rebuilt one year later, only to be burned down again. This time the Chinese were required to rebuild with brick, not wood.

Strife between the different Chinese clans often turned violent. My great grandfather wearied of the violence and moved to La Porte, a town closer to the mining fields, where he opened a store. Yet his struggle, and the struggle of many foreign miners, did not come without resistance, as our legal system was used to perpetuate inequality amongst the immigrants in the U.S.

From the beginning, institutionalized discrimination was enacted through a series of Foreign Miner's Tax Laws, the first of which was passed in 1850, and initially directed at Latino miners, then the majority of miners. Shortly after the law was passed, the Chinese started to replace the pre-dominantly Latino miners. In 1853, the Foreign Miner's Tax was increased and extracted the exorbitant fee of $4/month per foreigner engaged in mining. The local sheriff collected the tax, kept 20% and gave the rest of the State. The tax provided one quarter of the state's entire revenue until it was declared unconstitutional in 1870.

In the 1860s, the Central Pacific Railroad recruited large labor gangs from the Chinese community to build its portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. By 1865, 90% of the railroad workers were Chinese. In Plumas County, the Chinese miners lived in shanties, tents and patched-up cabins. They owned little property, other than their mining claims. Large scale Chinese immigration continued during the late 1800s.

At first, when surface gold was plentiful, the Chinese were generally tolerated and well received. However, as gold became harder to find and competition increased, animosity towards the Chinese and other foreigners increased. The belief that Chinese immigrants were "stealing" American jobs because they would work for lower wages was widespread. Many Chinese died working on the railroads, whether from malnutrition, dehydration or the violent explosions caused by blast equipment.

Despite this harsh environment, the immigrants did carve a place for themselves in society, founding a thriving community in San Francisco in what would become Chinatown. They governed their own affairs through the creation of the Six Companies, a group of the six major family associations. Eventually, the majority of Chinese workers were driven from the mines, enclaves such as Chinatown allowed these displaced miners to find low end wage labor such as restaurant work and laundry work.

With the post Civil War economy in decline, by the late 1800s, anti-Chinese animosity became politicized. Labor leader Dennis Kearney and his Workingman's Party, as well as by California Governor John Bigler, both blamed Chinese "coolies" for depressed wage levels. An anti-Chinese group, the Supreme Order of Caucasians, organized in California during this same era with some 64 chapters statewide. Some of these white supremacy groups believed that the Chinese were the most "offensive" of the lot because, unlike African Americans, the Chinese rejected the Christian religion. While some Americans like the Methodist missionary, Otis Gibson, took a kinder view towards Chinese immigrants, others like journalist and California Attorney General, Frank M. Pixley, believed that immigrants had no souls, and were damned by their very nature. Within this framework, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was born.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first significant restriction on free immigration in U.S. history. The Act limited the number of Chinese immigrants that were allowed to enter the U.S. to just 105 per year over a ten year period. The Act was further strengthened in 1884 with additional provisions that

restricted the ability of any person of Chinese descent, regardless of their county of birth, to freely leave and enter the U.S. Chinese "skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining" could not enter the country for 10 years under penalty of imprisonment and deportation. The few Chinese non-laborers had to obtain certification from the Chinese government showing that they were qualified to immigrate. The Act also severely impacted the Chinese who were already in the U.S. Any Chinese who left the country could not reenter. Thus, many Chinese men in the U.S. had little chance of returning to Chinese to find a wife or ever reuniting with their wives and families who were in China.

When the law was due to expire in 1892, it was revived for another ten years by the Geary Act. This Act went one step further and barred Chinese from testifying in court. It also required all Chinese to carry resident passports, with the harsh penalty of deportation if they were found without them. The Geary Act was renewed indefinitely in 1902.

Despite these laws, some Chinese immigration occurred. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which destroyed City Hall and the Hall of Records, allowed many immigrants known as "paper sons" claim they had familial ties to resident Chinese Americans and enter the U.S. From 1910 until 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay processed about 56,000 Chinese immigrants, including my paternal grandmother.

For the next 42 years, however, Chinese Americans were treated as second-class citizens, despite serving with distinction in WWI and helping build the railroads. Like other ethnic groups, the Chinese were seriously limited in their civil rights. They persisted, however, living together in Chinese enclaves, like San Francisco Chinatown.

The Chinese Exclusion/Geary Act was not repealed until the passage of the Magnuson Act in 1943. Furthermore the California law that prohibited Chinese Americans from marrying whites was not repealed until 1948.

I will end by telling you what happened to my great grandfather. My great grandfather, as a merchant, received a certificate from the Chinese government to immigrate to the U.S. so unlike most Chinese laborers, he was able to go back and forth to China on occasion. At age 30, he married Chan See, a 16 year old Chinese woman, in California. With this wife, he produced a family of four daughters and two sons. His youngest son, Dilly, is my maternal grandfather.

Yee lived over 20 years in La Porte as a successful merchant, running the Hop Sing and Company store, and the Chinese community business for the town. Unlike traditional Chinese, he was quite modern in his outlook. He believed in educating his daughters and refused to let his wife bind their feet. When La Porte's Chinese community suffered violent attacks by Whites, Yee protected his family by sending his wife and children back to Hong Kong. There his children would study in English schools in the Hong Kong school system, but most returned to the United States when the violence subsided.

When Yee Ah Tye died, the San Francisco Chronicle reported that he was prominent among the SF Chinese community, as he served as the president of the Kong Chow Association (one of the Six Companies). He was remembered for securing land from the US government near Point Lobos and establishing it as a Chinese cemetery. He was also remembered for giving the Kong Chow association land on Pine and Kearny Street which was used as the association headquarters. He was remembered as a prominent businessman in Plumas County who for decades owned mining properties and a general merchandise store in La Porte.

Chinese tradition dictated that upon death, your bones should be laid to rest back in China. But my great grandfather left explicit instructions to defy tradition, and to bury his body in America, his beloved new country of opportunity. This was a strong statement to his descendents that he no longer considered himself Chinese, but Chinese-*American*.

Yee Ah Tye's children grew up as the first generation of true Chinese Americans. His daughters married Christian Chinese Americans who were merchants and bankers. His sons took over his business interests.

His youngest son, my grandfather Dilly Ah Tye, became a prominent Chinese banker in Stockton. He raised 15 children, including my mother, Barbara Ah Tye. The depression caused the large family to struggle but they never went hungry. In WWII, six of Dilly's sons served in the war. The family prospered in the post WWII boom, and most of my generation, the fourth generation, went on to college. My generation thinks of ourselves as Asian *Americans* now, often taking for granted the civil rights won by struggles of many minority groups in the Sixties and later. What we celebrate today are the struggles and victories of those who came before us. We must never forget how important civil rights are to all of us.

Thank you for allowing me to share my family history and the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act with you.