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My Experience with the Ron Bick Lee Collection as a Young Archivist

Introduction

The Ron Bick Lee collection was donated by the Lee family from Vancouver, British Columbia, to the University of British Columbia Library (UBC Library) in 2010. Ron Bick Lee, born as Yat Yee Lee (李日如) and known as Bick Lee, was a Chinese-Canadian pioneer who moved to Canada from China in 1910 and spent most of his life in Vancouver. He was well known as a successful businessman and a dedicated community leader. As a recent library school graduate, I was privileged to have the opportunity to work on this important collection as a processing archivist at the UBC Library in 2011.

The collection material spans from 1914 to 1994, almost a century long, and it mainly contains Bick Lee's personal correspondences, business documents related to his Foo Hung and Granville Greenhouse business, and documents pertaining to his community and political involvement. His correspondences with his families, friends, and business partners in China, Hong Kong, and North America depict his vast network.

Working with the collection was a valuable learning process. The physical processing stage was my first thorough encounter of the collection. By arranging items in the collection, I was able to conceptualize the types of materials in the collection. In the process of creating the finding aid document, I studied the materials in order to be familiar with its scope and content. The collection content portrays the immigration experience of Chinese Canadians in general as well as Bick Lee's personal life as a businessman, a community leader, and a member of his immediate and extended families.

As a young archivist whose own life experience has little overlap with Mr. Bick Lee's, it was challenging to grasp the background of some of his documents, understand part of his handwriting, and make connections among people in his vast network. However, these challenges motivated me to research more details in and outside the collection to gain a better understanding of Bick Lee himself and the special historical context he lived in.

This Chinese rare collection is a very valuable source of exploring the Chinese-Canadian history in the 20th century. Given the special historical context that Bick Lee and some of his relatives lived in, their correspondences in this collection also provide valuable insight into the economic, political and cultural dynamics in both China and Canada in the 20th century.

Observational research methodology, such as interviews, was employed during my research. I interviewed Mr. Leong Tung Lee (李亮东), Bick Lee's extended family member (his cousin's son), who now lives in the Greater Vancouver area. The elderly Mr. Lee corresponded with Bick Lee from the 1960s to the 1980s, and has been very close to the Lee family. I also had an

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opportunity to meet with two of Bick Lee's sons, Dr. Robert H. Lee and Dr. William Lee, for my archival project at the UBC Library. My personal communication with the elderly Mr. Lee and Bick Lee's two sons provided qualitative information to support my research arguments in this paper.

A Remarkable Life Story

Bick Lee, who lived a successful life as an entrepreneur and a community leader, has been a role model for several Chinese Canadian generations who strive to succeed in this new land. Born in 1892 in Ong Sum village, Toisan, Guangdong, China, Bick Lee was brought up in a scholarly family. His father Zuwu Lee (李竹吾; 秀才) and grandfather Zhongting Lee (李仲廷; 举人) were both scholars under the Qing Imperial Examination system (R. Lee, 1986). During his childhood in Toisan, Bick Lee experienced traditional Chinese cultural influences with high respect for knowledge and education.

According to Mr. Leong Tung Lee, Bick Lee's father passed away when Bick Lee was a teenager. Therefore, without the support of his father, Bick Lee did not have the opportunity to receive much formal education (personal communication, December 8, 2011). However, he never stopped pursuing knowledge on his own throughout his life. Several documents found in the collection contain his study notes of Chinese and English. One of them is a notebook of him summarizing the meaning of the different Chinese phrases (R. Lee, n.d.). Some handwritten documents from his later life also demonstrated his impressive English skills.

Bick Lee left his hometown for Canada in 1911, to pursue a better future across the Pacific Ocean. He first landed in Victoria, British Columbia, where he worked as a dishwasher for three years before heading back to China for a pre-arranged marriage set up by his uncle (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011). In 1914, Bick Lee married Gin King Choon (甄琼春) from a village near his own in Toisan, Guangdong. Two years later, Bick Lee went back to Canada without his young bride. The immigration restrictions in Canada at that time separated the couple for 12 years, leaving Mrs. Lee waiting for the reunion with her husband back in their home village community (W. Lee, 1992). Not until 1928 did Bick Lee finally find an opportunity to arrange for his wife to immigrate to Canada by purchasing a fraudulent immigration document (R. H. Lee & W. Lee, personal communication, September 9, 2011).

