

LIVING WITH EXCLUSION:
CHINESE MERCHANTS IN BAKER CITY, OREGON
1899-1915

by

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A SENIOR THESIS

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The image of Chinese merchant, Leong Dod, of Baker City, Oregon, gazes from the final page of the 1899 affidavit that attests to his partnership with the firm, Wing Hing Yuen. The photograph shows him wearing traditional Chinese attire—a dark colored tunic that buttons across the chest and a close-fitting cloth cap. His intense gaze—in keeping with the photographic style of the era—does not belie even the hint of a smile. Notarized December 22, 1899—just days before Christmas and a week away from a new century—the document was created in the midst of Chinese Exclusion to assure the man's reentry into the U. S. following his upcoming trip to China.¹



Leong Dod of the Wing Hing Yuen Company in traditional Chinese attire, ca. 1899. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 22 December 1899. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS098, Case No. RS16338, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the first time immigration to the United States was restricted based solely on race or nationality. The Act prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the country for a period of ten years, but granted entry to certain classes, including "merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and travelers."² Renewed several times until it was finally repealed in 1943, the Act forced Chinese merchants in towns such as Baker City to vigilantly maintain their merchant status under the watchful eye of U. S. immigration officials. Case files on Chinese merchants in Baker City made by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) during the early 1900s held by the National

¹ U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 22 December 1899. Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, Box RS098, Case No. RS16338, Leong Dod. U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Alaska Region. (Hereafter cited as NARA-PAR)

² Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4.

Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Alaska Region (NARA-PAR) in Seattle, Washington, provide a glimpse into the administration of Exclusion at the local level.³

Important to any study of the files is the recognition that the documents contained therein—affidavits, letters, testimony—are not completely reliable because they were made within the framework of government regulation. White federal officials held the position of power and formulated questions, guided the direction of testimony, and ultimately decided the fates of Baker City's Chinese merchants. The testimony delivered by the Chinese within the context of Exclusion also raises interpretive questions about veracity and completeness.

This paper has two objectives. First, the research intends to illuminate attitudes held by the city's White newspapermen about its Chinese residents. The analysis of newspaper coverage pertaining to the Chinese from the 1870s through the late 1890s in the Baker City *Bedrock Democrat* sheds light on how racial attitudes espoused by the White newspapermen had evolved during that twenty-year period.⁴ News content has a dual quality of manipulating public sentiment while concurrently reflecting it. This quality allows for inferential reasoning about the attitudes of White businessmen who acted as witnesses for the Chinese merchants at the opening of the 20th Century. Second, the research examines how the merchants adapted to Exclusion by obtaining testimony of local Whites and by adopting an appearance that fit the Custom's Services definition of a merchant. A merchant's appearance was important because many policy-makers,

³ The case files amassed for this paper's purposes were gleaned from a partially completed database of Chinese Exclusion case files held by NARA-PAR. Case files that contained Baker or Baker City, Oregon, as the Case City or City of Residence were selected if the name shown on the file had appeared in the Baker County (Tax) Assessment Rolls, in the Manuscript Census Returns or in the Polk's City Directory. This method resulted in the selection of 23 case files that contain documents ranging in date from 1899-1928. The bulk of the collection—16 of the 23 files—range in date from 1898-1912. The file of Mrs. Pearl Leo (Liu) was also acquired. This was due firstly, to the rarity of cases pertaining to women, and secondly, because her file contained a letter penned by Peter Basche, which was important to this study. See Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 2962, Mrs. Pearl Leo (Liu). U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁴ According to the Illustrated History of Baker, Grant, Malheur and Harney Counties, the town had four newspapers in 1885 that included, *The Daily Sage*, the *Bedrock Democrat*, the *Reveille* and the *Tribune*. Western Historical Publishing Company, *An Illustrated History of Baker, Grant, Malheur and Harney Counties: With a Brief Outline of the Early History of the State of Oregon* (1902), 212.

labor unions, and citizens of western states perceived the Chinese as unassimilable. Thus, cultivating a Euro-American appearance countered these notions. Two questions will be addressed in this section. First, who was providing testimony on behalf of these merchants and what does that tell us about the merchants' adaptation to Exclusion and about their witnesses? Second, what factors around the turn of the century pushed Leong Dod and the other merchants to adopt a Westernized appearance?

Newspaper coverage of the late 1890s depicts Chinese culture in a more respectful manner than earlier coverage. This suggests a White social environment that is more accepting of its Chinese residents than in preceding years. Greater acceptance by Baker City's White population may have aided the Chinese merchants to obtain testimony they needed from White elites thus securing their position in the merchant class. Baker City's Chinese merchants adapted to Exclusion by cultivating relationships with the town's White elites and by adopting the appearance that fit the Customs Services' definition of a Chinese merchant. Thus, adaptive acculturation and networking allowed the merchants to maintain their position in the merchant class and to avoid being deported.

Contents of the Case Files: Three Stages to the Administration of Chinese Exclusion

The case files bring to light three stages to the administration of Exclusion. The first stage was called the preinvestigation. The purpose of this stage was to verify an immigrant's claim of merchant status. As a first step, White witnesses attested to a merchant's status in an affidavit. Witnesses submitted affidavits to the Customs Service, which subsequently sent a Chinese Inspector to investigate the claim, and record the personal testimony of the Whites who had witnessed the original affidavit. If all was in order, the merchant received a certificate that would allow him to re-enter the U.S. upon his return from China. Although the case files do not specify

the type of certificate issued, they were probably "Section 6" certificates, "which referred to the provision in the 1882 Exclusion Act that stipulated which category of Chinese were exempt from Exclusion."⁵ As mentioned previously, the exempt classes included, "merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and travelers."⁶

The second stage of administration found in the files is the application. When a merchant returned from China, he was not automatically granted admission, but instead had to apply for it.⁷ He was not allowed to enter the U. S. until federal officials confirmed his status as a returning merchant. This stage involved either sending a Chinese Inspector to the merchant's town of residence to conduct an investigation, or having the town's postmaster conduct the investigation and send his report by mail. The returning merchant was the most vulnerable at this stage. He was held in port, apparently aboard ship, until his status was affirmed. For example, documents indicate Leong Beon, a partner with Wing Hing Yuen, was held aboard the *Shinano Maru* off Port Townsend, Washington, for eight days before he was granted permission to enter the country.⁸



Leong Beon of the Wing Hing Yuen Company, ca. 1901. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 21 May 1901. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U.S. NARA-PAR.

Leong Dod, of Wing Hing Yuen, appears to have been detained 15 days—from his arrival date at the Port of Sumas, Washington on October 18, 1907 until he secured admission

⁵ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 49.

⁶ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 4.

⁷ The thirty case files reviewed for this research were most often for males. Two of the case files, however, were for women. One of the women, Lee Mo Nui, was a merchant. Her file indicated she was in business in Portland, Oregon. Her file was not selected because her name had not appeared in previous research and because she did not appear to be connected to the Chinese merchants in Baker City. See Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 5017/613, Lee Mo Nui and Case No. 2962, Mrs. Pearl Leo (Liu). U.S. NARA-PAR.

⁸ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcription of Examination. S.S. Shinano Maru*, 22 April 1903. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS117, Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

November 3rd.⁹ The documents do not reveal the nature of the holding facility at Sumas where he was in custody.

