

# Module 4

## The Strange Career of a Chinese Interpreter

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### Supporting Questions

**How** did Frank Tape further his parents' goal of aspiring toward inclusion in white society?

**How** did Frank Tape's attempts to fully assimilate lead both to his ascension as well as his downfall?

**How** did Chinese people respond to unjust exclusion laws?

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

Frank Tape's career as an immigration interpreter was unusual from the start. He had won the approval of Inspector James Dunn at the World's Fair of 1904, not because he excelled at interpreting, but because of his work as an undercover informant. In 1908, the Washington, DC, headquarters of the US Immigration Bureau assigned Tape to be the interpreter for Richard Taylor, a special agent investigating the smuggling of Chinese migrants across the Mexican border. At his next assignment in Seattle, Washington, Frank Tape used his stint on the border to promote his reputation. But Tape also sought status and personal wealth through corrupt practices, ultimately leading to criminal charges and his dismissal from the bureau.

This module uses Frank Tape's background as an immigration interpreter to explore the

darker side of the **immigrant broker**'s experience, including how brokers gained social and financial success at the expense of oppressing and extorting others. It also shows how immigrants themselves often sought the help of Chinese immigration interpreters, sometimes naively, and sometimes through bribery.

## 2. The Smuggling Network in Mexico

Since the late nineteenth century, Mexico welcomed Chinese labor, and many Chinese migrants easily entered the country and used it as a base for entering the United States, often their main destination. By 1904, a smuggling network was running from Mexican seaports such as Ensenada, Guaymas, and Mazatlán to border towns such as Calexico, Nogales, and Juárez. Chinese boarding houses and restaurants served as rendezvous points where Chinese brokers sold US-issued certificates of identity or arranged bribes to American immigration officers. Mexican guides helped immigrants cross the border in freight trains, by car, or on foot. Some Chinese migrants wore Mexican-style clothes and mumbled a few Spanish words as they walked past immigration border inspectors. Considering these circumstances, and the possibility of immigration officers accepting bribes for passage, the United States' force of eighty mounted customs officers could not effectively patrol the long US-Mexico border.

Richard Taylor was a federal agent from the Secret Service, working directly for President Theodore Roosevelt to investigate corruption cases in the federal government. He had investigated the Justice Department, the Customs Bureau, and the War Department prior to his case within the Immigration Bureau. Frank Tape was thrilled about his assignment with Richard Taylor. He would have considered Taylor, a field agent and not a bureaucrat, to be a role model. As his interpreter, Tape himself adopted the persona of being a secret government agent.

In Los Angeles, California, Richard Taylor saw that both the sea coast and the land border were virtually unguarded. He determined that smugglers launched small boats from isolated Mexican beaches in Baja California, near Ensenada, and then transferred Chinese immigrants to larger boats disguised as fishing vessels, which delivered them to isolated beaches in

Southern California. Once the boats landed, smugglers moved the Chinese immigrants to Los Angeles.

During the summer of 1908, Frank Tape worked with Taylor on four cases in which smugglers had been apprehended while transporting undocumented Chinese in Southern California. In one case, three Mexicans had assisted four Chinese migrants to board a freight train near Imperial Junction, an area at the southern border of California. They had come from Mexico, crossed the border on foot, and slept in tents when they were discovered by police. Taylor sent Tape to secure evidence against the smugglers by placing him into a Los Angeles jail cell where the migrants were being held. Although spending three days in jail was not what he had in mind for undercover work, he obtained confessions from two of the migrants.

### 3. Seattle Investigator

In September 1908, Frank Tape reported to the Seattle District Office, his next assignment with the Immigration Bureau. The city was a major port in transpacific migration. Thousands of people from China, Japan, and India arrived there every year. The Seattle district also processed documents for immigrants arriving by land and monitored the US-Canada border for Chinese smuggling.

