THE HOOSIER MANDARIN

MOY KEE, THE “MAYOR” OF INDIANAPOLIS’S CHINATOWN

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The history of the Chinese in America is usually considered a bicoastal affair. Most early immigrants lived in California and the Pacific Northwest, with a smaller number settling in the Chinatowns of the East. But Chinese also toiled in the Midwest, and Indianapolis had its very own, tiny colony of laundrymen and merchants at the turn of the twentieth century. It also had its very own fifth-degree Mandarin, a colorful figure named Moy Kee, who played a significant role on the national stage in the struggle of his countrymen for equality.

It took Moy a while to reach Indiana. He first set foot in the United States as a boy in the 1850s, part of America’s first wave of Chinese immigrants. Between the 1848 Gold Rush and passage of legislation barring Chinese immigration in 1882, tens of thousands—the majority, like Moy, men from Taishan (Toisan) County in Guangdong (Canton) Province—came to seek their fortunes in America. During this era, China was beset by aggressive colonial powers from without and domestic revolutionaries from within, and these conspired, in an overpopulated region with little arable land and many natural disasters, to make already hardscrabble life more intolerable. Pulling up roots and heading for a distant land became an imperative for many sons of Taishan. Most had no intention of remaining in America. Their dream was to earn enough to ensure a comfortable retirement in China, and, in the meantime, send money home to provide for their families, who were nearly always left behind. If they happened to die in America, every effort was made to send their remains back. Home was in China, not America.

Moy was different; he was intent on staying. He converted to Christianity in San Francisco and after a stint in Sacramento as a servant in the home of California governor Leland Stanford and a short trip home to marry, he headed for New York in 1878. There he found work in a shop selling imported Chinese goods and he preached at local churches on the side. Because he had managed to acquire very serviceable English, also unusual in that day, he was occasionally approached by journalists to speak out on issues affecting the Chinese community.

No topic was as combustible or vital to the welfare of the Chinese as the sentiment brewing in Congress to restrict further Chinese immigration. The Chinese had not initially been unwelcome in America, but after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, large numbers were put out of work, just as the country experienced a nationwide depression. Their willingness to work for low wages put them at odds with unemployed whites, who suddenly found many things to dislike about them: they were called odd looking and strangely dressed, accused of being clannish and unsanitary, scorned as heathens who were mentally and morally inferior to whites and derided for eating rats and sending their gold back to China.

Confined initially to the West Coast, where most Chinese lived, the racist bile began to spread eastward, and soon Chinese immigration was the subject of intense national debate. Moy spoke out movingly on the subject. In an editorial in the New York Tribune, he made the Chinese case: “We expected more from this country than any other because it was a ‘nation of freemen,’ but we have got less. The treatment we have received here has
been shameful, and if the good people of the United States could only realize how we have been hunted and hounded about, our property taken from us by force, our poor homes burned over our heads and we stoned and driven from place to place. . . . I am sure we would . . . find greater protection than we now receive. The Chinamen are patient, and they bear a great deal, but they cannot bear everything.”

This young Chinese seemed a perfect choice to carry out the Methodist Church’s plans for outreach to New York’s growing Chinese community, mostly laundrymen, cigar makers, and peddlers, and Moy was engaged to head a Chinatown mission to teach English and preach the gospel. The grand opening in 1879 was well attended by local Chinese and by American dignitaries, and Moy received admiring coverage not only in the local, but also in the national press.

Then, within just a few days, it was all over. Accused by his employer of pilfering merchandise, Moy was jailed, the first Chinese in the city ever arrested for larceny. The evidence was incontrovertible and he was branded a fraud. Although no record of a trial or a dismissed indictment exists, the New Haven Register correctly predicted the affair would “prove a complete bar to his subsequent success as a moral reformer of his almond-eyed brethren.” Indeed, Moy never worked as a preacher again, and he left New York soon afterward. But he was still destined to play an important role in the effort to improve the lives of those “almond-eyed brethren.”