The final stage of the administration of Exclusion appears to have involved ongoing surveillance of merchants as evidenced by a transcript of testimony identified as, "ad interim investigation of (Leong Boon's) status as a merchant and member of the firm Wing Hing Yuen."¹⁰ The third stage clearly represented a standalone element of Exclusion, as suggested by the lack of other documents in Leong Boon's case file, such as an affidavit prepared for a preinvestigation or documents pertaining to admission. The surveillance meant the merchant was at risk of deportation at any time and was thus required to vigilantly maintain the persona of a merchant.

The Setting: Baker City in the Early 1900s and its Chinatown

Baker City was in the midst of a mining boom in the early 1900s, which brought an immense amount of wealth into the community.¹¹ According to a 1914 report, 53 gold and silver mines in the region had produced ore conservatively valued at \$15.9 million for gold and \$595,000 for silver.¹² The authors combined the more accurate post-1900 records with pre-1900 records to infer production from both placer and deep mines. The city dubbed itself the "Gold Belt of Eastern Oregon" and the "chief commercial and railroad center" and had more than doubled its population to 6,663 in 1900—up from about 2,600 in 1890.¹³ Baker City boasted a gravity water

⁹ U. S. Customs Service, *Examination of Application*. 18 October 1907; *Finding of H. Edsell*. 3 November 1907. Records of the INS, Box S036, Case No. 704, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

¹⁰ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Interim Investigation*. 4 January 1908. Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 4858, Leong Boon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

¹¹ Rand, *Gold, Jade and Elegance* (Baker: The Record-Courier, Printers, 1974).

¹² State of Oregon, "Geology and Mineral Resources of the Sumpter Quadrangle, Oregon." J. T. Pardee and D.F. Hewett, Oregon Bureau of Mines and Geology, *The Mineral Resources of Oregon* 37, no. 6 (October 1914) 11.

¹³ R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1905, 17. U. S. Census, *Thirteenth Census*, Population, Volume III, Table 1: Population of Minor Civil Divisions: 1910, 1900, and 1890, 492.

system, sewer system, and telephone service, and was in the process of building a street railway system.



Baker City Main Street looking north, ca. 1910. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City Oregon, Record 1981.1.244.

The mining boom coincided with a building boom that saw the construction of many beautifully crafted brick and volcanic tuff buildings and elegant residences.¹⁴ Direct rail service "to the east and west" via the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company's (O.R.&N.) line—which connected with the Union Pacific at Huntington—brought not only investors and speculators, but supplied the opulent Geiser Grand Hotel with fresh lobster and turtle for its 1905 Christmas dinner.¹⁵

Although primary sources are available for Baker City's White community in the early 1900s, little is known about the inhabitants of the local Chinatown because the Chinese did not

¹⁴ R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1905, 17. James Hamrick and Kimberly Lakin, eds., *Historic Baker City: A Walking/Driving Tour* (Baker: Hudson Printing Co., Inc., 1985), 7-27.

¹⁵ James Hamrick and Kimberly Lakin, eds., *Historic Baker City: A Walking/Driving Tour* (Baker: Hudson Printing Co., Inc., 1985), 2. Rand, *Gold, Jade and Elegance*, 75.



Panoramic view of Baker City, ca. 1880. Chinatown is the cluster of low buildings in the middle of the photograph. The Joss House is the two-story building with the curved roof at far right. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1981.1.353.

leave their own written record. Whites of the era contributed to this dearth of information by failing to record Chinese contribution on the frontier. Federal citizenship law exacerbated this paucity of evidence. The Naturalization Act of 1790 only allowed aliens classified as “free white persons” to acquire citizenship through naturalization, and consequently Chinese immigrants did not generate the abundant and rich naturalization records housed by local county clerks, including certificates, declarations of intention, petitions and orders. This created a situation in which the bulk of English language records exist in the form of data-driven government documents such as census returns and tax rolls, or in the case of this research, Chinese Exclusion case files. Such records do not reveal the nature of the people behind the entries—personalities, aspirations, family connections, or experiences of persecution in the United States. Existing scholarship pertaining to the Chinese in Eastern Oregon has focused on the latter half of the 19th century at a region-wide level and on frontier-era newspaper coverage in selected Oregon

cities.¹⁶ In addition, reminiscences of old timers and works of local historians flesh out the few extant sources chronicling the lives of Baker City's Chinese community. Through careful scrutiny of these sources, however, one can craft a basic narrative of the district at the opening of the 1900s.

The 1900 Manuscript Census Return lists around 150 Chinese in the district when the census enumerator came by on June 6 of that year.¹⁷ Photographs of the district show most of the structures were small, single-story, wood frame structures. There was, however, a two-story brick temple, called a "Joss House," and a couple of stone structures, one of which housed Wing Hing Yuen. The memories of long-time resident, Bill Patterson, as retold by author, Helen B. Rand, provides a visual of the scene. Patterson's mother had sent him to the district:

to find An Gow to work for her. He first went to the Win Him Yin Company to inquire. This was a good sized store extending along Resort which sold products used by the Chinese. Bill was sent to the rear of the store where the lots had been filled with little cubicles, each surrounded by a high board fence. Each had a gate in front and another one out the back connecting with the next little shack. He went in and out until he finally found the man he was hunting.¹⁸

Wesley Andrews' description of a "stockade" that had been built "for the restricted district along Resort Street where it crosses Auburn"—in his reminiscence of the Chinatown in the 1880s—hints at tension between the two communities.¹⁹ His vague description leaves the exact construction of the stockade, its precise location, if it was still standing in the early 1900s and what exactly was being restricted in question.

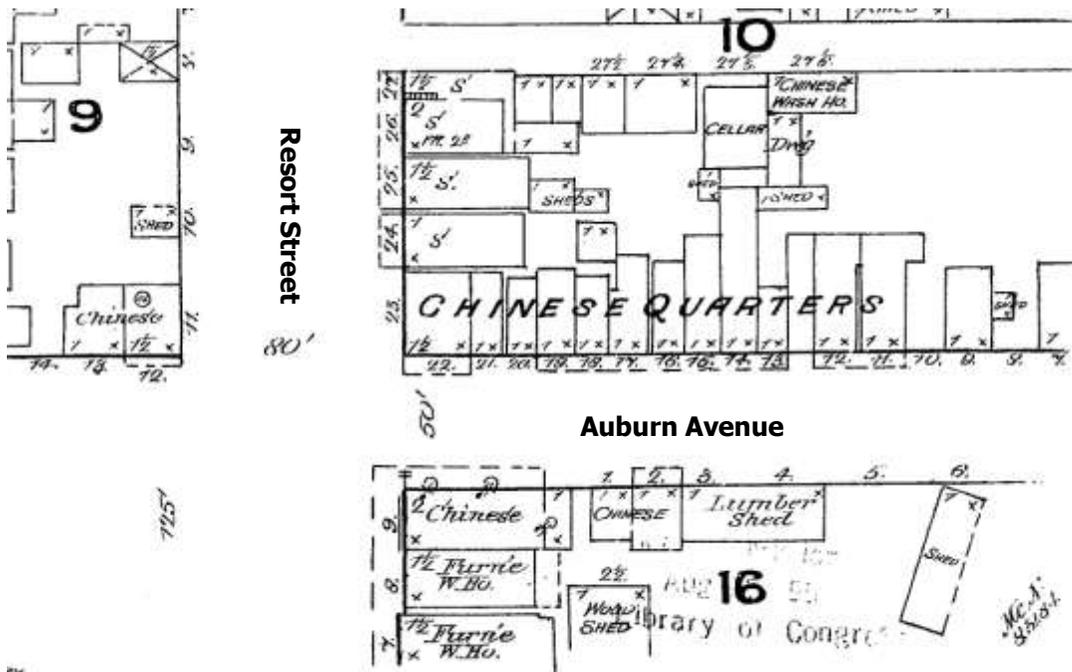
¹⁶ See Christopher Howard Edson, "The Chinese in Eastern Oregon, 1860-1890" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1970). Herman B. Chiu, "Oregon's Chinese and Newspaper Coverage: The Road to Acceptance" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1995).

