

## **"BURY MY BONES IN CALIFORNIA;" HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF YEE AH TYE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper we combine family history and archaeology to present the life and times of California pioneer Yee Ah Tye. Not quite a '49er, Yee arrived in San Francisco from southern China in about 1852 and became an agent for the Sze Yup District Association, a role that he would continue in Sacramento and La Porte until his death in 1896. Archaeological excavations of Chinese district association houses in Sacramento and at the site of a Chinese gold miners' camp in Sierra County provide insights into Yee's role as association official, merchant, and middleman representing the interests of his community for over 40 years.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most archaeologists are doomed to study anonymous people. Often we know next to nothing about them as individuals and have to use that tenuous shred of information—the artifacts that they left behind them—to reconstruct their place in the past. Some practitioners of the New Archaeology went so far as to make a virtue out of this condition. In fact, it has been suggested that studying individuals is nothing but particularism that leads to hopeless atheoretical relativity and an inability to make generalizations or cross-cultural comparisons. Well, things have changed and happily it's now respectable among archaeologists to insist that change occurs through human agency; that people have had a role in creating human history. California's history is more than just the outcome of 'forces' and 'processes,' although this is part of the story.

One of the small pleasures of researching local history is getting to follow the life of someone from the past who turns up in research in successive projects. One thought they'd just passed into the great abyss, one of thousands of names—and suddenly, there they are again; older, with more children, widowed, or whatever. A name from the past suddenly has a history. This was the junior author's experience with Yee Ah Tye.

Yee Ah Tye first appeared in the archaeological literature in 1981 as a result of research into Sacramento's Gold Rush era Chinese district (Praetzelis and Praetzelis 1982). Ten years later he popped up in connection with a gold mining site in Plumas County (Praetzelis and Praetzelis 1993) and then again, in 1995, when the researchers returned to excavate in Sacramento's Chinese district (Praetzelis and Praetzelis 1997). Recently, Lani Ah Tye Farkas (Farkas 1998) published a biography of Yee Ah Tye, her great-grandfather, which helped to put the archaeological glimpses of the man's life into perspective.

### **FROM KWANGTUNG TO CALIFORNIA**

Most Chinese came to America as sojourners, hoping to make their fortune and return to China as rich men and die among their people. If they should die in America, rich or poor, they made sure of one thing: their bones must be returned to the land of their ancestors and be buried there, so their spirit would not wander forever in the darkness of a foreign world. But Yee Ah Tye was different. When he died in 1896, he astonished his family and friends with his dying request: I have lived in America, "since I was a young man...Now let my body be buried here and my bones lie undisturbed for all times in the land where I have

lived" (Farkas 1998:1). Ah Tye had lived a majority of his life in America and felt that America was the home of his children, making him the first of a new 'hybrid,' the Chinese American.

Yee Ah Tye was given a funeral, "with all possible ceremonies of his native land and the addition of an American band." Five kinds of cooked and uncooked animal food, cakes, vegetables, fruit, wine, and tea sat on tables to feed Ah Tye's spirit in the world beyond (Farkas 1998:1). Chinese used food as a way to communicate with gods, ghosts, and ancestors. An American takes flowers to a grave. A Chinese might take a piece of pork and an entire chicken with its head and feet intact (symbolizing wholeness) to offer to the deceased. For the American and Chinese the essence of paying homage to ancestors is the same, but the offering is different. Lani Farkas' uncle Hughes tells a favorite story about an American and a Chinese who meet at a cemetery. The American observed the Chinese paying homage to his ancestors with food, then asked, "When are your ancestors coming to eat the food?" To which the Chinese replied, "The same time your ancestor comes to smell the flowers!"

Like more than 80% of the Chinese in the United States, Yee Ah Tye's descendants originated in Kwangtung Province. He was born in a south China village of farmers and fishermen. Ah Tye came to America around 1852 in a junk and spent his first night in American soil huddled with his companions in the doorway of a building. This might have been the reason he knew the importance of district associations.

Yee Ah Tye learned English in Hong Kong before coming to America and soon became the district association leader of the people from his Sze Yup Province. Research into old San Francisco newspapers revealed a darker side of Yee Ah Tye as district head. During his first years in America, Ah Tye led his people in the autocratic style he had learned in China. The San Francisco *Herald* (29 May 1853) described Ah Tye as a Chinese petty despot who inflicted severe corporeal punishment on his countrymen. Although various complaints were made against him, the *Herald* article reported that Ah Tye, "always succeeded in evading the law by his

superior adroitness, influence and cunning." He is said to have tried to extort money from Miss Atoy, the first Chinese madam in San Francisco. She took him to court and won.

