

Admiral Cheng Ho's Lost Compass

by Marko Fong

When I was a child, Yeh-Yeh, my grandfather, reminded me nine times that the Chinese invented the compass. The last time, I lost patience with the story, “Yeh-Yeh, it's just a magnet, they occur naturally.”

“Lucky, you know Cheng Ho?”

“The eunuch admiral? He sailed to Cape Horn, first navigator to master the magnetic compass,” I repeated a line from the Encyclopedia Britannica that Yeh-Yeh made us read aloud over and over. At ten, I didn't understand what a eunuch was.

“Cheng Ho didn't go just Cape Horn; treasure ships visit Australia and America. His very advanced compass. Not just point north-south. Show east-west too.”

“Magnets don't point east-west, Yeh-Yeh.”

“Not just magnet, case made from dragon bones. Cheng Moslem. He pray Mecca five times a day. He had to know which way pray at sea to find his God. He know world round, look for eastern route Mecca. That why called Ameccans.”

“So what happened to the Admiral's compass?”

“Big storm. Cheng claim saw Buddha just before flagship find shore. He land then bury prayer compass in Californ. After Cheng see Buddha, compass no tell east from west. He go home by follow coast up Bering Sea and never find Californ again. Cheng Ho compass, the

one he use find God, he bury right here.”

Paperson, California, my home town, has the mysterious capacity to escape detection by authorities. My parents' generation called it “old-country superstition” until GPS revealed the genius of the town's builders. Paperson refuses to keep stable coordinates. Its latitude stays constant but the longitude twitches as much as 121 degrees. The most eccentric reading coincides with my grandfather's native Toisan, the district from which Paperson's builders also came. According to GPS, Paperson swings between the banks of the Sacramento River and Southeastern China several thousand times a day. It blinks too rapidly for the naked eye to detect.

As peasants in Toisan and as displaced-railway workers near Sacramento, the men who created Paperson knew how to go unnoticed. They had little book knowledge and no access to magic. If they had expertise in anything, it was in the art of being overlooked. Until 1875, what we now know as Paperson and the thousands of acres around it spent most of the year beneath the Sacramento River. After tying the coasts of America together with steel track, the same Chinese workers transformed the Delta mud south of Sacramento into farmland.

Their efforts earned them the privilege of toiling in orchards and fields they had made possible near Orchard Vista. Later, the Exclusion Act turned their successors into America's- first-illegal immigrants. For fifty years, any new Chinese worker had come to the Delta either with false papers or none at all.

When Orchard Vista's Chinese quarter burned in 1911, the residents seized their opportunity to move out. Dr. Sun's revolution had returned China to Chinese rule and it gave them confidence. They built five-hundred feet downriver acreage leased from Franklin Edwards, grower of the Emerald Water Pear. The variety, firm on the

outside and juicy on the inside, the first pear suitable for shipment by rail to the East Coast, had really been created by Bing Tang.

Bing was Edwards' orchard man and the second son of the inventor of the bing cherry in Washington State. His father returned to China after anti-Chinese violence in the northwest forced him into hiding. Edwards feared that his foreman would do the same unless he granted Bing's request for the ninety-nine-year lease. The Delta's Cantonese workers took refuge in Bing's town. Here, they could eat their own food, speak their dialect, purchase traditional medicines, and gamble without interference from American authorities. Because so many of its residents used false papers identifying them as the "paper sons" of merchants, scholars, or diplomats (the only legal Chinese immigrants), Bing jokingly named his town Paperson.

The understanding of the hidden properties of sunlight, soil, and water that went into making cherries reliably sweet and pears impervious to bruising certainly contributed to the town's mysterious ability to stay hidden from the authorities. One of Bing's first acts as Paperson's "mayor" was to plant a line of trees just above the levee to cast shade and shadow at strategic moments. Although Paperson is just five-hundred feet away, you can't see it from Orchard Vista even from the third floor of the Japanese Presbyterian Church built on what had been that town's Chinese quarter.

As Bing's-last successor, my grandfather, no horticulturalist, used his own techniques to hide Paperson. After he bought the land beneath the town in 1936 in my American-born grandmother's name, he tricked the title company. By using an 1882 map from prior to the completion of the dredging, he persuaded Delta Title and Trust to show Paperson as a skinny-triangular parcel off the Edwards Ranch. The actual-post-1882 shape of the Edwards lease was a rectangle. The map's quarter acre is really fifty acres. For sixty years, the town never appeared on even the most-detailed maps of the region and

my grandfather's gambling house stayed hidden in plain sight.

The wizardry behind Paperson goes beyond any of Bing or my grandfather's tricks. If one visits the now empty town for any length of time it becomes apparent that the town is not made from wood as much as it's constructed from shadow. When it came to shadows, the builders of Paperson were wizards. They understood that the mind casts the most impenetrable shadows, and they used mind shadows to turn their town despite its six-story-community center, fire house, newspaper, movie theater, four blocks of businesses and gambling house into a shadow hole for memory.

Maybe the generation of laborers who filled the swamp and built the levees sowed Paperson's capacity to elude both maps and memory into its soil. Maybe it was yet another Bing secret: old timers once talked about his selling a seedless mango in his grocery and then acting as if the fruit didn't exist.

I choose to believe that it's because Cheng Ho's broken compass is buried there. Whatever ferrous metal a magnet touches becomes similarly polarized. Last year, I drove past Paperson three times before I could recognize the town where I grew up.

Please accept these as the best directions I can offer.