When Bick Lee moved to Vancouver from Victoria in 1916, he first worked at the well-known White Lunch Restaurant and Mr. Fong's On Hing Lung Importers for several years (W. Lee, 1992). In 1921, with the hope for a better life after the First World War, Bick Lee successfully gathered a few shareholders, including his brother and his cousin back in Hong Kong and China, and started his own importing and exporting business called Foo Hung Co. Ltd. In Cantonese, Foo Hung (辅行) means "supporting each other and walking together (辅协行进)," which revealed the joint-stock nature of the business (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011). The name also spoke to Bick Lee's dedication to helping others in his own family and the

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local community throughout his life. In 1933, Bick Lee purchased another business, Grandview Greenhouse Ltd., and successfully operated it while maintaining Foo Hung during the Great Depression (W. Lee, 1992).

Bick Lee celebrated his 100th birthday in 1991. Many organizations and individuals sent him congratulatory messages. His legendary success story was praised by his families, friends, business partners, and community members (W. Lee, 1992). Media coverage, including newspaper articles and interviews, also documented his centenarian celebration. Bick Lee passed away on December 22, 1994 in Vancouver, at the age of 104 (Davis, n.d.).

As I was processing the collection as the archivist, I was continually amazed by how well Bick Lee organized his own documents. He kept all his correspondences arranged by the person he corresponded with and organized them in chronological order. His way of keeping the documents in the collection shows his meticulous working habit, which I believe was one of the main factors contributing to his success. Bick Lee was also a very hard worker. His children recalled that they only had the chance to see their father for two hours on Sunday every week (R. H. Lee & W. Lee, personal communication, September 9, 2011).

The Family Business

Foo Hung was a family business with two branches: Foo Hung Hong Kong (港庄) and Foo Hung Vancouver (云庄). Foo Hung Hong Kong was operated by Bick Lee's brother Yick Bun Lee (李奕彬) in Hong Kong. From the 1920s to the 1960s, before Yick Bun passed away, Bick Lee had numerous correspondences with him regarding their business, family issues, and other miscellaneous matters. In each letter, they exchanged ideas about many different issues. These letters contain valuable insight into the different societal dynamics in Canada and China at that time. People's life stories described and discussed in these letters also interweaved a microcosm of that special historical context in Vancouver, Hong Kong and China.

Foo Hung was operated under a simple business model: Foo Hung Hong Kong bought and exported Asian goods to Foo Hung Vancouver for its wholesale and retail business among the Chinese community in Western Canada. Foo Hung's catalogue listed commodities such as Chinese herbs, tea leaves, canned food, cooking oil, beans, daily necessities, ceramics, stationery, Mahjong, etc. (Foo Hung, 1937). This is a representative set of common household items demanded by the Chinese community in Western Canada at that time. Foo Hung's business model seemed straightforward, but given the limited communication channels available between North America and the Far East in the early 20th century, it required efficient operational techniques and good business discipline to run such a large-scale international business across the Pacific Ocean.

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Bick Lee and Yick Bun primarily used letters as the communication channel for their business operation. Bick Lee kept both the incoming letters as well as the carbon copy of his outgoing letters to attain a complete set of their correspondences. At the beginning of each letter, Bick Lee and Yick Bun would include the dates when they received the last letter from the other party and when that letter was originally written by the other party. This meticulous working habit helped prevent miscommunications between the two business branches.

Bick Lee and Yick Bun used telegraphs to communicate in urgent circumstances. They also developed a special numerical coding system to represent their commodities for efficient communication (Foo Hung, 1958). In one Canadian Pacific Telegraph message, they used thirty characters to describe a message which essentially meant that the government prohibits the export of wheat flour packages whose retail price is nine dollars per package (Y. Lee, 1948). Largely due to its efficient communication model, Foo Hung set up a successful example of the early international commerce and trading between Canada and China in the 20th century.

Yick Bun and Bick Lee also exchanged business information in their correspondences. For example, in one letter written by Yick Bun to Bick Lee in 1949, he suggested the purchase of winter clothing when the weather was still warm and there was no winter clothing in the inventory (Y. Lee, 1949). In another letter written by Bick Lee in 1946, he mentioned that the retail business was going through a tough time because of the cost increase after the Chinese Civil War as well as the retail price control of the Canadian government (Y. Lee, 1946).

In terms of purchasing large quantities of merchandise, Foo Hung Vancouver used money orders issued by major Canadian banks such as RBC and Bank of Montreal as payment to Foo Hung Hong Kong. The money orders were in Canadian dollars which could be drafted as Hong Kong dollars at HSBC branches in Hong Kong or Shanghai (R. Lee, 1947). There is a copy of an RBC bank draft found in the collection, with exchange rate between Canadian dollars and Hong Kong dollars being 0.2395 on December 16, 1977 (R. Lee, 1977). Documents related to business transactions in the collection are valuable materials to study the trans-regional trading between China, Hong Kong, and Canada at that time.

