

1. THE LUCKY ONE

THE BOY, JEU DIP (ZHAO XIA), was twelve years old when he left southern China for America. He was from Skipping Stone (*fushi*) Village in Xinning County, Guangdong Province. The boy's ancestors were one of thirty-three clans that migrated to Xinning in the thirteenth century, during the southern Song dynasty. Because the founder of the Song dynasty was named Zhao, people in Guangdong with that surname often claimed royal lineage. But in the nineteenth century, there were mostly poor farmers in Xinning, not princes.

Xinning is the old name for Taishan, one of the Siyi (four counties) in southwestern Guangdong from which ninety percent of Chinese immigrants in California came in the nineteenth century. A great chain migration of sons and husbands poured from the Siyi, one of the least prosperous regions of Guangdong. Siyi's hilly terrain and rocky soil, its cycles of drought and flood, and its relative isolation from the market impoverished its farmers. Instability from British economic penetration in the wake of the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) and political violence caused by secret brotherhood societies made conditions worse. Xinning produced only enough rice to feed its people for half the year. Farmers supplemented rice

STRIVINGS

production by growing sweet potatoes and peanuts on the hillsides. Many Siyi men made seasonal migrations to more prosperous counties near Guangzhou (Canton) to labor as peddlers, hired hands, or factory workers. Increasingly, they sought work across the ocean that would sustain their families. Perhaps, if they were lucky, California gold would make them rich.

At twelve, Jeu Dip was young to be emigrating on his own. Most boys of that age traveled with a father, uncle, or cousin or had one of those waiting in California, but we have no evidence that Jeu Dip emigrated as part of a family strategy. He may have been orphaned or fled a cruel father, or perhaps he simply escaped from a cruel life. We do know that he never looked back.

When he left Xinning in 1864, Jeu Dip traveled what was by then already a well-trodden route from rural Guangdong to California—Jinshan, “the gold mountain.” He first made his way to Guangzhou, where the Pearl River flows into the South China Sea. Guangzhou is not far from Xinning as the crow flies, about eighty miles, but a mountainous terrain stands between Xinning and the Pearl River delta. In the early twentieth century, an enterprising emigrant named Chen Yixi would return from Seattle and build a railroad from Xinning to Jiangmen, at the edge of the delta. But before that, those with funds traveled by sedan chair, carried by coolies; those without money walked. Jeu Dip probably walked, at least as far as Jiangmen. If he had any money at all, he’d have taken a small boat when he could, a sampan, along the little rivers that thread the delta, as he made his way to Guangzhou.

There he found an emigration agent willing to loan him money for a ticket to cross the ocean, the debt to be repaid in California. The credit ticket was the common method of financing passage to California, Australia, and Hawaii (the destinations of choice for voluntary emigrants), but it is unclear how a twelve-year-old obtained such a loan without family collateral. Emigrants of lesser means had to sign indentures to get passage for work on plantations in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). The poorest rubes were lured

The Lucky One

or simply kidnapped by coolie traders and sent off in old slaving ships to harvest sugar in Cuba and guano in Peru. But Jeu Dip was a wily kid, smart and ambitious. And lucky, too—a blessing for any emigrant, but one especially appreciated by the Chinese, who understood the currency of luck in a fateful world.

Jeu Dip traveled by riverboat from Guangzhou to Hong Kong, which under British rule had grown to be the busiest entrepôt in East Asia. Rice, silk, tin, opium, and coolies flowed through Hong Kong to and from China, Southeast Asia, Europe, Australasia, and the Americas. The U.S.-China trade initially ran mostly to New York, by way of the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope. But in the early nineteenth century, Yankee merchants also ran a transpacific route that traded in sandalwood from Hawaii and sea otter pelts from the Pacific Northwest (the latter being the source of John Jacob Astor's fortune, before he went into Manhattan real estate).

The transpacific China trade, after eventually suffering from the depletion of sandalwood and pelts, was rejuvenated when the gold rush opened California to hundreds of thousands of people in 1848. Jeu Dip's crossing in 1864 was via the route between Hong Kong and San Francisco that had opened that year. Beginning in the early 1850s, Chinese began coming to California in large numbers, traveling in merchant sailing ships carrying the stuff of the China trade: silk, tea, rice, sugar, curios, herbs. Ships did not sail on schedule, but left only when there was enough cargo and passengers to make the transoceanic journey profitable to the shipper. Like other hopeful emigrants, Jeu Dip had to wait around—perhaps he picked up odd jobs for cash while he did—either in Guangzhou or in Hong Kong, until a ship was ready to sail.