Frank Tape arrived in Seattle boasting that he had just come from a special undercover assignment on the Mexican border and that he had direct ties to Washington, DC. Although his job as a Chinese interpreter was a conventional one, he maneuvered himself into the role of investigator by offering to take on Chinese smuggling cases that the inspectors could not solve. In one case, he uncovered an operation run by one of Seattle's wealthiest Chinese residents, Ah King, who used his merchant business as a front for forty-four "partners" who took turns bringing in their "sons." Ah King also reportedly opened the Chinese Village attraction at the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle to bring in unauthorized immigrants, similar to the scheme at the World's Fair of 1904 in St. Louis.

Frank Tape established himself in Seattle's Chinatown as a government man, a position of social importance in the community. People knew him as a successful interpreter and did not know that he worked undercover; that would have destroyed his reputation. Tape also used

his status and connections to invest in contracting Chinese workers for seasonal work in the Alaskan fish canneries, another type of brokering.

Among white people, Tape presented himself as white. He lived in a white section of town, drove a fancy car, and wore expensive suits. In the 1910 Census, he even reported his race as white. In 1911, he began living with a white woman, Lena Sutherland, a divorcée originally from Pennsylvania. In Seattle's polite society, some people disapproved of interracial relationships; but others conceded that he had come closer than any Chinese in achieving acceptance by white society.

Frank Tape's unusual lifestyle prompted both resentment and suspicion among his colleagues. Within a year of his arrival in Seattle, Tape's coworkers began to raise questions about him especially after he took up residence with Lena Sutherland. Tape's lifestyle became even more extravagant, from employing a chauffeur and maid to going on hunting and fishing trips. Sutherland spent heavily on clothes and jewelry. And so many wondered, how did a government salary support such expensive habits?

When Henry White took office as Seattle's new commissioner of immigration in 1913, he launched a secret investigation into Frank Tape's finances. Bank statements revealed that the couple, who married in 1912, was spending upwards of \$8,000 a year (worth \$200,000 today).

Tape was also questioned by the Walsh Commission, a federal body appointed by Congress to investigate labor conditions and what they called "Asiatic smuggling"—under the presumption that Chinese labor in the US undermined white labor. The commission was particularly interested in Frank Tape's racial identity. According to official records, the commission asked, "What is Tape's race?" and "Full, half, or quarter?"<sup>1</sup>, reflecting the stereotypes held by many whites that a person who is Chinese could not possibly be "American." They also questioned the financial and moral standing of his white wife. Richard Taylor, his former colleague at the Secret Service, defended Tape as a friend and a trustworthy investigator. But this was not enough to deter the case that was building against Tape.

Immigration Commissioner White's inquiry concluded with an eighty-one page report that

included Tape's bank statements and testimonies from several dozen witnesses, Chinese and white. It concluded that Frank Tape operated an extensive extortion racket and was possibly expanding his network to Mexico. He was dismissed from his position with the bureau and then arrested by the US attorney on criminal charges related to extortion in Chinese immigration cases.

## 4. Frank Tape on Trial

The public eagerly consumed stories about the investigations and trial of Frank Tape. After all, the cases combined themes that Americans found endlessly fascinating: corrupt government officials, Chinese criminality, and interracial relationships. Tape was first tried for breach of duty, malfeasance, extortion, and bribery in immigration cases; and in a second case, for conspiracy to intimidate witnesses involved in the initial trial.

The government's cases against Tape weakened when its chief witness, Lum Kong, was shot dead in Chinatown just days before the trial opened. Lum Kong was a local man who had reported Frank Tape to the bureau after Tape pressured him for money to process an immigration case for Kong's nephew. Rumor was that another man named Ching Kow was hired to kill Lum Kong—to eliminate him as a witness and intimidate the other witnesses on the Tape case. But Ching Kow himself was found dead a few weeks later, hanging from a doorframe in a Chinatown boarding house. Although Ching Kow's death appeared suspicious, police ruled it a suicide and closed his and Lum Kong's case. Without clear evidence against Tape, the juries in both cases found him not guilty in 1914.

Frank Tape was off the hook—but he was without a job and his reputation was in shambles. He had no money and Lena Sutherland, who he later divorced, disappeared from the scene. Frank Tape packed it in and returned to his parents' home in Berkeley.