¹⁷ U. S. Bureau of the Census, Manuscript Census Returns, *Twelfth Census*, Population Schedule, Baker County, 1900, University of Oregon Library, Eugene, OR. See Schedule No. 1—Population of Baker City, Oregon, Ward 1, pp. 6, 7, 7, 8. [The census enumerator designated two pages as page number 7.]

¹⁸ Rand, *Gold, Jade and Elegance*, 49-50.

¹⁹ Wesley Andrews, "Baker City in the Eighties: Boyhood Memories," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (June 1949), 87.

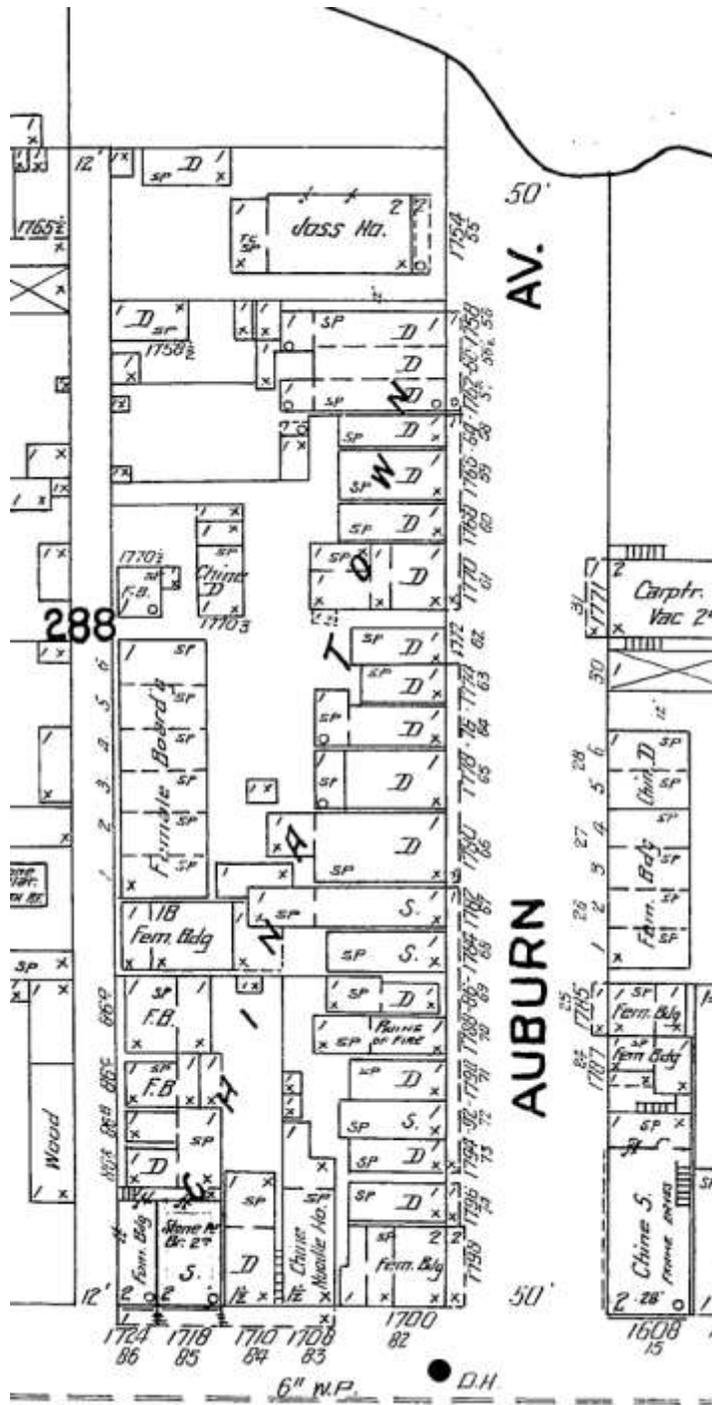
Frontier era maps of Baker City created by local insurance agent, James Ferguson, and printed by the Sanborn Map Company for fire insurance purposes, show Chinatown located along Resort Street and Auburn Avenue—terminated on the east by the Powder River. Resort Street parallels Front Street—now Main Street—along which the town's main business district was located.



Chinatown in 1884. Source: 1884 Sanborn Map 1. © 2001 The Sanborn Map Company, Sanborn Library, LLC.

The maps, ranging in date from 1884 to 1959, provide a highly detailed chronicle of the physical layout of the town that includes in part the location of structures, types of building materials, and building use.²⁰

²⁰ Sanborn Maps of Baker City exist for 1884, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1895, 1903, 1911, 1923 and 1959.



RESORT

Chinatown in 1903. Map is oriented east-west. Source: 1903 Sanborn Map 10. © 2001 The Sanborn Map Company, Sanborn Library, LLC.

The 1884 map shows the Chinese district, albeit with its eastern end cut off. This map shows long, narrow, one-story buildings facing Auburn Avenue and larger buildings facing Resort Street in block 10.²¹

Additionally, a Chinese establishment occupies the southeast corner of block 9. Chinese establishments also occupy the south side of Auburn Avenue, denoted as block 16. The northeastern end of the district is open at this time.

The two-story building on the east side of Resort Street, denoted as house number 26, is in the location of the Wing Hing Yuen store. The 1888-1890 versions also cut off the eastern end of Chinatown but show a district similar in layout to the 1884 map.

The 1903 map shows the entire district all the way to its eastern

²¹ In reference to the buildings facing Resort Street in block 10, house number 24 is one story, house number 25 is 1 ½ stories, house number 26 is 2 stories and house number 27 is 1 ½ stories. In this particular sequence of buildings, these numbers are found in the upper left of the rectangular outline of the building.