In San Francisco, the *Daily Alta California* carried a column, "Shipping Intelligence," which listed the items of cargo and the number of passengers on each arriving vessel. It gave the names of European and American passengers—merchants, ministers, an occasional family—but never the names of the "Chinamen" on board, so we don't know which vessel Jeu Dip traveled on. It might have been

S T R I V I N G S

the *Arracan*, a square-rigged trading ship that left Hong Kong in July 1864 under one Captain Kulken. She carried ten Euro-American passengers and ninety-one unidentified Chinese, along with “7 pkgs opium, 8775 bags of rice, 946 cakes of sugar, 250 gunny bags, 550 rolls matting, 100 baskets ginger, 14 cartons of champagne, 5 millstones, and 4109 pkgs of merchandise,” its cargo intended as much for the growing ethnic Chinese market in California as for Euro-American consumers. The journey took four months, with a stop in Nagasaki to water and provision.

On board, Jeu was assigned a berth, really a hammock, on the lower deck, a dark area between the top deck and the cargo hold. Each passenger brought his own bedding and chopsticks. The men slept, gossiped, gambled, and smoked opium. Occasionally, they went up on deck for fresh air, but mostly they stayed below. Jeu Dip picked up whatever information he could about Jinshan. His focus remained on the future.

When Jeu Dip arrived in San Francisco, the gold rush was finished, but the transcontinental railroad had not yet been built. The city had begun to shed its character as a feverish and rough through station for people heading for the hills. It was more settled and stable. In addition to being the center of western mining and other extractive industries, the city’s robust economy included the port, financial and mercantile services, and local manufacturing. Jeu Dip arrived in the midst of San Francisco’s first industrialization, a long upswing that lasted for more than ten years, one fed by capital that was accumulated locally. Still isolated from the national market, prices and wages were both high. A labor shortage persisted even though former miners drifted into the city after the placer, or surface, mines had been depleted.

Chinese were among those moving from the mining districts to the cities, but there they did not have access to the same jobs or wages as white workers. The Chinese were already cast as a subordinate group—not universally disdained but held at a racial distance,

The Lucky One

seen by some as exotic and by others as threatening. With the exception of elite merchants, whom white Americans viewed with curiosity (one admired the tea merchant Ho Kee and the silk trader Chy Lung for their “superb heads and faces”), Chinese were considered backward and servile. China’s semicolonial status underlay these views in Europe as well as in North America.

Anti-Chinese racism evolved with particular characteristics in the mining districts. The Chinese were not the first or the only foreigners to be targeted by the forty-niners, but anti-Chinese racism was particularly nasty, violent, and long-lasting. In the first heady days of the gold rush, whites from the American Northeast, South, and Midwest raised nativist arguments against “foreign” miners, including French, Australian, Mexican, and Chilean miners. They repeated the claims of manifest destiny, which declared the West the province of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Particularly targeted were Sonorans (from Mexico) and Chileans, who were some of the most experienced miners and therefore seen as the greatest threats.

By the time Chinese began to arrive in large numbers, in 1851 and 1852, most other foreign miners had been driven out or had moved on. Antiforeign sentiment, formerly broad and diffuse in its reach, became concentrated against the Chinese. It was exacerbated by the fact that the days when one could make an easy fortune overnight were gone. Placer mining, which had been open to anyone with a shovel and a pan, was beginning to give way to hydraulic and shaft mining, both of which required greater capitalization. Miners who struggled with low-yielding claims or hired themselves out to the mining companies for wages found in the Chinese an easy target for their resentment. In this context, a more sustained anti-Chinese hostility grew.

By the mid-1850s, there were some twenty thousand Chinese miners in California, the single largest foreign nationality left in the goldfields, working exhausted placer claims abandoned by Euro-Americans and Europeans. Required to pay the foreign miner’s tax of \$4 a month (amounting to more than \$150,000 in annual revenue

STRIVINGS

to the state), Chinese miners barely eked out a living. White miners viewed the willingness of the Chinese to labor patiently in the mining dregs with a combination of respect and disdain. An observer wrote that in such places that yielded a meager dollar or two a day, the Chinese were “allowed to scratch away unmolested.” But if they struck a rich lead, “they’d be driven off their claim right away.”