Before leaving, Moy filed a declaration of intention to become a U.S. citizen, the first step in the naturalization process. It was a highly unusual act for a Chinese, but a prescient one, for just two years later America’s doors slammed shut. In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which not only precluded most further arrivals of Chinese into the country, but also made those already here ineligible for citizenship. After a trip to China, Moy returned with his wife, Chin Fung. The couple moved to Chicago, where he opened a business, initially a laundry and later a tea shop. Despite the new law, he stubbornly continued his quest for citizenship. He must have cut a striking figure in Cook County Court on October 18, 1886. Not quite five feet, three inches tall, he was dressed in full Chinese regalia, his hair queue—all men were required by Chinese law to wear “pigtails” during this period—hanging down the back of his long robe. But the judge, unmoved by the argument that he was entitled to citizenship because his declaration had been filed before the Exclusion Act passed, denied the petition.

Unfazed, Moy returned to court every year to press his case, to no avail. In the meantime, his stature in the Chicago community, and his wealth, grew steadily. Finally, a judge suggested that he might succeed with an order from a higher court.
Such a tactic might have secured Moy’s citizenship, but it would be based on a technicality and help no one but himself. By this time, he was thinking bigger. America’s Chinese needed to become politically active in pursuit of their own civil rights, and Moy was willing to lead the charge.

On June 20, 1894, more than a hundred prominent local Chinese organized the Chicago Chinese Club. Its objective was to “bring pressure to bear on Congress to the end that the rights and privileges of citizenship may be granted to the Chinese.” The organization marked the birth of a Chinese political party, the New Haven Register observed, “although the members have not the power to vote.” Moy was an obvious choice to head the group because of his leadership skills and his symbolic value as, ostensibly, the “first of his race” to file his declaration for naturalization. Club membership was open to Chinese who wished to make America their permanent home and would forswear gambling and drunkenness. The group hoped to cooperate with similar organizations in other American cities.

The club’s stance against vice was divisive, however, since Chicago’s gambling houses and drug dens were in Chinese hands. Club members collaborated with the authorities and gambling establishments and opium dens were raided. The police did such a thorough job that the underworld bosses, several of whom were Moy’s own kinsmen, suffered devastating losses and vowed retribution. They attempted to raid the group’s clubhouse and accused Moy first of perjury, then of murder. Nothing came of these, but animosity endured, and was probably responsible for Moy’s sudden departure a couple of years later.

Moy had visited Indianapolis at least once, in 1894. The Logansport Pharos reported that “Moy Kee, the Chinese interpreter and adjuster of differences, is down
from Chicago" to help a kinsman settle a financial dispute with a fellow Chinese. He must have liked what he saw, for he and his wife moved there in 1897. The city’s Chinese community was tiny compared to that of Chicago, but this was probably good news to him. Relocating to Indiana did nothing to dampen his conviction that he was entitled to naturalization, however, and there he finally succeeded in this quest. The Marion County Circuit Court accepted his argument, and on October 18 made Moy a citizen of the United States.

By 1900 Moy had opened a tea shop at 216 North Delaware Street and he and Chin Fung lived there as well; she was, at the time, the only Chinese woman in the city. In 1901, after Moy started a restaurant at 506 East Washington Street, something unusual happened that foreshadowed a larger, more prominent role for him in the affairs of his countrymen. It came in the form of a gift of a hundred “100 year eggs” from Viceroy Li Hung Chang, a prominent figure in the Manchu court and China’s chief diplomat and statesman. The gift, a Chinese delicacy made by preserving duck eggs, aroused much interest among Americans unfamiliar with them.

Li had not been in America since 1896, and there is no evidence he ever met Moy. The eggs were probably sent in his name by Chinese diplomats in the United States. The Chinese government had begun romancing Moy in the belief he could prove useful. The effect of the gift, well publicized in newspapers all across the country, was a significant rise in Moy’s stature in the eyes of the American public.

In 1904 the Chinese government participated in the Saint Louis World’s Fair. Its pavilion was a replica of the summer home of Manchu Prince Pu Lun, the Emperor’s cousin, and the government tapped the Prince himself to head its delegation to the fair. Moy, one of the Chinese exhibitors, probably met Pu Lun in Saint Louis, but he surely did so in Indianapolis, which the Prince visited for ten days after the fair.

Pu Lun, who many believed might become China’s next emperor, arrived at Union Station on May 18, 1904, to a twenty-one-gun salute. The welcoming party was led by Mayor John W. Holzman, and the Prince greeted attendees. Moy and Pang Wah Jung, “mayor” and “vice mayor” of the local Chinese community, welcomed the Prince with deep bows and presented flowers. Then it was off to a reception at the Indiana Statehouse.

