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A family delves into the mystery of a ‘paper son’

A Chinese immigrant’s secret is uncovered only after his death

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Steve Yee is framed by a piece of his artwork. (Robert Durell / For The Times)

For his children, the mystery surrounding Joe Yee's past started with his name.

Growing up in Sacramento, Steve Yee, now 56, remembers piling into his father's big Pontiac Streamliner to visit the Ong family association. The group's members welcomed his father in a Cantonese dialect and addressed him as one of their own.

But Joe Yee never explained to his six American-born children why, if he were part of the group, his last name was not Ong. Odder still, their father claimed to be an only son, with no surviving relatives in China or America.

"For us, the question was always 'so who are you anyway?' " Steve said. "There was the sense that you have no past."

It wasn't until years after their father's death in 1979 that his children learned the answer to that childhood mystery.

What they learned shed light on a chapter of Chinese life in California that is little known today but was key to shaping the immigrant communities of the last century.

"My father was a 'paper son,' " said Steve Yee.

Photos of his father and family are displayed at the home of Steve Yee, a Sacramento area artist. (Robert Durell / For The Times)

When Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it froze the size of the Chinese immigrant population in the country. No new Chinese, except for a select few, including scholars and diplomats, were allowed into the country. Those already here were largely barred from citizenship. The act blocked Chinese men who had immigrated during the Gold Rush and the railroad boom of the late 19th century from reuniting with their families.

But when the great earthquake of 1906 hit San Francisco, lighting fires that leveled hundreds of city blocks, some Chinese immigrants sensed an opportunity.

By claiming to be citizens whose records had been lost in the destruction, they became free to travel to China; once there, they could either bring back blood relatives or sell their paperwork to others who would claim to be family members -- paper sons.

"About 80% to 90% of the 175,000 Chinese that came to America between 1910 and 1940 were paper sons," said Judy Yung, professor emeritus in Asian American Studies at UC Santa Cruz whose father was a paper son.

"Almost no family would talk about it, fearful of being discovered or deported."

Even after the anti-Chinese immigration law was repealed in 1943, immigrant quotas remained tightly restricted. Only in the 1960s did new legislation broaden immigration from Asia and give paper sons a chance to tell the truth about their past and restore their real names.

Even then, many, including Yung's and Yee's fathers, did not participate in the "confessional" program and chose to stick with their adopted names for fear of retribution.

"My father's story is the story of most of the Cantonese people that came here during the '40s, '50s and '60s," Steve Yee said. "He lived under the fear that he could be deported any time if he was discovered. So he took his real [identity] to his grave thinking it's the best thing to do."

Legacy of confusion

Chinese Americans today make up 40% of the roughly 5 million Asians in California and they represent the largest Asian population in the country. China ranks second only to Mexico in terms of new U.S. immigrants.

But the legacy of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the paper son phenomenon lingers. The result is that a younger generation of Chinese Americans like Steve Yee grew up confused about and disconnected from their family history.

Yee said his father hid his secret so well that the family wondered if they would ever find out much about his real background. Joe Yee worked long hours at the family-owned grocery store and rarely talked to his children about himself or his past.

His children knew he served in World War II and was awarded a Bronze Star. They knew he traveled back to China once to wed their mother in an arranged marriage. And they knew he defeated discrimination by asking a white friend to buy their home and deed it to the family.

Steve Yee holds a family photo from the 1950s showing his father, mother and uncle along with his brother and sister. (Robert Durell / For The Times)

Other than that, their father remained a mystery. He was not so much concerned about his children learning their Chinese roots as he was about their becoming Americans.

Steve Yee's older sister Lillie was the only child who understood enough of the home village dialect to communicate with their mother, who spoke no English.

Worried about Lillie's progress in school, their father insisted the others stop speaking Chinese at home. Today, none of the six children speaks Chinese.

"Basically we were told to put down your chopsticks, we're going to eat hot dogs and watch the Giants like everybody else," Yee said.

After their youngest sibling was born, their mother developed schizophrenia and was institutionalized. Their father eventually lost his business and began drinking. He died 30 years ago, a broken man.

Yee said that his relationship with his father was always distant and that it became especially strained toward the end of the older man's life, in part because of the changing times. Against his father's wishes, Yee grew his hair long and became an artist instead of an accountant or lawyer.

"It was not a situation where you could say, 'Oh, by the way, Dad, who are you really?' " he said.

For her own children's sake, Yee's sister Lillie Yee-Shiroi, 61, also wanted to learn more about her father's life and family history. There was so much basic information they didn't know. What was her father's real birth date? When did he arrive in San Francisco? On what boat?

"When my son was in fifth grade he had to do a family history project and make a family tree," recalled Yee-Shiroi, a retired social worker who married a Japanese American.

"On my husband's side there were all these relatives. On my side, besides my brothers and sisters, there was question mark, question mark, question mark."

Steve Yee, a local artist, stands in front of a family association building in Sacramento's China-town. Yee's father was a "paper son," one of thousands of Chinese immigrants who came to the country illegally. Yee has traced his father's identity and past. (Robert Durell / For The Times)

First clues

So Yee and his sister began tracing their family history.

The Sacramento-based Ong family association, known as Ong Ko Met, offered the first clues to their father's real identity.

"When my father died, some people came from Hong Kong to the wake," Yee recalled.

"One woman wrote some words [on a piece of paper] in Chinese and placed it firmly in my palm."

The woman spoke to him briefly, but he didn't understand what she said. He saved the message for years.

It was not until he started researching his father's true identity for an arts project more than a decade ago that he learned what the Chinese woman tried to tell him.

"The piece of paper was my name, Ong Shi Weng," Yee said. "So here I am, 45 years old, and I find out what my real name is."

There was another discovery. On their parents' marriage certificate, their father's home town was listed Toishan, Kwantung. Yee-Shiroi learned later from the family

Steve Yee walks in Sacramento's Chinatown, one of the many places where he searched for records of his father's past. (Robert Durell / For The Times)

association that this was only the "paper" hometown. Their father was actually born in Hoi Ping, a nearby town in what is now known as Kaiping in Guangdong province.

Meanwhile, the California Assembly passed a bill last summer to commemorate the reversal of the Chinese

Exclusion Act on Dec. 17, 1943. Each year, Dec. 17 is designated as the Day of Inclusion.

"A lot of our young people don't know about the history of discrimination in this country, especially the fact that one ethnic group was singled out by law saying they could not immigrate," said state Assemblyman Mike Eng (D-Monterey Park), who sponsored the bill. "This is a way to educate the community."

The research into his father's past has inspired Yee to work on building a Chinese history museum in Sacramento. His biggest regret is that he didn't ask his father more questions while he was alive.

"Every time a paper son passes away, an entire library is lost," he said.

"The Chinese for a long time lived under persecution but kept quiet. Now we know we have a story to tell too. This is our story.”