Chinese Exclusion Act Records

A Neglected Genealogical Source

by Patricia Hackett Nicola, CG

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed to limit the number of Chinese entering the United States and prevent the Chinese already in the United States from becoming naturalized citizens. When the Act was renewed ten years later, it required Chinese immigrants to register and obtain a certificate of residency or identity as proof of their right to be in the United States.[1] By the time the law was repealed in 1943, thousands and thousands of case files with valuable genealogical information had been created. In the last fifteen years, these records have been made available to researchers. Some are even indexed.

History of the Act

In 1869, a United States treaty with China opened the door to Chinese immigration. The United States needed cheap labor for the mining and railroad industries, and the Chinese were willing to provide it. Immigration peaked in 1873 when 23,000 Chinese entered the country. The state of California had the largest population of Chinese with about 150,000 in residence. Many of the Chinese were in the United States to make money and planned to return to the families they had left in China. There was an economic depression after the completion of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869. Anti-Chinese riots occurred. Soon anti-immigration laws were passed to limit the number of Chinese coming into the country. These laws were also fueled by racial and cultural fears. It was difficult for Chinese to assimilate into the American culture. They would never look Anglo-Saxon. Many United States laborers, although recent immigrants themselves, resented the Chinese being in the United States and taking jobs away from "white" workers. There were many conflicting opinions, but the general consensus was that the workers wanted to severely restrict the number of Chinese coming into the United States[2].

In 1880, the United States modified its immigration treaty with China to limit the immigration of laborers. Teachers, students, merchants, and Chinese travelers were not affected. In 1882, the first Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. It excluded laborers and Chinese employed in mining. The Chinese already living in the United States could no longer obtain their United States citizenship, and if they left there for China (or anywhere), they were required to obtain certificates to re-enter.[3]

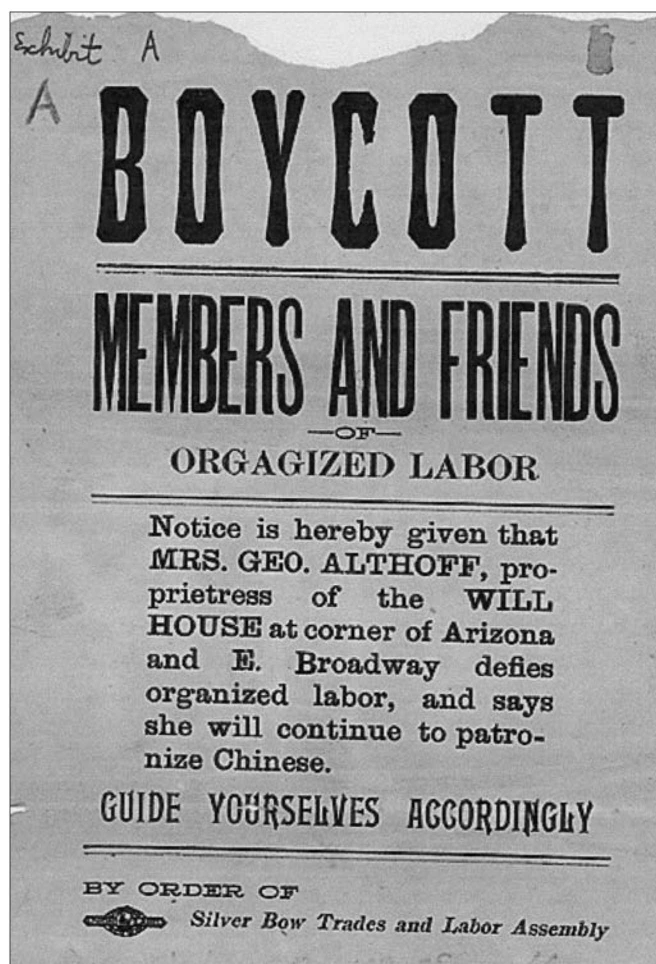
Exhibit A
A
BOYCOTT
MEMBERS AND FRIENDS
—OF—
ORGAGIZED LABOR
Notice is hereby given that MRS. GEO. ALTHOFF, proprietress of the WILL HOUSE at corner of Arizona and E. Broadway defies organized labor, and says she will continue to patronize Chinese.
GUIDE YOURSELVES ACCORDINGLY
BY ORDER OF
Silver Bow Trades and Labor Assembly

Boycott Flyer, ca. 1898. Boycott flyer, Exhibit A, Flyers distributed by Silver Bow Trades and Labor Assembly and Butte Miners' Union in support of Chinese and Japanese boycott, ca. August 1898," Records of District Courts of the United States (Record Group 21), National Archives-Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle), ARC Identifier 298113.