Perhaps tired of the continuing internal conflicts in San Francisco and desiring to start anew in a town closer to the gold fields, Yee Ah Tye moved to Sacramento's Chinatown where he was the Sze Yup District Association head in 1854.

Like other early Sacramento Chinese leaders, Yee Ah Tye seemed to have an openness to Caucasians, which made for good relations with them. For example, in 1861, he helped to host a Chinese New Year dinner for prominent Caucasian leaders such as a judge, physician, and lawyer. Two newspapermen for the Sacramento *Daily Bee* (7 December 1861) were guests and listed the 26 courses served. There was birds' nest, seaweed, 2 kinds of duck, 2 kinds of rum, 5 brands of champagne, and the last course was cigars.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY OF CHINESE ASSOCIATIONS AND THEIR AGENTS

The district associations were very important institutions for Chinese immigrants. These organizations, later known as the Six Companies, were similar to the *landsmanshaften* self-help groups organized by groups of immigrants from Europe. Each association was based on its own district within Kwangtung Province. It provided its members with a place to stay when they arrived in California and helped them find work. If they became sick or got in trouble with the law, the district association would help out. And, if the need arose, the association would even ship their remains home to be buried.

During the 1850s, the associations' agents in San Francisco and Sacramento were the most visible individuals in their communities. They had to be sophisticated businessmen and educated and bi-lingually articulate advocates for besides taking care of their members' needs, the agents had to represent the Chinese community to often hostile local authorities. In 1850s Sacramento, Yee Ah Tye represented the Sze Yap Association and Tong Ahchick was the agent of the Young Wo Association. Josiah Gallup, an attorney and Sacramento City alderman, worked with the

Chinese agents to represent Chinese interests with local government and as an agent to buy everything that the association needed from wagons to eggs. Both associations had boardinghouses for their members and offices on the same block in Sacramento. Fortunately, the entire block was razed by fire in the summer of 1855—well, fortunately for the archaeologists at least—for this event created a remarkable archaeological deposit portions of which have been associated with the Chinese boardinghouses that backed up on what was called China Slough. Although the remains of the Sze Yup Association had not survived, archaeologists did uncover an excellent assemblage related to the Young Wo Association's house (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1997).

Food bones from the pit show that, while the city's Anglo-Americans ate beef and mutton, their Chinese neighbors were dining on exotic species of fish including the Chinese golden threadfin and sea bream. Bones from Chinese turtles were also found in the pit; these may have been used for medicine as well as food. Pork, which was expensive in California at the time and particularly savored by the Chinese, made up nearly half of the mammals represented by bones in the pit. Adding to the variety, the remains of several species of birds—chicken or turkey, pheasant, geese, and ducks—were also present. Fowl, pork, and imported fish and reptiles. These were all expensive items at the time; certainly not the kind of food that the stereotypical 'Chinese laborer' could afford. So whose artifacts were these? We think it likely that many of them may have been used by the household of the association agent himself, an individual who also owned a selection of English ceramics including a large transfer-printed basin with an ownership pecked into the glaze.

### **YEE AH TYE FINDS A HOME IN LA PORTE**

From Sacramento, Ah Tye moved to La Porte, which was the hub of a rich gold mining area in the Sierras of northern California. Grass Flat was one of the mining communities surrounding it. La Porte was founded in 1850 as a result of a gold strike. By

1858, there was a Chinatown within the town's limits, between the business district and residences of town. In 1860, La Porte's population was about 1,000. Men outnumbered women 4 to 1. Of the 136 La Porte Chinese 100 were placer miners. Ah Tye became a partner, then later the president, of the Hop Sing & Company merchandise store, which also contracted Chinese laborers.

Known as a progressive businessman, Ah Tye was one of the first Chinese to engage in hydraulic mining. Powerful jets of water from a hydraulic hose could tear down a hill more rapidly than could a hundred men with shovels. La Porte escaped extreme anti-Chinese agitation in the 1870s because there was plenty of gold to go around and the mines depended upon cheap Chinese labor. But the 1880s were a different story. In 1886, anti-Chinese leagues were formed around La Porte, forcing white mining companies to lay off Chinese laborers. However, tax assessments show that Hop Sing & Company was strong enough to continue its business independent of the whites. Mining deeds also reveal that during these anti-Chinese periods, United States surveyor Charles W. Hendel was a co-owner of the Hop Sing Placer Mine. This partnership may have created a buffer for the Chinese during these hard times.

