Module 2
"In-Between" People

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Supporting Questions

What was the Tape family's background?

How did the Tape family build profitable connections not only with the Chinese immigrant community, but also with the white community?

Despite their position as "brokers," **what** barriers did the Tape family still face due to their racial identity?

1. Why do some Asian Americans attempt to assimilate into American society?

The *Tape v. Hurley* case introduced Joseph Tape and his family as **Americanized** Chinese who—unlike most Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century—spoke English, became Christians, and adopted Western-style clothing and other American customs. Joseph, who started a business hauling goods for Chinese merchants from the docks to Chinatown, later became the official transportation agent for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and the Southern Pacific Railroad. His son and sons-in-law also worked for the same steamship company, or as interpreters for the United States Immigration Bureau or the police courts.

The Tapes were **immigrant brokers**—middlemen who coordinated between government agencies or companies (e.g., steamships, railroads, and banks) and the Chinese people they worked with. Because brokers facilitated communication between two parties who otherwise

cannot communicate with each other, both sides depended on them and the brokers possessed a lot of power. At the same time, it was common that neither side entirely trusted a broker. Some brokers helped immigrants gain citizenship, while others extorted immigrants and threatened to ruin their cases if they weren't paid off. We will learn that the Tape family included both honest and corrupt brokers.

This module is about two generations of the Tape family who made their living as brokers. While their occupation gave them access to privileges of the white American middle class, that access was always limited. They would always be considered "in between" Chinese and white American society.

2. The First Generation: Joseph and Mary Tape

Joseph Tape, the family patriarch, originally hailed from Taishan County in Guangdong Province, China, and arrived in the United States in 1864 at the age of fourteen. His Chinese name was Jeu Dip. He came alone and was ambitious. His first job was as a servant in the home of Matt Sterling, a dairy farmer who lived at the edge of San Francisco, where Van Ness Avenue is today. Jeu Dip was not satisfied with washing floors, doing laundry, and peeling potatoes, however. He made himself useful to Sterling, and within a few years the farmer let him drive the milk wagon.

Jeu Dip's milk route later took him to the Ladies' Protection and Relief Society, a charity home for widows and abandoned women and their children. There, he met the home's only Chinese resident, a young girl. Since the girl's Chinese name was never recorded in America and she herself never acknowledged it, she was named Mary McGladery, after the assistant matron who took her in a few months after she arrived in San Francisco in 1868 at age eleven. Mary came from somewhere near Shanghai, China, unaccompanied by any adult relative, and was what the Cantonese called "mui tsai," which were girls sold by poor parents to be servants for wealthy families.

Mui tsai brought to California in the nineteenth century sometimes worked as servants in

the homes of Chinese American merchant families, but more often were connected to the prostitution industry, a lucrative business in a community that was 95 percent men. The girls performed menial labor in Chinatown brothels and were often resold into prostitution or marriage when they became older. The missionaries and the press called them "slave girls."[1]

Mary had faced similar circumstances until she ran away from the brothel where she initially stayed. Someone took her to Chinese Presbyterian missionary Rev. Augustus Loomis, who brought her to the Ladies' Protection and Relief Society. The ladies had cared only for white children, but could hardly refuse the minister when he appeared with the frightened girl. With the matron's guidance, young Mary learned to read, play the piano, and draw. She became a genteel, Westernized girl in a Chinese body.

3. Chinese American: A New Identity

Mary was eighteen years old and Jeu Dip was twenty-three when they met in the spring of 1875. Because the Chinese Mary spoke was not a Cantonese dialect prevalent among the other immigrants in San Francisco, Jeu Dip courted her in English. They both spoke English well, having learned it at a young age and through virtual immersion. They were fast becoming "Chinese Americans."

This new kind of identity didn't really have a name at the time. No one used the term "Chinese Americans" to suggest **assimilation** or **acculturation** the way we understand Chinese American identity today. But unlike the vast majority of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco, Jeu Dip and Mary McGladery had come to the US without Chinese parents and lived among white communities. At the same time, they were the only Chinese in their worlds, thus marked by a double difference—different from the white people around them and different from other Chinese immigrants.

Six months after they met, on November 16, 1875, Jeu Dip and Mary were married at the Presbyterian church, although neither had been baptized. Jeu Dip took the name "Joseph Tape"—a Joseph to accompany his bride's Christian given name, Mary. Tape was a German surname, perhaps chosen because "Joe Tape" sounded similar to Jeu Dip.

4. Becoming an Immigrant Broker

Joseph Tape began his own business as a teamster, driving his own horse and wagon, handling large deliveries for wholesale Chinese merchants. Before long, he expanded his services to become an expressman who carried arriving immigrants' baggage from the docks to Chinatown.

His entry into business was no small accomplishment. Joseph was the first Chinese to handle the baggage of arriving Chinese passengers, a job previously done by Irish expressmen. He had tapped into an extensive network of businesses that surrounded global and domestic migration. All manner of middlemen and brokers—including emigration agents, steamship and railroad agents, labor contractors, money changers, baggage handlers and expressmen—worked in the movement of strangers. They were all part of a vast industry that followed migrants on their every step, from countryside to city, across oceans and continents.

Through this work, Joseph gained prestige among white businessmen. His knowledge of both English and Chinese enabled him to communicate with a wide range of parties, such as the steamship company, customs officers, immigrants, community leaders, and merchants. He also occasionally interpreted for the Chinese consulate.