When the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended in 1892, all Chinese residents were required to register and obtain a certificate of residence. Those who did not have the proper paper work or witnesses could be deported or imprisoned. During the 1920s, Congress started using quotas to regulate the number of

immigrants arriving into the United States but the Chinese did not have a quota. In 1943, Congress repealed the exclusion act and gave foreign-born Chinese the right to become naturalized.[4] At that point a quota was given, and ironically, it more severely restricted newcomers; however, U.S. native-born Chinese no longer had to register if they left the country.[5]

Paper Work Created

As the laws became more restrictive and enforcement became tighter, the size of the Chinese Exclusion Act files increased. In the earlier files, the name of the person was recorded in traditional Chinese order—last name first, then age, height, physical marks, occupation, and place of residence. The inspector usually added remarks, such as, how much English the person knew, the places the person had lived in the United States and how long in each place. A photograph was taken before the person left the country, and this was compared to the person re-entering the country. The port, date of arrival, and vessel name were included in the file. The date the returning Chinese was admitted, rejected, or deported was stamped on the outside of the file. Early files may also have copies of some affidavits from local courts that were given before the person left the country.

Later files included a formal interrogation. Both the questions and answers were recorded. The traditional name was listed, then Chinese married name (usually completely different from the name on the case file), any aliases, or a Western version of the Chinese name were also itemized. There were many numbers in the files—port arrival numbers, alien registrations numbers, court case numbers, certificate of residency, and certificate of identity. For a Chinese person looking for his ancestor, any of these numbers could be an important clue. Files usually include the name of the village and province or city and state where the person was born. Sometimes included are lists of family members with cross-references to their files, return-certificate applications, affidavits from witnesses, birth, marriage or death certificates, drawings or descriptions of a home or village in China.

Ex S.S. Tacoma Name
No. 18. TREASURY DEPARTMENT
Ah Soy
Hampton Va
Age 33 – Height 5-5½"
Mole right side of jaw

Ah Soy Admittance Paper, 1899. Ah Soy Admittance paper, Hampton, Virginia, June 23, 1899, Chinese Exclusion Act immigration case files, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives -Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle), Case 15055.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Immigration Service
District No. 31

No. 29160/179
Re: WONG TUNG JIM, or
JIMMIE HOWE, Applicant for a
Laborer's Return Certificate, Form 432.

Office of Inspector in Charge.
Los Angeles, California.
December 29, 1928.

Fred D. Jack, examining inspector and acting stenographer:

APPLICANT, duly sworn, testifies as follows in the English language.

Q What are all your names? And your age.
A Wong Tung Jim(Chinese name) and Jimmie Howe(English name). 29 years.
Q Are your parents living?
A My father is dead, he died about April, 1914, at Pasco, Washington; my father's name was Wong How, no other names. My mother, Mrs. Wong How, I do not know her maiden name, she lives at 130 Clarke street, Pasco, Washington.
Q Where were you born?
A I think I was born in the village of Sai Toon(Tun), Sun Ning District, China.
Q When and where did you first enter the United States?
A I was about five years of age when I came to the United States the first time, that was in 1904, I came with my father, my mother, my sister Ah Toy and my brother Tong Hong; my brother and sister who came to the United States with me are living with my mother now, they are both younger than I, they were both born in China.
Q How many brothers and sisters have you now?
A Three brothers and their names are Ah Hong, about 26 years of age; and Franklin Howe, age 23 years, a native of Pasco, Washington, and Chester Howe, age about 20 years, a native of Pasco, Washington.
Q The Seattle file indicates that you were brought to the United States when you were about five years of age, is that correct?
A Yes.
Q How many sisters have you?
A Four sisters, their names are: Ah Toy, born in China, living in San Francisco, California, I do not know her street address, and May Howe, married to Leland Lee, and lives in Walla Walla, Washington, she was born in Pasco, Washington., Alice Howe, about 17 years of age, a native of Pasco, Washington, and Julia Howe, age about 16 years, a native Pasco, Washington.
Q Are you the same Wong Tung Jim (Jimmie Howe) who was investigated at Seattle, Washington on June 2, 1924(Seattle file No.2077/1-2)?
A Yes, that was the time I went to Canada.
Q Are you the same Wong Tung Jim(Jimmie Howe) who was investigated at Los Angeles, California, June 24, 1927?
A Yes, and that was the time I was preparing to go to Europe?