There is a certain pattern to Frank Tape's career. In many instances, he was a zealous enforcer of the Chinese exclusion laws, pursuing smugglers and migrants as an immigration agent. But there is considerable evidence that Tape also extorted money from Chinese immigrants, whether they abided by immigration legislation or not. These practices appear paradoxical—partnering with the government to investigate Chinese immigrants and also

bribing them to ensure their entry. Both, however, point toward Tape's desire for power and social status, as well as a certain disregard for immigrants, whether on behalf of the government's exclusion laws or for his own personal gain.

Not all Chinese immigration interpreters were corrupt, and most employees of the bureau were not on the take. Frank Tape's brother-in-law, Herman Lowe, served as an interpreter in Seattle's Portland district for decades without any taint or rumors of corruption. A fellow interpreter in Seattle was Quan Foy, whose business practices were the opposite of Tape's. Quan Foy was quiet, unassuming, and uninterested in investigative work. His superiors considered him loyal and reliable.

## 5. Corruption at Angel Island

It is important to remember that the systems of processing Chinese immigration cases, both legally and through covert means, extended beyond the work of interpreters. A few years after Frank Tape's trial, a major scandal took place at **Angel Island**, located in California's San Francisco Bay, the largest port of entry for Chinese immigrants.

The Angel Island Immigration Station had been built in 1910 in an effort to isolate arriving Chinese migrants from their relatives or their representatives from family associations, who would usually provide the new immigrants with information to help pass the interview process. But Angel Island could not be completely contained—the station's staff, officers, and food supplies had to be ferried to the island every day.

In 1917, a major investigation of Angel Island Immigration Station found an extensive system of manipulation and theft of documents, extortion of money from immigrants, and fraud in applicants' examinations. This underground system was estimated to bring in \$100,000 per year (worth \$1.6 million today), and involved the station's clerks, stenographers, typists, watchmen, inspectors, and interpreters—as well as outside law firms, brokers, photographers, and counterfeiters—and only a few were Chinese. As an immigrant broker in San Francisco, Joseph Tape was not suspected of any wrongdoing. But Edward Park, the brother-in-law of Joseph's daughter Emily, who worked as an interpreter, was among those fired. Fifteen people were indicted on charges of conspiring to mutilate government records to land

immigrants illegally.

People in San Francisco's Chinatown were overjoyed to learn of the dismissals and indictments. As one person wrote to the bureau, "You have done a great justice to our Chinese peoples. That is, you have made a clean sweep out all the crooks, and grafters, which is in Angel Island."<sup>2</sup> For the immigrants arriving, the oppression of the exclusion laws was compounded by the burden of having to pay bribes to get through the system—even if they were legally eligible for admission.

Many in the Chinese community believed that the exclusion laws themselves were unjust and immoral—how does this impact our understanding of what was "honest" or "corrupt" at the time? Most Chinese did not consider it morally wrong to enter the country, even if they knew it was against the law. Immigrants often expected the Chinese interpreters to help them, either because they believed their families in the US had paid them off or because they simply assumed they could trust another Chinese person. As seen in these corruption cases, however, immigrants could make no assumptions about a Chinese interpreter's loyalties.

The scandals at Angel Island reveal a dense web of practices and transactions that complicated the administration of the Chinese exclusion laws. Contrary to the heightened, racialized publicity surrounding Chinese immigration cases in news media, corrupt business practices were not a problem solely among Chinese workers. In the Angel Island case, white brokers and lawyers made the most money, while Chinese brokers were the small fry, earning a modest cut lower down the chain. Still, these bribes and extorted funds gave Chinese brokers access to a more comfortable life that remained out of reach for the vast majority of Chinese Americans in the twentieth century. In this way, the murky moral world created by the Chinese exclusion laws led to the experiences of brokers like Frank Tape as "in-between" figures of class and racial identity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, *Smuggling of Asiatics* (Washington, 1916), 6158-66.

<sup>2</sup> "Anonymous letter to Densmore," Oct. 30, 1917, NAID 4707423, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization, RG 85, National Archives and Records Administration, San Francisco.