Bick Lee also corresponded with various suppliers in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other parts of China for business enquires. Their correspondences often contained business catalogues of the different merchant suppliers. For example, Shanghai Commercial Press had retail business of stationery and calligraphy-learning booklets with unit price less than one Chinese dollar at that time (R. Lee, 1927). Invoices of Shanghai Sun Ling Company also show that they sold commodities such as children's rockers, regular chairs, lunch baskets, and armchairs to Foo Hung (Foo Hung, 1927). Some suppliers even sent Foo Hung their samples as advertisement. The kind of products they discussed about in the letters and the content of these correspondences could serve as a unique source to study the booming retail industry and people's life in China in the early 20th century.

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Foo Hung's business partners and customers spread all over Canada. Buyers from across the country corresponded with Bick Lee to enquire about his products. Some sample customers included China Trading Co. from Toronto, Goldbridge Laundry from Goldbridge, British Columbia, Canada Café from Empress, Alberta, and Shanghai Restaurant from Winnipeg, Manitoba (Foo Hung, n.d.). The vast business network of Foo Hung also proved the widespread movement of the Chinese population in Canada in mid-20th century.

Foo Hung also ran a so-called mini-bank for the Chinese community in Western Canada. The mini-bank functioned as a money ordering service for Chinese immigrants and workers to send money to their families in China. These money orders usually covered a small amount of money, mostly hundreds of Canadian dollars, and no more than a thousand dollars (R. Lee, 1947). Foo Hung also sold Canadian National Railway Express Money Orders for their Chinese immigrant customers in Western Canada (Foo Hung, 1935). These activities of the early Chinese immigrants and workers in Canada revealed their strong ties with their families across the Pacific Ocean.

Foo Hung stayed in business for fifty years. It survived the Great Depression and the Second World War because of Bick Lee's good business sense and the ongoing support he gained from his community network. One of Foo Hung's catalogues mentioned that the business was in a relatively good condition compared with others during the Great Depression, thanks to the constant customer support from the local community. Foo Hung thus decided to lower their retail prices to repay their customers (Foo Hung, 1935). Bick Lee also purchased a nursery business, Grandview Greenhouse Nursery located near Grandview Highway, in order to support his Foo Hung business during the Depression. His good financing abilities helped him collect enough capital for this new investment in a short period of time, and the new business turned out to be very successful during the rough economy (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

Because of Bick Lee's hard work and good management skills, Foo Hung became one of the leading Asian goods suppliers in Canada shortly before the Second World War. Soon the War suspended the communication and transportation between China and Canada, which cut off Foo Hung's source of supply for several years. Bick Lee also lost contact with Foo Hung Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in the 1940s. In this difficult economic and political climate, Bick Lee quickly adjusted his business model and switched to sell rattan furniture instead. The even more successful business later made Foo Hung the biggest supplier of rattan furniture and household items in Vancouver (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

Community and Political Involvement

Besides his successful career as a businessman, Bick Lee was also well-known as a community leader. He was the chairman of the Lee's Association in North America for one term and was

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always very active in helping his clansmen over the years (W. Lee, 1992). As a strong supporter of education in the local Chinese community, Bick Lee donated a property to the Vancouver Chinese Public School for its reconstruction project and served as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees for many years (W. Lee, 1992). Bick Lee was also involved with and served at several associations, such as the Chinese Merchants Association, Toisan Benevolent Society, and the Chinese Social Development Society. As recognition of his remarkable contribution to the local community, Bick Lee was recognized as a Vancouver Centennial Distinguished Pioneer by the City of Vancouver in 1986 (City of Vancouver, 1986).

Bick Lee was also actively involved in politics and was recognized for his devoted service to the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) over the years. He became a Kuomintang member around the late 1920s and the early 1930s, inferred from an award certificate issued by Ching-kuo Chiang to Bick Lee for his fifty years of service (Chiang, 1982). Bick Lee was appointed to several key positions within the Party from the 1930s to the 1950s, including the executive commissioner of the Kuomintang League in Canada (Kuomintang, 1950), and the legislative commissioner of the Legislative Yuan at that time (Kuomintang, 1947).

During the Sino-Japanese war, Bick Lee participated in various war bond drives to raise money to support the Chinese army. As a result, several organizations presented certificates and awards to Bick Lee for his contribution to the war effort (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011). These documents and certificates provide research materials for Kuomintang-related overseas activities during wartime. They also show that the Party widely established overseas leagues during the political turbulence from the 1930s to the 1950s, in order to gain the overseas Chinese's support for its economic and political positions and causes.

