



He Can Always Have The Moon: The Story of Ah Kan

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Chinese writer Lin Yutang noted the wants of man:

He wants some old trees in his neighborhood, but if he cannot have them, a date tree in his yard will give him just as much happiness. He wants many children and wife...If he is not born with such "voluptuous luck," then he will not be sorry, either. He wants a filled stomach, but congee and pickled carrots are not so costly...He wants a jug of good wine, but rice wine is often home-brewed...He wants leisure...He wants a secluded hut, if he cannot have an entire pleasure garden, situated among the mountains with a rill running past his hut, or in a valley where of an afternoon he can saunter along the river bank...But if he cannot have that luck and must live in a city, he will not be sorry, either. For he would have in any case, a cage-bird, and a few potted flowers and the moon, for he can always have the moon (Yutang 1938: 64-65).

Yutang's words are a shadowy reflection of the life of one of Idaho's Chinese pioneers, Ah Kan. On March 15, 1934, the Idaho County Free Press, Grangeville, Idaho ran seven lines on the front page:

Ah Kan, the last of the Chinamen of Warren, who was brought to the county hospital in Grangeville a few weeks ago by Chic Walker, pilot of the McCall airplane, died Saturday at the county hospital. He was buried in the local cemetery.

Ah Kan's death certificate, signed by B. Chipman, noted Ah Kan, age 108 died of arterio sclerosis and senility on March 8, 1934. Ah Kan's occupation was listed as miner. No information regarding the birthplace or the names of his father and mother was given.

The first mention of Ah Kan appears in The Free Press, Grangville, on January 22, 1892:

Delinquent list of taxes due on the 20 percent raise made by the "State Board of Equalization" for the year 1891:

Ah Kan and Ah Toy--16 horses	\$2.44
Ah Hip and Ah Ching--13 horses	2.07
Ah Sung--8 horses	1.42

Ah Kan and Ah Toy ran a pack train, hauling freight from Lewiston and Weiser to Chinese miners in the mining camps. Kan was knick-named Sleepy Kan, or Kay. Trull recorded the following remarks using Bailey as a reference:

In 1879 it was stated that 800 Chinese were running several pack trains between the Meadows and the valley of Weiser and Warrens, Idaho. The last Chinese survivor of that group was Sleepy Can or Kay. In his younger days he ran a mule train, packing into Warrens. He came to central Idaho as a boy with his father in 1862. He accumulated a fortune at Elk City, returned to China, married, and settled down to a life of ease they all dreamed about. He soon grew homesick for the free life of the mines, and returned to America, leaving his wife with the promise that he would send (cont.)

for her. Shortly after he left China a son was born but the wife died soon afterwards. When Old Sleepy again reached Elk City the placer mines had ceased to give up their fabulous treasure and the Oriental was never able to make more than a bare living (Bailey 1983:480-481, Trull 1946:28-29).

Elsensohn (1965), quoting Warren, Idaho resident Pat Irwin, notes:

There are no Chinamen in Warren today (1965). China Can (Kan) and China Sam were the last to survive. China Can was quite a doctor and a favorite with the children. His remedies were made of the herbs he gathered. He took sick soon after China Sam's death from heart failure. At the age of seventy-five, he was brought out to Grangeville...where he died at the county hospital. Polly Bemis, China Sam, and China Can all passed away within a comparatively short period (Elsensohn 1965:93).

Another reference to Ah Kan as a healer is made by MacDonald (1966)

At Warren, two Chinese miners, Ahkan and Lee Dick, were said to have used mold successfully to cure infection. They also made a tonic for pregnant women which early residents swore by (McDonald 1966:50).

In 1870, census records indicate there were 33 physicians and surgeons living in the Idaho Territory, seven of those were Chinese (Arrington 1962:3).