Moy and Pang rode with Pu Lun in the parade, a spectacle inconceivable in their home country, where Manchu princes did not, as a rule, condescend to consort with the sons of Cantonese peasants. But these were unusual times, and Pu Lun’s trip itself was more or less unprecedented. Indianapolis’s Chinese community numbered fewer than a hundred, but Moy was its undisputed leader, and, as such, had to be accorded respect by the Pu Lun’s entourage. Accordingly, he was granted a private audience with the Prince at the Claypool Hotel.

Pu Lun accepted Moy’s invitation to a luncheon at his restaurant. A large lantern was hung outside the door, and the facade was festooned with colorful ribbons. Oriental rugs were laid, and on a teakwood table incense, food, and Chinese wine were placed. Holzman, civic leader William Fortune, and poet James Whitcomb Riley were also in attendance. The repast pleased Pu Lun, who presented Moy with a silk scarf and made a surprise announcement: upon his return to China, the Prince would recommend that Moy be granted a title.

Pu Lun proved as good as his word, and two months later Moy received certificates bearing the seal of the Emperor of China elevating him to the rank of Mandarin of the Fifth Degree.
Mandarin of the Fifth Degree. The title, which did not confer any practical benefit but permitted him to display an embroidered silver pheasant badge on his tunic, had not been bestowed simply because the prince had enjoyed his company. This was certainly a business transaction of some sort. During this era, the declining Manchu government courted overseas Chinese merchants because it needed capital, and it is possible Moy paid for his title. Another possibility, though, is that the Chinese government saw in him a potential standard-bearer in a drive to push the United States to ease restrictions on its Chinese population. The title might have been given to encourage him in this effort and to signal that the Chinese government supported him.

In May 1905 the Manchu government instructed its subjects in America to band together to protect their rights. An organization linked explicitly to Pu Lun’s visit would be established, and would take instructions from the Chinese minister in Washington. The new group would be headed by none other than Moy Kee of Indianapolis, who told a reporter: “My people are honest. They come to help build up the farms and cities. . . . It is manifestly unjust to the Chinese to say that they are inferior to others who come here. . . . I claim for my race high-mindedness, honesty and industriousness. In our fight to secure the repeal of the exclusion act, you will find us honorable—straightforward.”

In 1906 Moy and Pang visited Washington and they went to the U.S. Capitol to pay their respects to Vice President Charles W. Fairbanks, the former senator from Indiana, and on February 1 Congressman Jesse Overstreet, an Indiana Republican, took them to the White House to meet President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s appointment book records no such meeting, but it shows he hosted a reception to which Overstreet had been invited, so the audience likely took place in conjunction with that event. Whether Chinese citizenship was discussed is unknown; if so, it provoked no action, for Chinese exclusion policies remained the law of the land until 1943. The audience, however, was surely the apotheosis of Moy’s career. Before long, his fortunes declined precipitously.

The first blow came in a letter from the Chinese minister in Washington informing him he had been ousted from his Chinatown position and stripped of his rank. The “mayors” of America’s Chinatowns during this period were apparently appointed by Chinese diplomats, not elected, since America’s Chinese were still mostly subjects of the emperor. Moy’s elevation
in 1904 had been choreographed by the Chinese legation, and so now, in 1907, was his demotion.

What was behind this reversal of fortune is unclear. Moy certainly had enemies. He had left many behind in Chicago, and was not universally popular even in Indianapolis, where some felt he had betrayed his countrymen as an interpreter in the trial of three black men accused of murdering a Chinese laundryman in 1902. Moy himself later attributed his fall to false allegations of malfeasance concerning funds he had collected for earthquake relief in China. Whatever the reason, it was a deeply humbling experience for someone who had recently been so prominent and commanded so much respect.

The humiliation may be why Moy and his wife returned to China the following year. Whether they intended to come back is debatable. On the one hand, they sold their restaurant to their partners, although the finality of this sale would later be denied. On the other, they filed statements with the Immigration Bureau signaling their desire to return. Those who had more than $1,000 in property or uncollected debts could come back if they reported their financial details before they left. Moy and Chin each claimed $1,900 in assets, more than enough to guarantee reentry, and set sail for China on October 26.

Within a year, the couple sailed back from Hong Kong. As they disembarked at the Port of Tacoma on March 11, 1909, however, they were taken into custody by U.S. Immigration officers who questioned their status. As a citizen, Moy should have been permitted entry, but since the Exclusion Act precluded citizenship for Chinese, his status was in limbo. Whether the man so recently received at the White House would be readmitted boiled down to how much property he and his wife had left behind when they departed for China, and how much money they were owed in America.