Not all white miners were against the Chinese. Many contemporaries described their encounters with Chinese in the goldfields in a tone that was curious but not hostile. Nearly all noted that Chinese kept their camps and their persons in “wonderfully clean” condition and that they were friendly to others. But a certain story began to circulate—that Chinese were brought under bondage and controlled by their clan organizations, or “companies,” and that all the gold they took out of the earth remained in the hands of the Chinese, spent on provisions sold by Chinese merchants or taken back to China. The allegation that foreigners took from America and gave nothing back to it had been leveled against Europeans and Mexicans. But when used against Chinese, it was made worse by the charge that Chinese laborers were like slaves.

John Borthwick’s *Three Years in California*, published in 1857, is an example of how anti-Chinese ideas were repeated and reproduced. Borthwick’s descriptions of his personal encounters with Chinese miners were basically honest, if not entirely without bias. He wrote about a “bevy of Chinamen” that set up an operation on Weaver Creek, near his cabin. They were “industrious,” he conceded, although in his view they did not work as vigorously as Americans or Europeans and handled their tools like women. He described a “perfect village of small tents,” the Chinese miners’ fondness for wearing western-style boots of enormous size, and a fight in which they brandished picks and shovels and threatened one another but then stopped without having struck a blow (“just how the French Canadians fight”). But when Borthwick wrote that the Chinese were brought by their own countrymen by the shipload and kept under

The Lucky One

complete control “by some mysterious celestial influence, quite independent of the laws of the country,” picturesque detail ceded to hearsay.

The circulation of this false view of Chinese labor built public support for official anti-Chinese measures. The forty-niners were an important constituency in the politics of the new state; they had both the cultural capital and the numbers to influence elections. Miners were key to the election of Democrat John Bigler as governor of California in 1851 in a close vote of 22,613 to 21,532. Bigler, a burly figure who espoused sympathy for the workingman, was a popular politician. In his inaugural address, he issued a strident call to check Chinese immigration and to persuade those Chinese already in California to leave by imposing a heavy tax on them.

Bigler’s speech was printed as a pamphlet and distributed widely in the mining districts, giving white miners license to harass, attack, and take the property of Chinese. The legislature raised the miner’s tax on Chinese to six dollars a month, and in 1854 the state supreme court ruled that Chinese could not testify in court against whites. Chinese merchants wrote that the Chinese miners were “reduced to misery . . . wandering about the mountains . . . for want of food [and] in utter despair.”

While Chinese continued to work at the margins of California mining, some drifted farther afield to mining areas in Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Others were hired by American entrepreneurs to reclaim land in the Sacramento and San Joaquin deltas for agricultural development. Still others headed to towns and cities where ethnic enclaves had developed to serve and provision Chinese miners. San Francisco, the main port of entry for Chinese immigrants to the United States, was the most important of these, even though in the 1850s and 1860s most Chinese did not actually settle there. According to the 1860 federal census, taken four years before Jeu Dip’s arrival and five years before Charles Crocker had the inspired idea to use Chinese labor to build the western section of the

STRIVINGS

transcontinental railroad—just 2,700 of the 20,000 Chinese in California lived in San Francisco.

When Jeu Dip arrived in California, he would have heard that work in the mining areas had become scarce. Railroad work was not his aspiration. He figured it was better to stay in the city. He went to work as a house servant for Matthew Sterling, a dairy rancher on Van Ness Avenue.

Matt Sterling and Jeu Dip had things in common, although neither would have admitted it. They were both immigrants, risk takers, strivers. Sterling had emigrated from Scotland to New York in the 1840s and then moved to California in the late 1850s with his wife, Anna, and two small children. They went west with practically nothing, drawn like thousands of others in those days by the promise of opportunity in San Francisco—not just the gold rush, but the myriad businesses, large and small, that flourished in its wake. For several years, Sterling struggled as a laborer. But by 1870, he was working as an assayer of metals, an occupation that still supported a busy trade, though not as thriving as it had been in 1849. Sterling did well enough to bring his wife's mother over from Scotland and to buy a few acres on Van Ness (where the Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall stands today). In addition to his assaying work, Sterling grazed cows and sold their milk. He became comfortable enough to hire a Chinese houseboy.