In 1910, the 13th census taken at Warren, Idaho, lists the following Chinese:

Name	Origin/Imm.	Age	Occup. & If Working	Read/Write(Eng.)	Own Home
Kan, Ah	China(1870)	76*	Laborer, working	no/no	yes
Tow, Ah	China(1876)	67	Laborer, working	no/no	yes
Dick, Lee	China(1879)	45	Laborer, working	yes/yes	yes
Goon, Ah	China(1877)	56	Laborer, working	no/no	(lives w/Lee Dick)
Sam. Ah	China(1881)	53	Laborer, working	yes/yes	(lives w/Lee Dick)
Hi, Ah	China(1877)	54	Hired Man, working	yes/yes	(lives w/F. Nethken)

In 1920, the 14th census taken at Warren, Idaho, lists the following Chinese:

Name	Origin	Age	Single, etc	Occup. & If Working	Read/Write(Eng.)
Can, Ah	China	66*	single*	Laborer/Gold Miner	yes/yes
Tow, Ah	China	75	single	None	no/no
Sam, Ah	China	57	single	Laborer/Gold Miner	yes/yes
Bemis, Polly	China	67	married	None	no/no

*Ah Kan was listed as a widow in the 1910 census. Discrepancies in Ah Kan's age and the date he immigrated to the United States provide interesting, unanswered questions.

Forest Ranger A.E. (Gene) Briggs tells of his meeting with Ah Kan and Ah Sam in Warren in 1932:

Two very old Chinese men were still living in Warren, apparently leftovers from the placer mining days. One was known as China Can (Ah Kan). No one seemed to know how old he was, but he could easily have been a hundred years of age, judging from his appearance. He was almost completely dried up and was barely able to shuffle along with the aid of a cane. He was very reserved and was never seen talking to anyone. Some folks said he was cranky, but who wouldn't be at that age. Oldtimers told us he (cont.)

operated a large pack string of mules to transport food supplies and equipment to Warren during the placer mining days before there were access roads. Some of Can's friends told me he was still hoarding more than a hundred aparejos, or leather pack saddles at his cabin. I managed to get a look at these saddles one day, but was unable to draw any conversation out of Can. He would have told a very interesting story. I would like to have acquired one of the saddles as a relic of the past.

The other Chinaman was known as China Sam (Ah Sam). He appeared to be much younger than Can and was always friendly. He worked in the store and Post Office and folk said he was very old. Whenever a drunk attempted to provoke either of the old Chinamen, folks came to their defense in a hurry. They were evidently considered to be assets in the town and relics of the past (Briggs 1963:106-107).

Two photographs of Ah Kan show him at different stages of his life. The first photograph shows him as a young man walking down the street of Warren on a winter day. In the later photograph we see him as an elderly man setting on a log next to his wood pile, wearing a plaid shirt, with a conical straw hat tied under his chin. He appears to be resting, the saw suspended in the sawlog, as he poses for the photograph. Ah Kan provides the opportunity to give a name, a history, and a face to the long list of Chinese names counted in early census records; names with no story, leaving little sense of understanding of the early Chinese pioneers of Idaho.

THE MINING CAMPS

The story of the Chinese immigration has already been examined in The Chinese Pioneer In Idaho: An Overview (Reddy 1993). However, a look at cultural differences may be helpful. The community the Chinese immigrant came into played a role in the structuring of the minority group (Weiss 1974:4), and undoubtedly the individual. Warrens in the last half of the 1800's was fairly quiet for a mining town. Norman B. Willey, of The Nez Perce News wrote an editorial from Warrens, I.T., June 29, 1881:

Up to the present time the season has been exceptionally favorable for mining operations. Most of the placer claims that are in condition for working are in the hands of Chinamen. They make trade good and put a large amount of money in circulation. It is usual to decry Chinamen, making it appear that they are an injury to the country. but in this camp they bought large tracts of mining ground and paid large sums of money for claims that white men had tested thoroughly and could not make running expenses out of the current rate of wages, or indeed, at any rate of wages that white men are likely to work for soon. They have not yet bought any new ground this year, though there are several sets of claims open for their inspection (July 14, 1881 edition).