The News: The Tone of Chinese Newspaper Coverage Shifts Over Time

The *Bedrock Democrat*: 1870s to 1890s

Early newspaper coverage in the *Bedrock Democrat*—from the 1870s through the late 1890s—hints that attitudes held by White newspapermen about the town's Chinese population may have changed for the better over time.²⁴ By the 1890s, Chinese news coverage had broadened from the racist pieces of the 1870s to include articles that explained aspects of Chinese culture, announced Chinese events such as Chinese New Year, and covered general Chinese news to varying degrees. This suggests that the general public's attitude may have reflected the trend as well. For example, a February 1882 article announcing the commencement of Chinese New Year celebrations, describes how the Chinese lit firecrackers, made "offerings to the spirits, lancantations, prayers, etc." and how they continued "celebrating as long as their money lasted."²⁵ Herman B. Chiu, in his analysis of Chinese newspaper coverage, has pointed out how this portrayal of the celebrants made the Chinese "appear mysterious and foolish."²⁶ In contrast, the paper's announcement of Chinese New Year in its January 28, 1895 article begins with the perfunctory announcement, "The Chinese New Year begins Friday, January 25, and tomorrow local Celestials will cease their labors and proceed to celebrate, an operation that requires about three days."²⁷ The article proceeds to describe the Chinese calendar in the tone of a human-interest piece. References to firecrackers, spirits and hedonistic revelry until one's funds are exhausted are markedly absent from the 1895 article. Instead, its factual announcement, along with the description of the calendar points to an editor, and a readership, that may have become accustomed to the festivities since the 1882 report and was perhaps accepting of them

²⁴ The *Bedrock Democrat* was a four-page weekly that commenced publication in 1870.

²⁵ Chiu, "Oregon's Chinese and Newspaper Coverage," 54. See also Herman B. Chiu, "Power of the Press: How Newspapers in Four Communities Erased Thousands of Chinese from Oregon History," *American Journalism* 16, no. 1 (1999).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁷ *Bedrock Democrat*. January 28, 1895.

and curious about Chinese culture. Possibly the Chinese had been in the area long enough that White townspeople had become familiar with them and their customs through social interaction and business relationships.

Another example of early newspaper coverage was found in a December 18, 1874 piece that had been previously printed in the *Owyhee Avalanche*. It reads:

There is an old Chinaman near our office who annoys us both day and night, by scraping away on an old fiddle. We tried to buy it, but the old fellow won't sell; so in all probability, we're doomed to listen to that discord of sweet sounds while old moon-eye lives; which we trust won't be long.²⁸

This racist 1870s piece pokes fun at the spectacle of “old moon-eye” and the cacophonous racket he makes on his fiddle, portraying him as a silly irritant.

In contrast, several later articles are more newsworthy, detailed, and respectful. A January 27, 1896 article headlined “A Chinese Funeral,” for example, details “a first class funeral” of one “Choi Foy” who was “high up in the degrees of Chinese Masonry.”²⁹ The article explains the lavishness of the funeral, how “the finest hearse in the city” took the body to the cemetery and that “a large number of the Chinese population attended.”³⁰ The unbiased tone found in the reference to Chinese masonry indicates an acknowledgment of and respect for this Chinese institution. Additionally, the reference to the “Chinese population” as opposed to using the common epithet of the era—Celestials—further points to increasing respect for the community and its institutions over earlier coverage. Finally, the fact that the Chinese were allowed access to the hearse—presumably owned by a White—points to acceptance by the White owner for Chinese use, a possible acculturation of Chinese funerary ritual and, therefore, a

²⁸ *Bedrock Democrat*. December 18, 1874.

²⁹ *Ibid.* January 27, 1896.

³⁰ *Ibid.* January 27, 1896.

possible cultural connection between the two communities at least in this one aspect of death ritual.

A second article from this later period, run on December 7, 1896, under the headline "Going Back to China," describes an elderly Chinese resident who had saved enough money to return to China. It informs the reader that returning home is the goal of every Chinese sojourner, but that this rarely occurs. When it does, the article states, it "is indeed quite fortunate" for the person involved.³¹ The article subtly belittles the man, however, by printing his pidgin English reference to his wife as his "wifo" and by attributing his savings to "abstaining from 'fan tan'" while failing to reference his obvious hard work and frugality.³² Even so, the fact that this man's accomplishment was deemed noteworthy enough to warrant an article several paragraphs in length and that its conclusion warmly expressed "regrets over his leaving," bespeaks of both a genuine fondness for this man as an individual and of a cultural understanding and respect for the Chinese's sojourner status.

Herman B. Chiu's analysis of Chinese newspaper coverage in Oregon in the 1870s and 1880s reveals how the *Bedrock Democrat* compared to other towns in Oregon in its coverage of the Chinese. He examined newspapers in John Day, Astoria and Jacksonville, in addition to Baker City, because each community had a significant Chinese population at that time. He found that the *Bedrock Democrat* contained "the largest number of 'positive' to 'neutral' stories relating to the Chinese of the four papers in the study."³³ A word of caution is appropriate here, however, because the papers Chiu studied very rarely published news about the Chinese. On the occasions they did, Chiu found the news derogatory and racially biased to varying degrees. His findings, when combined with the changes in tone of the *Bedrock Democrat* coverage between the 1870s

³¹ *Bedrock Democrat*. December 7, 1896.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Chiu, "Oregon's Chinese and Newspaper Coverage," 53.

and 1890s, however, points to Baker City as a community that may have treated its Chinese residents more respectfully than other Oregon towns of the era that had large Chinese populations.

The *Bedrock Democrat* coverage of the late 1890s falls at the cusp of the earliest documents contained in the case files. The articles hint at a White community that had gained respect for its Chinese population, as well as increased interest in and knowledge of Chinese culture. Additionally, the White perception of Chinese masonry as a counterpart to a Euro-American fraternal organization hints at a cultural bridge between the two communities.

The Chinese Merchants: Wing Hing Yuen and On On Co.

This paper focuses in particular on information gleaned from the case files of men who were partners in two Chinese businesses—Wing Hing Yuen and On On Co. The case file collection contains the most files for the partners of Wing Hing Yuen.³⁴ Sources indicate the business prospered in the early 1900s and had a run of nearly 50 years. The Baker County Tax Roll of 1890 indicates "Ming Hing Yuan" owned "Block A, Part of Lot 3" in Fisher's Add'n" of Baker City.³⁵ Moreover, the Chinese Exclusion case file of Leong Sun who left for China in October 1890 states the firm owned "lot No. 2 in Block "A" in said Baker City Oregon, together with the Stone Store building and other improvements situate [sic] thereon."³⁶ The Chinese Inspector's report of February 17, 1904, describes the "stock on hand" at the store to be of

³⁴ The collection contained nine case files for Wing Hing Yuen.

³⁵ Baker County Oregon, Tax Roll 1890, 3rd page of "W" section, Line 24.

³⁶ *Case files of Chinese Immigrants, 1890-1914*, M1638, Roll 1, Case 1, microfilm, quoted in Brian Thornton, "Exceptions to the Rule: Chinese Merchants and the Exclusion Laws, 1890-1894," *Pacific Northwest Forum* 6, no. 1 (1992): 53.

"considerable proportions."³⁷ He further characterized the business as able to "easily support all the active members."³⁸



Standard Station at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Main (formerly Front) Street looking east ca. 1930. The Wing Hing Yuen store is seen in the middle, left of the photograph, partially obscured by the Standard Station garage. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1992.11.

The business was still in operation at 1722 Resort Street as late as 1937.³⁹ The 1930 Baker County Tax Roll showed "Lot 2, Blk. A" under the ownership of "Poy, Lee et al."⁴⁰ Although this entry does not show the property under the ownership of Wing Hing Yuen, the case files indicate Lee Poy was a partner.⁴¹ The reference to "et al" in the tax entry points to multiple owners, implying the property remained under the collective ownership of the firm's partners.

³⁷ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of Chinese Inspector in Charge*, 17 February 1904. Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 1009/2, Long Guoy. U. S. NARA-PAR.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1937*, 113, 117, 157.