A full-scale investigation followed. Immigration dispatched an agent to Indianapolis to interview Moy’s business partners about alleged assets and debts. The initial conclusion was that these were insufficient, but in a surprising reversal, a recalculation was done and the couple was cleared for entry. Moy had rallied support from prominent Indianapolis residents.
such as Charles W. Moores, a well-known civic leader, and Doctor E. C. Bachfield, a dentist who knew Moy well. But whether politics or a good-faith reassessment was responsible is unclear. After more than five weeks in detention, Moy and Chin were readmitted, and proceeded to Indianapolis to resume their lives in America.

Moy’s native land had visited an indignity on him in 1907. In 1911 it was the turn of his adopted country to humiliate him: it set out, for no apparent reason, to revoke his hard-won citizenship. The impetus came from Washington in 1909, when the matter was referred to the U.S. Attorney in Indianapolis. If cause could be found—a foregone conclusion, given the wording of the law—naturalization was to be rescinded.

Moy received word of the proceedings in his restaurant in August 1911. He dropped a dish and stared silently for several moments, the Indianapolis Star reported. “A look of anguish clouded his customarily smiling countenance. It was one of the saddest moments of his life.” The newspaper went on to report that Moy declared sadly, “It’s no use to buck Uncle Sam,” although few Chinese had a record of bucking Uncle Sam as long as his. “If they don’t want me to be an American, I’ll still be a Chinese citizen,” he said. “No, it’s no use to fight them—I haven’t enough money to do that, even if I wanted to.”

“Moy always has been regarded as a loyal citizen,” the Star declared sympathetically in a caption under a two-column portrait of him, “and his many friends are expressing regret that he may have to forgo the privileges of citizenship.” During his detention in Washington, it noted, Moy had declared himself a “citizen of Indianapolis, the best city in the country.” The love, it would seem, was mutual. Mayor Samuel L. Shank wrote President William Howard Taft, explaining that Moy, whom he had known for sixteen years, was one of Indianapolis’s finest citizens. It is known that Taft received the letter, but whether it was seriously considered is doubtful. Moy boycotted the court proceedings; there would have been no percentage in appearing in person to suffer a humiliating loss of face. On October 9, 1911, fourteen years to the day after it had granted it, the court revoked his citizenship.

The following year, Moy marked his sixty-fourth birthday with an elaborate celebration. Fifty friends were invited to his restaurant, which was pointedly decorated with Chinese and American flags. The court’s action notwithstanding, Moy still believed he was American. It was probably the last such gathering he enjoyed, however. On January 6, 1914, sitting at a table in his restaurant, he fell to the floor and was dead of a heart attack by the time the doctor arrived.

According to his obituary in the Star, he was the wealthiest Chinese in Indianapolis, his “fortune” estimated at $25,000. The article described the events of his life, focusing on his time in Indianapolis and conveniently omitting mention of his sojourns in New York and Chicago, both of which had ended unfortunately for him.

Local newspapers followed the story of Moy’s funeral arrangements voyeuristically over several days. The Star reported that Chin Fung knelt beside his body and chanted a death song. The Tipton Daily Tribune related how she sprinkled rice over his face to “rekindle the fire of life.” On January 15, the Star described Moy’s attire: “Moy Kee’s body . . . lies on a couch, the features preserved almost as naturally as though he were asleep. On his head is the cap that he wore as a part of the uniform. The cap is surmounted by the flowing peacock feather that is a part of the insignia of his rank. In one hand a fan, outspread, has been placed. In the other is held a folded paper, which, though blank, carries out the custom of providing the deceased with fare on his journey into the hereafter.”

American friends were permitted to call, and then a brief funeral service was conducted by an approximate Chinese equivalent of the Order of the Freemasons, of which he had been an officer. Chin Fung announced plans to depart a week and a half later to accompany her husband’s body back to China, never to return. Prior to her departure, Indiana governor Samuel M. Ralston gave her a letter asking that courtesies be extended to her on her journey home, a facsimile of which was published in the Star. She went to San Francisco, where, on January 26, 1914, she set sail for China, bringing Indiana’s former Mandarin of the Fifth Degree, once, but no longer an American citizen, back for the final time, to rest with his ancestors in Taishan.

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