Wong Tung Jim Interrogation, 1928. Testimony of Wong Tung Jim (Jimmie Howe), page 1, December 29, 1928, Chinese Exclusion Act immigration case files, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives-Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle), Case 29160, ARC Identifier 298955.

Chinese merchants who were partners in firms had to submit partnership lists. The name of each partner was included—sometimes ten or more and his ownership investment in the company. Chinese were allowed back into the United States if they were owed more than $1000. Statements from the borrowers were included in the file.

Ah Gan, 1899. Ah Gan Admittance, August 30, 1899, Chinese Exclusion Act immigration case files, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives -Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle), Case 15288.

Photographs

Most files contain a photograph of their subject. Sometimes several photos are in the file—taken at different ages. When a family was applying for documentation to leave the United States, a group photo was taken. The photos can show how Americanized the person was or his occupation. He may be wearing the traditional Chinese clothes of a laborer or the suit of a merchant. Sometimes a child can be identified as male or female by the direction the wearer's shirt is buttoned, or by a hat or jewelry. Styles changed significantly over the years.

Who Had to Register

Any person of Chinese ancestry, even someone born in the United States, who planned a trip out of the United States, whether to Canada or China, had to register to assure re-entry into the country. Some well-known Chinese who have files are Madame Chiang Kei-Shek, Dr. Sun Yet Sen, and actress Anna May Wong.[6]

Caucasian in the Files

In the almost 400,000 Chinese Exclusion Acts files[7], there are some Caucasians mentioned—usually customs officers, lawyers, post masters, bankers, and judges. If the Immigration authorities were suspicious of a Chinese person re-entering the country, they interrogated more witnesses and required more affidavits. They viewed Caucasian witnesses as more credible than Chinese witnesses. A witness usually told how long he had lived in the area, how long he had known the defendant and in what capacity. Witnesses could be Caucasian merchants who owned stores in a Chinese neighborhood, neighbors (sometime female neighbors), policemen or firemen, or members of the clergy. Unfortunately, there is no practical way to get this information. The files are indexed by the name of the subject of the file, not the nonessential people who happen to appear in the files.

Lost Citizenship

At the turn of the century, anyone who married a non-citizen lost his or her United States citizenship and was seen as being a citizen of the spouse's country. Although this law pertained to men and women, in most cases it was the women who lost their citizenship. A woman, whether Chinese or Caucasian, was required to fill out the same forms as her Chinese husband and register before leaving the country. After the Act was repealed in 1943, many of these women went to court to regain their citizenship.[8]

"Paper Sons"

The immigration laws were very restrictive, and the Chinese tried to find ways around them. The more rigid the immigration officials became, the more enterprising the Chinese became. When returning from a visit to China, sometimes a Chinese person brought back a "son." The "son" sometimes used a "coaching letter"[9] to help memorize the family and village information of his "father's" family. If he passed the interrogation, he was admitted into the United States. These young men were called "paper sons." Many illegal immigrants entered the country this way, but eventually United States Customs caught on. Immigration officials sometimes overreacted, and legitimate Chinese were not allowed to re-enter the country. When Customs was suspicious of a returning Chinese, they required more affidavits and witnesses.[10] These files are very valuable to the descendants of these people.