⁴⁰ Baker County Oregon, Tax Roll 1930, Vol. 2, p. 121, Line 2 lists "Poy, Lee et al" as having paid taxes on "Fisher's Add to Baker, Ore., Lot 2, Block A."

⁴¹ Lee Poy is listed as a partner of Wing Hing Yuen. U.S. CUSTOMS SERVICE, *Partnership List of the Wing Hing Yuen Company*, 9 March 1911. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS158, Case No. RS27253, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

The discrepancy between the lot numbers listed in the 1890 and 1930 tax rolls is alluded to in the case files. One of the partners, Leong Dod, affirmed in testimony in January 1908 that the firm owned "the Noodle Restaurant" located next door to the store "and the cribs in the rear of the building."⁴² Whatever purchases and sales of property took place between 1890 and 1930, the firm nonetheless appears to have owned property as late as 1930 and was still listed in the city directory as late as 1937.



On On Co. Dry Goods store at left, its sign partially obscured by the automobile, ca. 1910. South side of Court Avenue between Main (formerly Front) Street and 1st Street. The Ellis Transfer Company wagon is the main subject of the photograph. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1981.1.154.

The second establishment, On On Co., was located in Baker City's White business district and catered to a White clientele. An affidavit on behalf of Leong Kie of On On Co. dated January 14, 1904, signed collectively by witnesses, J. H. Parker, P. Basche and S. A. Heilner, indicates the firm had been in business "on Court Street between Main and First Streets" since 1896.⁴³ The firm did not own the property in which the store was located but rented the space

⁴² U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of Leong Dod*, 4 January 1908; *Testimony of W. A. Baird*, 4 January 1908. Case No. 4858, Leong Boon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁴³ U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 14 January 1904. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box S010, Case No. 159, Leong Kie. U. S. NARA-PAR.

from Heilner.⁴⁴ Heilner described the company's stock as "mostly dry goods, fancy Chinese and Japanese goods," which were sold "mostly to the white people...because they keep mostly white



Leong Kie of On On Company, ca. 1904. Source: U.S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 14 January 1904. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box S010, Case No. 159, Leong Kie. U. S. NARA-PAR.

goods."⁴⁵ The testimony of M. Hoff expands upon Heilner's testimony by describing On On Co. as a business where his "wife buys gowns for the children."⁴⁶ He went on to state that they "make up shirts and ladies gowns" and sell "baskets like they have in those Chinese concerns, willow work and

bamboo."⁴⁷ The collective affidavit of Parker, Basche and Heilner adds "men's furnishings, curios and fancy articles" to the store's stock.⁴⁸

Those Who Witnessed: the Banker, the Hardware Merchant and the Postmaster

According to historian Erika Lee, the "social and class standing of witnesses" was a key consideration for immigration officials.⁴⁹ Middle and upper class White witnesses were looked upon more favorably by immigration officers and increased a merchant's "chances of reentering

⁴⁴ U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of S. A. Heilner*, 2 December 1903. Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 4775, Leong Chung Goon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Testimony*, 3 December 1903. Case No. 4775, Leong Chung Goon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 14 January 1904. Case No. 159, Leong Kie. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁴⁹ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 137.

the country."⁵⁰ Who was providing testimony on behalf of these merchants and what does that tell us about the merchants' adaptation to Exclusion and their relationships with White witnesses?

Two men in particular acted as witnesses for affidavits and provided personal testimony repeatedly for these merchants. The first, J. H. Parker, gave his occupation as Vice President of First National Bank.⁵¹ The 1910 Baker County Tax Roll lists Parker as one of 18 bank stockholders—his personal shares valued at \$4,345.⁵² He appears to have moved up in the social strata since the 1870s when the *Bedrock Democrat* printed an advertisement for one J. H. Parker who was a "Dealer and Worker in Tin, Sheet-Iron, and Copper."⁵³



James H. Parker, date unknown. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1981.1.308-1.

In addition to his position at the bank, the Polk's 1893 Baker City Directory listed Parker as the President of Baker City Gas & Electric Company and the Treasurer of Baker Valley Irrigation Company. These affiliations were listed in the miscellaneous information contained in the opening pages of the directory under the heading "Incorporated Companies."⁵⁴ The 1908 directory does not contain this section so it is difficult to surmise if Parker was still involved with these companies. Tax data are inconsistent as well. The above-mentioned list of stockholders

⁵⁰ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 137

⁵¹ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Application*, 4 January 1908. Case No. 4858, Leong Boon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁵² Baker County, Oregon, Tax Roll 1910, Vol. 2, p. 161, Stockholders listed on Lines 12-29; "Parker, J. H." entered on Line 22.

⁵³ *Bedrock Democrat*. December 18, 1871.

⁵⁴ *R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1893*, 22-23.

was the only time such an entry appeared in the ledgers referenced for this research.⁵⁵ The 1893 information, nonetheless, points to Parker's heavy involvement with the town's infrastructural



First National Bank interior, southwest corner of Front (Main) Street and Court Avenue, 1888. The men in the photo are identified as Walter Fernald, Vice President; J. H. Parker, Cashier; Thomas Downing, Assistant Cashier, and Sam Murphy, Bookkeeper. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1981.1.230.

and real estate development during the early years of its mining boom, in addition to his position at the bank.

The second man who provided testimony was Peter Basche, a prominent and wealthy hardware merchant. Data compiled from the 1910 Baker County Assessment and Tax Roll indicate Basche paid over \$3,800 in taxes that year.⁵⁶ The entries indicate he was involved in multiple business partnerships in addition to his hardware business. His real estate holdings included lots in Baker City, acreages outside the city, and properties in Sumpter, McEwen and Whitney. Nearly two thirds of his taxes that year—based on land and personal property valued at over \$80,000—stemmed from his lucrative hardware business, Basche-Sage Hardware Co.⁵⁷ His

⁵⁵ Ledgers referenced were from years 1879, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930.

⁵⁶ Baker County Oregon, Assessment and Tax Roll 1910, Vol. 1, p. 32, Lines 12-25; p. 33, Lines 1-21.

⁵⁷ Baker County Oregon, Assessment and Tax Roll 1910, Vol. 1, p. 33, Lines 19-21, entry for *Basche-Sage Hardware Co.*

second largest tax liability of over \$800 was incurred on multiple city and county properties he owned in partnership with J. H. Parker.⁵⁸ Basche had political connections as well that included holding the position of County Treasurer.⁵⁹ A letter he penned to the U. S. Immigration Service



County Judge Peter Basche, ca. 1912.
Source: Judy Boguski, e-mail message to author, December 14, 2007.

in March 1913 evidences his later position of County Judge. The letter, written on "Office of the County Judge of Baker County" letterhead, shows Basche's title appended to his signature.⁶⁰

Basche's connection to Wing Hing Yuen, according to testimony he gave on behalf of Leong Dod, in March 1911, was in relation to some placer mines "at Connor Creek near Huntington, with which [he was] concerned."⁶¹ He explained, "The mines are worked by the Chinese and Leong Dod's firm has furnished the supplies."⁶² Basche's curious coupling of the Chinese workers in the same sentence as his reference to supplies, however, hints that Wing Hing Yuen may have acted "as sort of a hiring hall for Chinese labor" in a manner similar to the Kam Wah Chung Co. of John Day.⁶³ Here, it would seem that Basche—when taking into consideration his obvious wealth combined with his livelihood as a hardware merchant—would be able to outfit his mining operations with everything he could possibly need. Indeed, Basche-Sage Hardware Co. is listed as a "provisioner" of Mining Supplies