### **ARCHAEOLOGY OF YEE AH TYE'S BOARDING HOUSE**

In the early 1990s gold prices were, temporarily at least, on the way up, and an Australian mining company decided to re-open the old Pioneer Mine, an hydraulic mine on the border of Plumas and Sierra Counties. One minor obstacle to their plans was the presence of archaeological remains from the first miners who had worked there and lived at nearby Grass Flat in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese men had been employed at the Pioneer from as early as 1876. The 1880 US Census schedule for what we take to be Grass Flat lists a household of 8 Chinese men between the ages of 24 and 44. The neighboring white miners' boarding house also housed 8 men. Boarding house living was common for working men during this period, as was the separation of Chinese and non-Chinese

miners. The Pioneer declined after the Sawyer Decision which effectively put a stop to hydraulic mining but geared up again for just a few years during the 1890s, and it is from this period that the most interesting archaeological remains have survived (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1993).

In 1895, the Pioneer Mining Company owned two boarding houses up on Grass Flat, the Thomas House and, to the south, the China House. Thomas' House was run by Owen Thomas and his daughters, Laura and Agnes; it catered to white miners. We cannot be certain who had charge of the China House or who recruited the Chinese miners who lived there but it's very likely that Yee Ah Tye had more than just a little to do with it\_ for, during that year, Hop Sing & Company of La Porte was assessed for \$250 worth of "Chinese merchandise" on Grass Flat; the value went up to \$350 in 1896, and then disappeared from the tax rolls altogether. And Yee Ah Tye, of course, was the force behind Hop Sing & Company.

Although these two groups of men boarded only a couple of hundred feet from each other, archaeology shows that they lived very differently. While the Thomas' boarders lived in a single building, part of which may have been fitted out as bunkhouse, the China House itself may have been only one of the places occupied by Yee Ah Tye's men. Archaeological evidence in the form of discrete, spatially separated clusters of artifacts suggests that the Chinese workers lived in a dispersed settlement around the China House itself as well as in it. Many of the artifacts were thin-walled, brown-glazed stoneware vessels that contained traditional Chinese food and drink. Significantly, many of these vessels were whole or had been broken where they were placed, suggesting that they had simply been abandoned where they were used.

While refuse disposal at the Chinese settlement was ad hoc, at the Thomas House it was decidedly organized and formal. Another difference between these two populations shows up when we compare artifacts that reflect recreation in its various forms. While the Thomas House and its refuse dump together had a mere five alcohol bottles, the Chinese settlement contained over 75, as well as 23 artifacts related to opium smoking, including fragments of pipes and

small copper alloy boxes, each of which would have contained several ounces of opium.

## **FAMILY LIFE AND THE END OF YEE AH TYE**

Most Chinese men deemed a daughter less valuable than a son, because once she married she was considered a member of her husband's clan. Why raise a daughter for the benefit of another clan? Contrary to tradition, Yee Ah Tye valued his daughters. He hired a tutor to educate his girls in their La Porte home and even bought his daughter, Bessie, a piano and had it transported to La Porte by horse and wagon from San Francisco. Ah Tye's more traditional Chinese friends thought he was crazy to spend so much money on a mere girl.

Yee Ah Tye never allowed his picture to be taken because of a scar left on his cheek by a would-be assassin's knife. The unsuccessful assailant didn't earn his \$300 fee, so he was stranded in tiny La Porte with no money and no place to hide. The story is told that Ah Tye gave him the money to return to San Francisco.

Yee Ah Tye was a sojourner in neither life nor death. He could have easily returned to China as a wealthy man to live out his days. Instead, he lived in California for over 50 years and died at the ripe age of 73 in 1896. In all that time, he never visited China.

The temple ruins at San Francisco's Lincoln Municipal Park Golf Course was once part of the Lone Mountain Cemetery, a gift of Ah Tye. Other glimpses of his life in America can be seen in deeds, mining claims, tax assessments, newspaper articles, and land that he once owned. Yee Ah Tye's legacy, however, is in his descendants. Many Chinese with common last names like Chan, Lee, and Wong may have no relationship with one another. However, the descendants of Yee Ah Tye have borne his unique last name through six generations, in the words of the Yee family genealogy, "spreading like melon vines, increasing continuously" (Farkas 1998: 141).

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