Location of Records

Many of the National Archives Regional facilities have Immigration and Naturalization Service Records, Record Group 85, files relating to the Chinese Exclusion Act, but the majority of the records are located at Pacific Southwest (Laguna Niguel, California), Pacific (San Bruno, California), Northeast (New York City), Pacific Alaska (Seattle), and New England (Waltham, Massachusetts) facilities. Record Groups such as District Courts of the United State (RG 21) also contain files related to the Chinese Exclusion Act [See *Chinese Immigration and Chinese in the United States: Records in the Regional Archives of the National Archives and Records Administration, Paper 99*, for complete listings of files in other Record Groups.][11]

Examples of Files

The Chinese Exclusion Act files are a treasure trove of unusual and unique data. Some of the documents I have found include a petition with thirty-two Caucasian signatures (the thirteen-year-old applicant was deported); female and church witnesses; the adoption papers for two Chinese children being adopted by missionaries; a bill for forty-five meals at fifteen

Reproduced at the National Archives and Records Administration – Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle)

AUG 8 1898

Signatures of Applicant

Name	Occupation.	Residence.
S. J. Hutchison	Ticket Agt B&O RR.	Pittsburgh Pa
J. E. Inghram	Chief Route Clerk Star [illegible]	Pittsburgh Pa
Mrs Mary E Inghram	S.S. Teacher	Pittsburgh E.E. Pa
R. T. Carothers	Mayor	McKeesport Pa
Homer C. Stewart	Cashier 1st Nat Bk	McKeesport Pa
Chas. H. Tawney	Teller 1st Natl Bank	McKeesport Pa
Joseph A. Kelley	Justice of Peace	McKeesport Pa
W. H. Geyer	Retail Grocer	McKeesport Pa
Ada Page	Sabbathschool-Teacher	McKeesport Pa
Eugene Rodgers	Grocer	McKeesport Pa
S. B. Page	Grocer	McKeesport Pa
R. W. Eskin	Secty Water Dept	McKeesport Pa
Edwin Soles	Supt Water Dept	McKeesport Pa
Henry Alleste		McKeesport Pa
F. R. Satterthwait	Watchmaker	McKeesport Pa
Adolph Schmidt	Druggist	McKeesport Pa
Charles Wm. Kahl	Drugclerk	McKeesport Pa
J. W. Campbell	Ins. agt	"
W. L. Langheim	National Hotel	McKeesport Pa
B. R. Cornin	Real Estate Dealer	McKeesport Pa.
Edw. Haber	Clothier	McKeesport Pa.
F. W. Steckel	Merchant	McKeesport Pa
Geo. V. Hartman	Hardware Mct	McKeesport

14450

Petition for Yee Ton Lock, 1898. Signatures on Petition for Yee Ton Lock, August 8, 1898, Chinese Exclusion Act immigration case files, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives-Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle), Case 14450.

cents each for someone being deported; a detailed description and map of an 1890 neighborhood in Seattle; maps of Chinese villages; photos of Chinese businesses; information on Moy Kee, the "Chinese Mayor" of Indianapolis, who was detained in Seattle in 1909; witness testimony from Mrs. Saide Leo Gee Wo (a Caucasian woman, the daughter of C. H. Starbuck); a copy of 1894 Washington, D.C., birth record; photos of a Chinese man taken in 1898, 1908 and 1943; and records for a Chinese man from Hampton, Virginia, who had spent three years in the United States Navy.

The Chinese lived in almost every state of the Union. Their homes may have been in Deadwood, South Dakota, but their files are located at the port where they first arrived in the country or the port of their first return. If they left from Seattle and returned to Seattle, their file is located there.

Chinese Immigration Records Online

The National Archives has digitized some of these documents and put them online. To see what is available, go to the website at <www.archives.gov/genealogy/heritage/chinese-immigration.html>, go to "Chinese Immigration Documents Online," through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC). Find the heading that says "Chinese Exclusion Acts Case Files 1890-1960," and follow the instruction. 245 multi-page digitized documents from the National Archives-Northeast Region (New York City) are available.