⁵⁸ Baker County Oregon, Assessment and Tax Roll 1910, Vol. 1, p. 33, Lines 5-12, entry for *Basche P. & Parker J. H.*

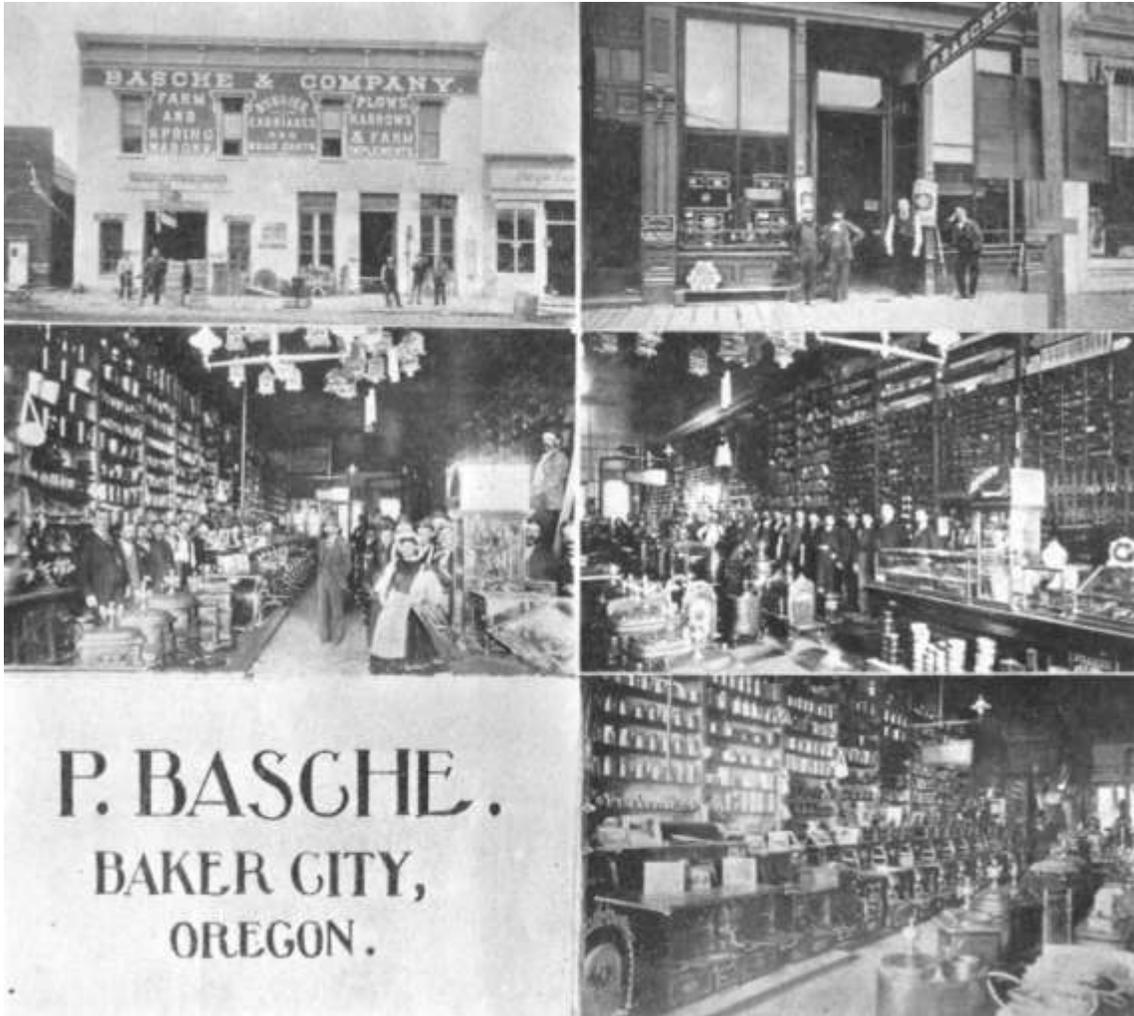
⁵⁹ *R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1908-1909*, 18.

⁶⁰ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of P. Basche*, 8 March 1913. Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 2962, Mrs. Pearl Leo (Liu). U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁶¹ U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of P. Basche*, 9 March 1911. Case No. RS27253, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Jeffrey Barlow and Christine Richardson. *China Doctor of John Day*. (Binford & Mort Publishing, 1979), 28.



Basche & Company advertisement, 1897. Source: Baker County Library, Baker City, Oregon, Record 1980.1.517.

in the 1905 Classified Business Directory.⁶⁴ It is thus possible that he caught himself mid-sentence in an effort to avoid connecting Wing Hing Yuen with the excluded labor class.

Basche testified several years earlier, in February 1904, that he visited Wing Hing Yuen "frequently" because he purchased his "tea from them."⁶⁵ He also pointed out that the partner,

⁶⁴ R. L. Polk & Co. Baker City Directory 1905, 599.

⁶⁵ U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of P. Basche*, 12 February 1904. Case No. 1009/2, Long Guoy. U. S. NARA-PAR.

Long Guoy, for whom he was testifying, did "all the buying from the merchants in Baker City," thus indicating the two men may have transacted business at Basche's hardware store as well.⁶⁶

In addition to Parker and Basche, the town's postmaster was occasionally called upon by the Customs Service to conduct investigations. This occurred when a merchant had returned from a trip to China, had arrived in port, and was requesting re-admission. The Customs Service sent investigation paperwork to the postmaster who was assigned two tasks. His first task was to get answers to the following questions:

1. The approximate value of the stock of goods carried by said firm, and the amount of money invested in said business by said applicant.
2. Are the witnesses personally acquainted with the applicant, and were the enclosed papers signed in presence of applicant?
3. What is the standing of the witnesses?
4. Ascertain, if possible, by inquiry of applicant's firm, whether photograph was taken in your city, and if so, interview the photographer.
5. State whether, during the twelve months prior to departure from the United States, said applicant engaged in any manual labor except such as was necessary in the conduct of business as such merchant. **THIS IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT.**
6. Is said firm still doing business?
7. Does this firm permit gambling in their place of business?
8. For what amount is this firm assessed?
9. Make Careful inquiry as to applicant's ability to understand and speak English?
10. Do you believe the applicant entitled to admission?⁶⁷

These questions illustrate how the Customs Service both defined and created what constituted an acceptable Chinese merchant. The postmaster's second task was to have the witnesses to the original preinvestigation affidavit fill out a questionnaire that reaffirmed their original statements. These questionnaires were notarized and returned, along with the postmaster's response, to the Customs Service office that had made the inquiry. Thus, the

⁶⁶ U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of P. Basche*, 12 February 1904. Case No. 1009/2, Long Guoy. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁶⁷ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Examination*, 22 April 1903; *Letter of C. W. Ide*, 22 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

merchant's admission to the country depended in part on the postmaster's investigation and favorable report.