5. An American Middle-Class Life?

Yet even as Joseph Tape became a well-known figure in Chinatown, he remained somewhat apart from the community. He built a little house for himself and Mary on Green Street in Cow Hollow, a new neighborhood that was just being settled in the 1870s, located near present-day Pacific Heights. The couple had white friends, people they knew from the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and the Ladies' Society, and pursued white upper-middle class pastimes. Mary took up painting and photography, favoring still lifes and landscapes, while Joseph was an avid hunter who kept two hunting dogs. They explored the California countryside together, enjoying free tickets on the Southern Pacific, a privilege of Joseph's as an associate of the railroad company.

Their first child Mamie, was born in the summer of 1876. Mary delivered her at home, but not

with a Chinese midwife, which was the custom. Instead, a white doctor and nurse attended the birth, an unusual practice even among white middle-class families. Three other children followed: Frank (1878), Emily (1880), and Gertrude (1890). The children played with the white kids in the neighborhood and were tutored by the daughter of a neighbor.

The Tape family's little bubble would burst in 1884 when Mary took her daughter to Spring Valley Primary School and the family was thrown into the anti-Chinese politics of the time. Even following the Tape v. Hurley case in 1885, which ruled public schools must allow admission to all children, many white communities preferred that Chinese students attend separate, segregated schools.

For several years, Mamie and Frank commuted to the Chinese Primary School in their father's wagon. But things on Green Street changed as the area became more developed and the racial climate grew more tense. Frank began fighting with the Irish kids in the neighborhood. Mary and Joseph began to worry that their children's prospects for marriage would dim unless they met other Chinese, as both Chinese and white communities frowned upon interracial marriages.

With these issues in mind, the Tapes moved closer to Chinatown, about a block from the school and close to the Christian mission houses. But racial tensions were rife in Chinatown as well. When Mamie and Frank completed the eighth grade, the limit of the Chinese Primary School, they left San Francisco.

6. The Move to Berkeley

The Tapes moved across the bay to Berkeley, which had very few Chinese residents. Chinese people could own property there, and schools were not segregated. Joseph built a house on Russell Street, near Shattuck Avenue, a newly subdivided area in the southern part of town that was still sparsely populated.

Emily and Gertrude went to the LeConte School, near their home. Their childhood was in many ways the one that their parents had desired ten years earlier for Mamie—attending school and playing with white children. This was especially true for Gertrude, the youngest,

who had never gone to the Chinese Primary School and never learned to speak Chinese.

Things were not as easy for Mamie, who was eighteen when the family moved across the bay. She did not want to go to school in Berkeley and missed her friends in Chinatown. She went back to San Francisco often and began dating Herman Lowe, a fellow Chinese American she knew from the missionary circles. Lowe, the son of a laborer, had gone to the Baptist mission school in Chinatown. After he finished school, he continued to be privately tutored by one of the missionaries. He worked as a servant for a white household and later as a sewing machine operator at a Chinatown shirt factory.

7. Pressures for the Second Generation

Joseph Tape thought Herman Lowe was an unsuitable partner for his daughter Mamie. Although he had gone further in school than Joseph's own son, Lowe came from a poor family and, to Joseph, lacked ambition. Joseph wanted Mamie to marry Robert Park, an up-and-coming figure in Chinatown. Park was also from a poor family but graduated from Lowell High School and studied at Berkeley. He was an interpreter at the police court and active in Chinatown politics. But Mamie loved Herman and was determined to marry him. There are no records as to why Mamie loved him so much that she was willing to defy her parents. Perhaps the characteristics that Mamie experienced as loving and gentle in Herman were the same ones her father read as dull and passive.

Mamie and Herman married on September 8, 1897, at the Alameda County Courthouse in downtown Oakland. Rev. Charles Hobart of Oakland's First Baptist Church served as witness. After Mamie sent word to her parents of her elopement, it would be another year before they spoke.

Frank meanwhile was living the good life in Berkeley. He learned from his father how to ride a horse, hunt, fish, and feel important. He worked for Joseph, commuting with him across the bay, driving his father's wagons, and helping out in the office. By 1900, Joseph Tape's business was thriving; he was employed by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company as its official

transportation clerk. He also became a passenger agent for the Southern Pacific Railroad, selling tickets on commission.

Joseph's success in the immigration business brought the family wealth and social status, but it also created pressures for the second generation. Like most immigrants, Joseph and Mary regarded their children's achievements as measures of their own success in assimilation. They had focused on their children's schooling and their relationships with white people. Mary had insisted that their children learn to play musical instruments. Joseph had prepared his son for the family business and wanted his daughters to marry men of intelligence and ambition. The Tapes were among the first Chinese to test the limits imposed by the exclusion laws. As a result, the pressures on the children were, in a way, greater than those Joseph and Mary faced. There were few others in the Tape family's position and few, if any, role models to follow.

The two eldest children troubled Joseph and Mary the most. Frank strived to be like his father—respected and successful—but did not have Joseph's discipline. Their only son, Frank had been spoiled as a child and grew to be entitled and boastful. Stories in Chinatown later spread about valuables disappearing from the luggage of passengers who used the Tapes' services. Although Frank did not admit to any wrongdoing, Joseph compensated customers who accused his son of theft on more than one occasion.

As for Mamie, the girl who had won the right to go to school by learning to question authority, now appeared to be merely willful in the eyes of her parents. Joseph had not sued the school board, faced down the racists, and brought his daughter up as a "Caucasian," only for her to marry Herman Lowe, who he considered a "servant boy."

Endnotes

[1] "Chinese Slave Girl Plot Foiled," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), November 27, 1912.