The next section, further down the page, is "Immigration Investigations Files Relating to the Enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1882-1943." There are 163 digitized documents: 57 from the Pacific Region (San Bruno), 58 from the Pacific Region (Laguna Niguel) and 48 from the Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle).

If you return to the original National Archives web address listed above you will find a list of Record Group 85 case files for District No. 9, Chicago, 1898-1940 and District No. 10, St. Paul, 1906-1942. These are strictly lists of names and file numbers.

The National Archives site has a list of Chinese and Asian genealogy links and redirects you to Ancestry.com's index to over 18,500 Chinese Exclusion case files from National Archives-Northeast Region (New York).

A word of caution–these records can be hard to find, so follow the website's instructions exactly. They mean what they say the documents are "multi-paged." If you think you have seen the complete document, keep clicking. There may be more pages to view.

Finding the files

Any Chinese-American who was in the United States before 1945, whether born there or not, may find ancestors in these records. The files are a gold mine, a wealth of genealogical information and a photo. The records are indexed by the name of the subject of the file and the case number. Sometimes the files can be found through port arrival numbers obtained through ship passenger lists, or any of the various numbers mentioned earlier. Some files are cross-referenced to the case files of other family members.

The Chinese lived in almost every state of the Union. Their homes may have been in Deadwood, South Dakota, but their files are located at the port where they first arrived in the country or the port of their first return. If they left from Seattle and returned to Seattle, their file is located there. If they moved to New York and departed from that port for each succeeding trip, their file would still be in Seattle. Most of the Chinese Exclusion Acts files are located at National Archives facilities at San Bruno, Laguna, New York City, and Seattle. The best thing to do when looking for a Chinese person in these files is to give the staff at the National Archives every possible name and all possible numbers associated with the person.[12]

The Good News and the Bad News

- The name listed on the file might be different from the name a person was known as by their family. The person could be known by his or her official name, married name, an alias, or a Western name.
- There was no nation-wide system of assigning numbers to these files, so the numbering system is not consistent from one Regional Archives to another. Each Immigration and Naturalization Service District had its own system. When searching for a file, it is best to give the National Archives staff every possible number (and name).
- A file was probably never created for a native-born Chinese who never left the United States.
- Information on people who were closely associated with the Chinese—extended family, storeowners, partners, or neighbors could be buried in the files. Unfortunately, the Chinese Exclusion Acts files are not indexed to show the incidental people who show up in them.
- Some of the files are cross-referenced to other members of the family. They might refer to a father, brothers, or uncles.
- The interrogations from files sometimes contain maps or photos of storefronts, or esoteric information such as how many steps from home to the well in the person's village.
- Documents relating to events less than seventy-five years old may be subject to privacy restrictions.

• The indexes are incomplete, but the National Archives hopes to have indexes by name and file number sometime in the future.[13\]

Summary

As with many records, it is unfortunate how these files came about, but the information provided is priceless. I would be delighted to find a record for my ancestor that included a photo of my ancestor and a description of his ancestral village. I would like to encourage more Chinese to use these records to find the rich details of their ancestors' lives in the United States in the late nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century.

Notes

1. Waverly B. Lowell, compiler, *Chinese Immigration and Chinese in the United States: Records in the Regional Archives of the National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives, Reference Information paper 99, 1996, 1.
2. National Archives and Records Administration, *Teaching with Documents: Using Primary Sources From the National Archives (*Washington, DC, National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1989), 82 .
3. Ibid., 84.
4. Ibid., 85.
5. Susan H. Karren, "Chinese Exclusion Acts Case Files at the National Archives & Records Administration" (lecture and handout, Puget Sound Chapter of Association of Professional Genealogists, Seattle, April 3, 2004).
6. Ibid., 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 109-117.
10. Colleen She, *A Student's Guide to Chinese American Genealogy* (Phoenix: The Oryx Press, 1996), 31.
11. Lowell, *Chinese Immigration and Chinese in the United States.*
12. Karren, "Chinese Exclusion Acts Case Files."
13. Ibid.

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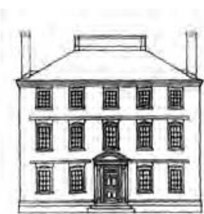

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