In one such case, Postmaster D. L. Moorman conducted an investigation into Leong Beon of Wing Hing Yuen. Leong Beon had arrived in Port Townsend, Washington, and was interrogated aboard the *Shinano Maru* on April 22, 1903—setting in motion what was the first step in his admission application. That same day, C. W. Ide, the Collector of Customs at Port Townsend, sent a letter outlining the above-mentioned questions to Postmaster Moorman, along with the questionnaires that were to be filled out by the original witnesses.⁶⁸

The responses Moorman gave went well beyond the parameters of several of the questions. One such example is his response to the yes-or-no question, "Are the witnesses personally acquainted with the applicant?":⁶⁹

The witnesses Messrs. Parker and Baird, are absolutely reliable. Mr. Parker being Vice President of the First National Bank of this city; an institution with nearly a million and one-half assets, and Mr. Baird being the owner of three different and various department stores, and one of the well to do business men [sic] of this city. There is no question of their acquaintance with applicant, and in fact, all the Chinese merchants in business in this county.⁷⁰

Moorman expanded his responses similarly to questions that pertained specifically to Wing Hing Yuen, and to Leong Beon in particular. He not only affirmed the company was still in business, but underscored that it was "the leading Chinese firm of this county."⁷¹ The tenth and final question Moorman responded to, "Do you believe the applicant entitled to admission?" was more heavily weighted than the other questions because it most directly allowed for Moorman's

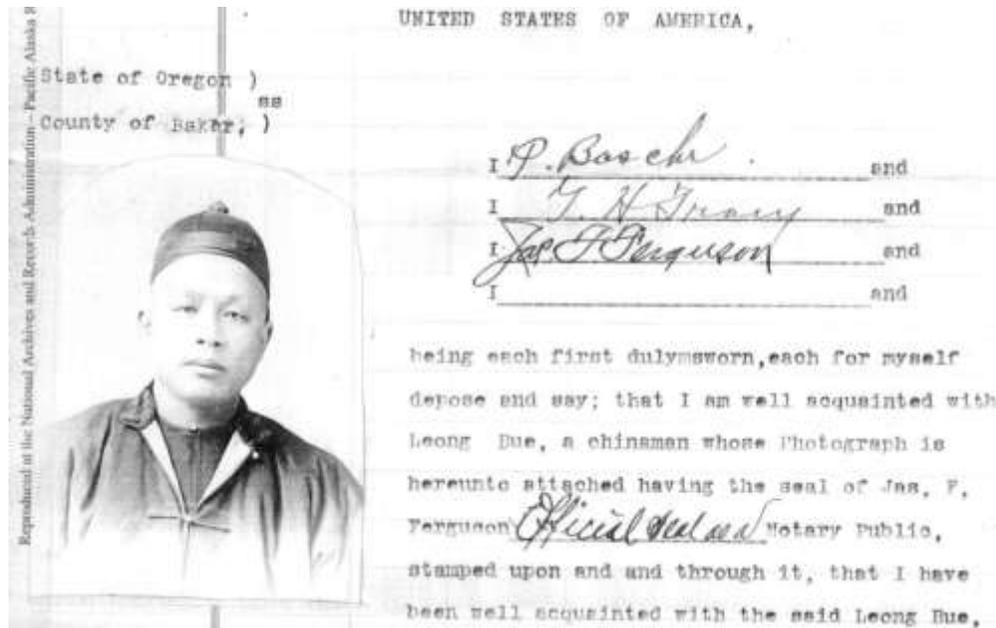
⁶⁸ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Examination*, 22 April 1903; *Letter of C. W. Ide*, 22 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁶⁹ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of C. W. Ide*, 22 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷⁰ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of D. L. Moorman*, 25 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

personal sentiment to leak into the investigation.⁷² This question, placed as it was at the end of the questionnaire, could sway the immigration officials' decision to admit Leong Beon. Moorman expanded his response here, as well as with his statement, "there is no question whatever, in my mind, as to his being entitled to admission."⁷³ Leong Beon was admitted on April 30, due in part to the "favorable report of the postmaster at Baker City, Ore."⁷⁴



Leong Bue of the Wing Hing Yuen Company. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 13 May 1902. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS116, Case No. RS17964, Leong Bue. U.S. NARA-PAR.

Moorman elaborated his responses similarly when he conducted an investigation in February 1903, pertaining to the admission applications of Leong Bue of Wing Hing Yuen and Leong Wa of On On Co. He once again wrote glowingly of the witnesses—Peter Basche and

⁷² U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of C. W. Ide*, 22 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷³ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of D. L. Moorman*, 25 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷⁴ U. S. Customs Service, *Transcript of Examination*, 22 April 1903; *Letter of C. W. Ide*, 22 April 1903. Case No. RS18016, Leong Beon. U. S. NARA-PAR.

James Ferguson—and composed advocatory replies to the questions:

The witnesses are perfectly reliable, and reference to mercantile reports of Dunn or Bradstreet will advise you as to standing in particular of Mr. Basche, he being one of the wealthiest as well as leading merchants here, and Mr. Ferguson, one of the old residents here, is comfortably well off⁷⁵

In reference to the Chinese firms and the merchants in particular, Moorman classified both as "the leading Chinese merchants of this county," and reiterated that he had "no doubt whatever as to their being entitled to admission."⁷⁶



Ah Yee of the Wing Hing Yuen Company, ca. 1899. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 30 September 1899. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS 104, Case No. RS17052, Ah Yee. U. S. NARA-PAR.

An earlier postmaster, B. T. Potter, also assumed the role of advocate in his replies in the November 14, 1901 investigation report he penned in reference to Ah Yee, of Wing Hing Yuen. Potter attested that Ah Yee had been a member of the Free Will Baptist Church since 1878, in

⁷⁵ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of D. L. Moorman*, 12 February 1903. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS116, Case No. RS17964, Leong Bue. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

spite of the fact that he was not asked to report on the man's religious affiliations.⁷⁷ This contrasts with Moorman's expansive discussion of the White witnesses, which verged on boastfulness about the town's wealthy businessmen. Postmaster Potter does not extol the White witnesses in his investigation, but instead focuses on an acculturative attribute of Ah Yee that would likely be viewed favorably by immigration officials. This passage points to Potter's savviness about which attributes of Chinese merchants immigration officials deemed beneficial. In addition, it points to a connection between the Baptist Church and this one member of Chinatown that dated back over 20 years. None of the other case files indicate membership in the Baptist Church or any other church in town; thus, it is unknown how widespread the Christianization of Baker City's Chinese was at this time.

These records demonstrate the merchants of Wing Hing Yuen and On On Co. successfully secured the testimony and favorable accounts from prominent Whites, which allowed them to maintain both their place in the merchant class and to conduct regular trips to China. Both Parker and Basche indicated ties to the businesses, which appear to have transpired both in Chinatown and in the White business district. These relationships not only point to the merchants' awareness of the importance of powerful White witnesses in their efforts to maintain their merchant status, but also intimates a fluidity of movement between the two districts and a certain acceptability of Chinese crossover into White social space.

Leong Dod: The Cultivation of a Western Appearance.

Leong Dod's 1899 affidavit photograph is the only time he appears in Chinese attire in his four affidavit photographs dated between 1899 and 1911. The next affidavit, from 1905, shows

⁷⁷ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter to Collector of Customs*, 14 November, 1901. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS 104, Case No. RS17052, Ah Yee. U. S. NARA-PAR.