Family Connection

Bick Lee provided generous support for his relatives back in China throughout his life. He made an effort to help his relatives immigrate to Canada over the years. In many of his correspondences with his relatives and extended family members, Bick Lee tirelessly explored opportunities for them to immigrate to Canada. He was very hands-on in connecting his relatives with others in his network. In Leong Tung Lee's letters to Bick Lee, he asked Bick Lee for help in gaining the ownership of Foo Hung Hong Kong after Yick Bun passed away, in order for him and his family to immigrate to Canada (L. T. Lee, 1977).

Representing the people and the home community in Toisan, Leong Tung also asked for Bick Lee's financial support to build a water tank for his home village (L. T. Lee, 1978) and an auditorium in the local middle school (L. T. Lee, 1980). Bick Lee generously donated the money to support these projects, and his contribution to his home community was well received and remembered by his people. This is a typical example of how overseas Chinese kept strong ties with their hometowns and communities over the years.

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Every New Year, Bick Lee arranged to send money to different family members and relatives back in Toisan and other parts of Guangdong, and he also kept records of the expenses on file (R. Lee, 1994). His relatives regularly wrote thank-you letters to him and his wife with family updates. Bick Lee referred to the donation as “New Year candies,” which was a nickname for red pocket money (R. Lee, 1994). The financial support he generously provided for his relatives was sometimes a lifeline during the economic hardship in China.

Bick Lee’s nephew Leong Yee Lee (李亮仪) also corresponded with him over the decades. In his letters, he mentioned several major social movements in China from the 1950s to the 1970s. In one letter he wrote in 1965 he talked about how capitalism was greatly repressed in the nation. He was also being mistreated himself because of his capitalist-class family background (L. Y. Lee, 1965). Leong Yee described the social events involved with the Class Struggle (阶级斗争) in China at that time, which were to eradicate the entire capitalist class in the country (L. Y. Lee, 1965).

In another letter written in 1966, Leong Yee mentioned the Cultural Revolution and related societal outcomes of that movement. Bick Lee’s property in Guangdong was also being forfeited by the government because of its rental status (L. Y. Lee, 1966). The information contained in these correspondences is a valuable source to study those major Chinese social movements in the 20th century at a grassroots level.

Personal Life

Mr. and Mrs. Bick Lee were a very harmonious couple according to their families and friends. The couple celebrated their fiftieth golden wedding anniversary in 1964. When Mrs. Lee passed away in 1973, Bick Lee was too heartbroken to attend her funeral, and he never visited her grave (L. T. Lee, personal communication, December 8, 2011). Mrs. Lee was a remarkable woman in many aspects. Being a virtuous and traditional Chinese woman, she waited for the reunion with her husband for 12 years in their home village community. Mrs. Lee stayed with and took care of her mother-in-law during those 12 years, and they became very close friends (W. Lee, 1992). After she came to Canada to be reunited with her husband after the long separation, she bore seven children to Bick Lee in nine years. She was a loving and devoted mother who “had a lot of common sense and the courage to put the common sense into practise” (W. Lee, 1981). Today, their children and grandchildren still carry Bick Lee’s legacy of success in the local communities.

Conclusion

The Ron Bick Lee collection is now a designated national cultural property in Canada approved by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board. The correspondences, business documents, certificates, photographs, and newspaper clippings in the collection are unique resources to study Chinese-Canadian history in the 20th century. Bick Lee’s documents related to

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his community and political involvement give us an overview of the societal and historical setting he lived in. His personal correspondences with his families back in China provide very valuable sources for us to study some major Chinese social movements in the 20th century.

Acknowledgement

I give my special thanks to Mr. Ron Bick Lee's family, who donated this valuable collection to the UBC Library and generously provided financial support for the archival project that I worked on. I also integrated in this paper the information I gained from my meeting with Dr. Robert H. Lee and Dr. William Lee in September 2011. Eleanor Yuen, the head of the UBC Asian Library, gave me much valuable insight about the collection and made the initial introduction to the Lee family for me. Also through Eleanor, I contacted Mr. Leong Tung Lee for information about Bick Lee from a relative's perspective. The elderly Mr. Lee graciously accepted my request and invited me to his residence for the interview in December 2011. The archival processing stage took place at the UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC). The RBSC head Ralph Stanton, the archivist Sarah Romkey, and the library staff there offered me a great deal of support. My sincere gratitude also goes to Lise Doucette and Nikisha Moise who helped review my paper and David Wang who visited the UBC Library twice to search for materials for my research while I was not present in Vancouver.

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