We do not know how Sterling came to hire Jeu Dip. He might have asked a neighbor's servant to bring an acquaintance or relative to work for him, or perhaps he asked someone at the Chinese mission church or the immigration office to recommend a boy. The demand for Chinese houseboys and cooks was great, owing to the relative scarcity of women and the unwillingness of white men to perform domestic labor. In fact, it was not easy to employ a Chinese servant. Many Chinese shunned the work, for it was both arduous and servile.

The Lucky One

Jeu Dip's chores would have been typical of those of domestic servants in American upper- and middle-class homes in the mid-nineteenth century: hauling water, emptying slop buckets, sweeping and washing floors, washing and ironing clothes, cleaning the silver, washing windows, cutting kindling for fires, cleaning the chimney, running errands. Many Chinese house servants also prepared food. Anna Sterling may have taught Jeu Dip to cook, or she may just have had him help with kitchen work, peeling potatoes and cleaning poultry. His pay was probably only fifteen dollars a month. Most likely, Jeu Dip lived in the Sterling household, perhaps in the attic or even in one of the outbuildings.

The work began before sunrise and ended after sunset. (“Work very hurry each morn” and “no time rest one minute today,” wrote the servant Ah Quin, a contemporary of Jeu Dip, in his diary.) One also had to take orders and withstand scolding. (“He say I not wash [floors] clean, then made me work on Sunday,” Ah Quin wrote. And after failing to blacken the shoes, Ah Quin complained, “Christ, what I do all morning.”) It was an isolating existence; if Jeu Dip had contact with other Chinese people, it was with the servants of neighbors. He would have gone to Chinatown occasionally, perhaps while out on an errand for Anna Sterling or on his day off. The California Street cable car was not built until 1878, so he had to walk to Chinatown, about two miles away. There he might have stopped by an English-language class run by missionaries or a performance of the Cantonese opera, gotten a shave, or eaten a five-cent dinner.

San Francisco’s Chinese quarter, or Chinatown, was still very new. It had grown up around the intersection of Sacramento and Dupont streets, just up the hill from Portsmouth Square. A decade before Jeu Dip’s arrival, white-owned businesses abandoned the hill in favor of the new, expanded wharf-front commercial area built on landfill, and Sacramento Street building owners then rented to Chinese merchants. A small concentration of Chinese commercial and public functions grew up there—grocery and general stores, restaurants,

STRIVINGS

district and clan association halls, temples, lodging houses, gambling houses, opium shops, and brothels. Not all Chinese in the city lived in Chinatown; some settled closer to their places of work, such as the fishermen at the mouth of Mission Creek (named China Basin) and the workers at the woolen mills and ropewalk on Potrero Hill. The Chinese called Sacramento Street “Tangren Jie,” meaning “Tang people’s street,” after the Tang dynasty (618–907), when the ancestors of the Cantonese people in the south became integrated into the Chinese Empire. Since then, Tangren Jie has come to mean “Chinatown” wherever Chinese have settled around the world.

Jeu Dip’s excursions to Chinatown may have included stops at his *huiguan* (native-place or surname association). Most if not all immigrants registered with their huiguan. Membership (about five dollars) gave them a place to lodge when in town, to receive mail, to pay off their credit tickets, and to send money home. The huiguan loaned money, made job referrals, settled disputes, arranged for medical care in the event of illness, and, in the event of death, returned a person’s bones to his ancestral village. It was the basic social organization of the immigrant community. Jeu Dip, a Siyi person, would have been a member of a spinoff from the Siyi Huiguan, the Ning Yeung (Ningyang).

Jeu Dip’s contacts with other Chinese may have confirmed his higher standing compared to those who were, for instance, working as factory laborers. Servants wore relatively better clothing than did workingmen, suggesting a higher social status. Some identified with their employers, in the belief that the association elevated their status even more. Many years later, published accounts mythologized Jeu Dip’s early life in revealing ways: his obituary states that he worked in the household of Leland Stanford, the railroad magnate and governor of California, and his son boasted to a journalist that the dairy ranch on Van Ness had belonged to D. O. Mills, founder of the Bank of California. Neither claim can be corroborated, but census records do confirm that one “M. R. Stirling [sic]” owned property on Van Ness and that his household included a Chinese boy servant.

The Lucky One

In the early 1870s, Jeu Dip began driving the milk wagon for Mr. Sterling. Whether his wages increased or not, it was definitely a step up from domestic work. Driving meant not only that he could shed the posture of servility but also that he would get to know the city, its residents, and its places of work. He would be able to practice his English and make contacts for the future, when, he dreamed, he would start his own business. And he would meet his future bride.