Leong Dod of the Wing Hing Yuen Company shown in western garb for the first time, ca. 1905. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 15 January 1905. Case No. 704, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

him wearing a Western style suit jacket, white shirt and dark tie.⁷⁸ For his 1908 photograph he donned a cravat and carried a pocket watch—the chain of which can be seen attached to his vest.⁷⁹ The final photograph, from 1911, shows a man with a trace of a smile and a look of contentment.⁸⁰ A young man, Leong Tai Yow, had successfully entered the country in 1910 as Dod's son, and had been granted a partnership with Wing Hing Yuen, indicating that the older Leong may have been preparing to return to China permanently.⁸¹

Leong Dod is just one of several merchants in the case files who adopted a Western appearance just after the turn of the century. In contrast, photos of Chinese merchants in U. S. Customs Service Portland Bureau Chinese Exclusion case files from the 1890s show merchants from this era looked "very Chinese," and that "no Western clothes were in evidence, although queues, small, black felt skull caps and silk" adorned the applicants.⁸² While some earlier photos of the partners of Wing Hing Yuen show them in Chinese attire, all photos after 1902 show the partners in Western garb.

The three-year period from 1902 to 1905 saw significant consolidation in the administration of Exclusion at the federal level. Three events in particular may have contributed to the merchants' cultivation of a Westernized appearance. First, Frank P. Sargent was appointed

⁷⁸ U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 15 January 1905. Case No. 704, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁷⁹ U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit*, 23 September 1908. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS056, Case No. RS2222, Leong Tai Yow. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁸⁰ U. S. Customs Service, *Application for Preinvestigation of Status*, 9 March 1911. Case No. RS27253, Leong Dod. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁸¹ U. S. Customs Service, *Letter of R. E. Hussey*, 28 August 1912; *Application for Preinvestigation Testimony*, 1 August 1912. Records of the INS, RG 85, Case No. 1534, Leong Tai Yow. U. S. NARA-PAR.

⁸² Brian Thornton, "Exceptions to the Rule: Chinese Merchants and the Exclusion Laws, 1890-1894," *Pacific Northwest Forum* 6, no. 1 (1992), 54.



Leong Dod of the Wing Hing Yuen Company, ca. 1908. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Affidavit notarized by V. W. Tomlinson*, 23 September 1908. Records of the INS, RG 85, Box RS056, Case No. RS2222, Leong Tai Yow. U. S. NARA-PAR.

commissioner-general of immigration in 1902, just two years after Congress assigned this position responsibility for the administration of Chinese Exclusion.⁸³ A former labor leader and ardent exclusionist, Sargent prided himself on the increased denials and deportations under his leadership. For example, in 1894 "the ratio of admissions to denials and deportations was 100:7;" whereas, under Sargent's leadership "the ratio had changed to 100:57" by 1904.⁸⁴ Next, the Bureau of Immigration was given jurisdiction over all Chinese immigration affairs in 1903.⁸⁵ Finally, the 1905 Supreme Court decision disallowing any Chinese to appeal a Bureau of Immigration decision in court "gave the bureau

unprecedented power that exceeded that of most federal agencies."⁸⁶ Thus, after 1905, a merchant faced a formidable infrastructure that could see him peremptorily deported without recourse.

These changes are illustrated at the local level in Chinese Inspector, J. H. Barbour's, February 1904 question about a merchant's mode of dress. He asked witness Peter Basche, if the merchant, Long Guoy, dressed "in American clothes and has the general appearance of a merchant?"⁸⁷ This was the first time in the case files that Barbour asked such a question, to which Basche responded affirmatively. Barbour's question indicated the Customs Service had created a template image of a Chinese merchant—an image that was pointedly Western. It was

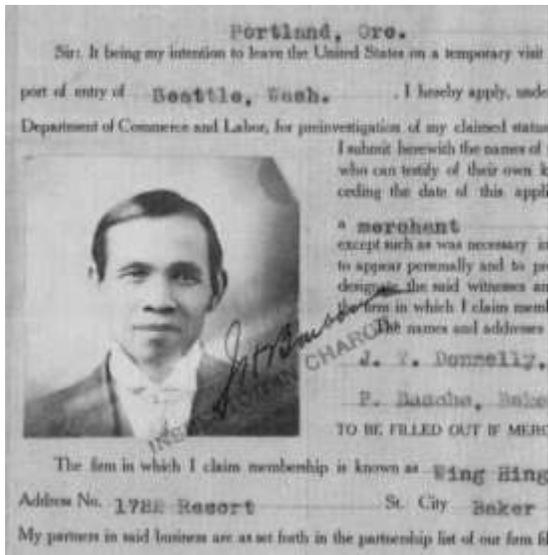
⁸³ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 66-67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁵ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 68.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ U. S. Customs Service, *Testimony of P. Basche*, 12 February 1904. Case No. 1009/2, Long Guoy. U. S. NARA-PAR.



Leong Dod of the Wing Hing Yuen Company, ca. 1911. Source: U. S. Customs Service, *Application for Preinvestigation of Status*, 9 March 1911. Case No. RS27253, Leong Dod. U.S. NARA-PAR.

against this backdrop of both federal regulation and local inspection that the shift to Western attire took place for the partners of Wing Hing Yuen. It is unknown whether Long Guoy was present at Basche's testimony, if Basche related the nature of the question to the partners of Wing Hing Yuen, or the extent to which these Chinese merchants were able to apprise themselves of the recent changes at the federal level of Chinese Exclusion.

Nonetheless, after Barbour asked this question, all photos showed the merchants in Western attire.

Conclusion

The newspaper coverage of the 1890s when taken in concert with the testimony of Parker and Basche and the reports of the postmaster point to a community whose attitudes about its Chinese may have improved by the early 1900s. The documents found in the case files highlight leading businessmen who were interested in maintaining Baker City's Chinese merchant class—whatever their motives for doing so may have been. Was Basche motivated by access to laborers he needed to work his mine? Was Parker motivated by the money the Chinese—noted for their frugality—deposited at First National Bank?

Documents not found in the case files also shed light on the Chinese merchant's relationship with the larger community. Historian, Erika Lee, found correspondence from

"enemies" in some of the case files from other cities she investigated.⁸⁸ However, none of the 23 case files reviewed for this paper contained any such correspondence.

The case files illustrate the administration of Chinese Exclusion at the local level. They show how the Chinese merchants of Baker City operated within federal legal constraints by harnessing the testimony of powerful White businessmen and bureaucrats, and by cultivating the appearance and connections that fit the Customs Service's definition of a Chinese merchant. This carefully crafted visage of acculturation aided their efforts to maintain their place in the merchant class.

Unfortunately, the nature of the merchants' trips to China—who they visited, where they went, the names of the districts and villages from whence they came—are only rarely a part of the documents. Thus, the insights the documents provide are muted by the nature and enforcement of Exclusion, by the perspective and beliefs held by the immigration officials who administered it, and by the carefully crafted responses of the Chinese themselves—made as they were to fit the White-created definition of a Chinese merchant. The case files, nonetheless, highlight a largely forgotten chapter of Oregon history, enrich and complicate the understanding of Chinese Exclusion at the local level, and shed light on the nature of Baker City's Chinese community in the early 1900s.

⁸⁸ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 14.

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