In the early years, the 1860-1880's, acculturation into the Warrens community was filtered through external and visual exchanges on the conscious level, however, unconscious changes were also taking place. The immigrants built new residences using local materials, tools, and architectural styles, combining them with known traditional information. They acquired new skills in mining, bringing with them a knowledge of irrigation and water management. They had to learn new language skills with all the inferences. Different types of (cont.)

clothing and shoes were available and were often adopted. Although food and goods from China were packed into mining communities, other choices were available. Even when the desire to adopt cultural information is not expressed, the contact between both groups means some acculturation will occur. This integration does not necessarily mean the addition of the new and the elimination of the old, but a relatedness of the items depending on their success and availability. This happened to both the white and the Chinese communities (Weiss 1974:10-12).

One of the stronger elements of Chinese tradition and cultural stability was the well defined and organized family system. As noted, Ah Kan came to the United States with his Father. The 1870 census recorded many young males in their early teens, some as young as twelve, living at Warrens.

Although emigration did weaken family ties to some extent, the typical life of the emigrant was arranged in such a way as to allow him to fulfill his familial obligations. The family would make the decision as to when a young man, usually between the ages of fifteen and thirty, was to go. He would join an overseas community where members of his localized lineage (tzu) were already established. Ideally, he would return to China several times - to be married; to beget children; and finally, when he was old or wealthy enough, to retire in China and be buried with his ancestors. During his sojourn abroad, he would continually send home remittances upon which his family depended for their subsistence (Weiss 1974:24).

We see Ah Kan following this pattern to a relative point, then abandoning it. It is difficult to speculate the reasons for his decision.

Few whites understood the demands made from China on the sojourner. An example comes from Yutang (1938), as a letter from Cheng Panch'iao to his younger brother (date unknown):

If you could get (dollars), you could buy a big lot for me to build my cottage there for my later days. My intention is to build an earthen wall around it, and plant lots of bamboos and flowers and trees. I am going to have a garden path of paved pebbles leading from the gate to the house door. There will be two rooms, one for the parlor, one for the study, where I can keep my books, paintings, brushes, ink-slabs, wine kettle, and tea service, and where I can discuss poetry and literature with some good friends and the younger generation. Behind this will be the family living rooms, with three main rooms, two kitchens and one servants' room. Altogether there will be eight rooms, all covered with grass-sheds, and I shall be quite content. Early in the morning before sunrise, I could look east and see the red glow of the morning clouds, and at sunset, the sun will shine from behind the trees (Yutang 1938:37).

Other demands were internal, and part of the politico-cultural system prevalent at the time of immigration. One Chinese leader, Tseng Kuofan, 1811-1872, advised a philosophy of the rural ideal. He warned against extravagant habits, and advised, "planting vegetables, and rearing pigs", and "keeping up the tradition of the forefathers." In this way, "one will feel a sense of life and growth when looking in over our walls... (Yutang 1938:38). "This family ideal of industry and frugality and living the simple life persisted" (Yutang 1939:39), cementing the family unit, keeping it intact, in China or the United States.

Most difficult for the white community to understand was the Chinese character. The Chinese quality of patience was, according to Yutang, "the result of racial adjustment to a condition where overpopulation and economic pressure leave very little elbow room for people to move about" (p.46) The Chinese had a sense of indifference commonly misunderstood, not realizing that, "in a society where legal protection is not given to personal rights, indifference is always safe and has an attractive side to it difficult for Westerners to appreciate" (Yutang 1938: 48). Yutang quotes two poet-monks of the T'ang Dynasty on this philosophy:

Once Hanshan asked Shihteh: "If one slanders me, insults me, sneers me, despises me, injures me, hates me, and deceives me, what should I do?" Shihteh replied: "Only bear with him, yield to him, avoid him, and endure him, respect him, and ignore him. And after a few years, you just look at him" (Yutang 1938:53-54).

The Chinese pioneer realized not only from his past exposure to the legal systems in China, but from his mistreatment in the United States, that the legal system, for the most part would not help him. However, his religious mix of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism gave him "an unequalled genius for finding happiness in hard environments" (Yutang 1938:58).

Our reflection of Ah Kan is a man who was a realist. "When a man grows old, he develops a genius for flying low, and idealism is tempered with cool, level-headed common sense..." (Yutang 1938:54). Ah Kan to the end of his life remained Chinese. Circumstances, intervened. But being realistic, he prevailed, and being Chinese, he always had the moon.



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