

JEROME IN ACTION: NO FEAR

Seeing Doc Lawler “in action,” leaves us with a real sense of what he stood for, and we can use the same approach to better understand Jerome Shen. While Jerome never negotiated with labor management, he did twice negotiate his way out of Shanghai. In 1945, he fled with his wife and children to Chungking to escape the expected Japanese occupation, and in 1949 he returned from the United States to bring his family out of China as the communists were about to establish control of the government. If any two instances in Jerome’s life had to be picked out as the defining moments of his life, these would without question be them. These experiences of violent uprooting are at the heart of the Jerome Shen story.

Four years before Jerome led his family out of China to the United States, the Japanese occupation of Shanghai provided a practice run for the escape he would later plan from the communist army. In 1945, the Chinese Nationalist government was facing a serious challenge from the invading Japanese army. Japanese forces had taken the former capitol of Nanking, forcing the head of the Nationalist government, General Chiang Kai-shek, to move his government and military headquarters to Chungking. In Shanghai, Jerome and others in what he felt was a “younger generation” sensed that the future of the city wasn’t very bright. Not as patient as their parents, young adults like Jerome felt they should flee the city before the Japanese overran it. Also aware that his physician skills would be in high demand by the Japanese military, Jerome decided to move his young family to Chungking. Agnes Shen encouraged Jerome to leave, but his father counseled more cautious behavior. John Shen’s fortune was tied down to Shanghai,

and he didn't want to risk losing his wealth by fleeing to Chungking. It was Agnes' vision, however, that resonated with Jerome.

With help from a banker friend of his wife Theresa Yao's family, Jerome organized a small group of ten people to travel to Chungking. Chungking was the desired destination because there, Jerome and his family could receive military protection from the Nationalist army. Jerome's father-in-law was also doing business there, and he would be able to help Jerome find lodging. With a six-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter, the move was also important because the good grade schools had already moved from Shanghai to Chungking. The move made sense for all these reasons, and in the summer of 1945 the road to Chungking was filled with "all younger people." Jerome, his wife Theresa and their children Jerry and Elizabeth traveled with their nucleus of Shanghai friends, and with seven servants from the Shen estate. While some of the distance was covered on horseback, the Shens walked the majority of the trip. The children were often placed in a wheelbarrow, sometimes sharing space with a pig Jerome brought along for trading.

The trip to Chungking took about three months, and in the tense military atmosphere there was no shortage of excitement. Jerome and his family could not take much with them on the journey, and Jerome's plan was to disguise themselves as merchants. At one point along the way, the Shens ran into a Japanese soldier out on patrol. In what Jerome felt was an act of human kindness, the soldier saw the young Shen children and chose not to stop them for questioning. While this incident with the Japanese soldier didn't escalate, Jerome found other ways to get himself into trouble. One night, a group of travelers stopped at the shore of a small body of water. It was a popular rest stop, and in addition

to Jerome's small group, a number of other people were eating dinner. While resting, two teenagers in a boat were trying to cross the water. Before they could get very far, however, a set of servants from a group other than Jerome's hit them and took the boat. Displeased with what he saw, Jerome got up and hit one of the servants back. It wasn't the best tactical decision. The other groups outnumbered Jerome's group ten to one. Before he knew it, Jerome found himself surrounded by a large number of angry people, some of whom were yelling "I'll kill you." Already weary from traveling away from home, the rest of the larger group wasn't too interested in defending an upstart young doctor. Theresa Shen thought her husband might really lose his life. Jerome, however, was too excited to be fearful. After bargaining with the crowd circled around him, it was agreed that instead of killing Jerome, they would make him pour tea for everyone else. Pouring tea was considered the ultimate degradation, and for Jerome to pour tea to servants was a big disgrace to someone of the Shens' social status. Disgrace, however, was better than death.

Just as the trip to Chungking was about to end, Jerome learned that peace had been declared and that the Japanese had been defeated. The Shens continued on to Chungking, but once they arrived they found that everyone was eager to get back to Shanghai. Peace with the Japanese meant that Shanghai was once again the place to be. One historian estimated that "the influx of returning Chinese refugees beginning in 1945 probably boosted the population to its highest total in the city's history."ⁱ

This demand for return passage to Shanghai created long waits for many, but the Shens didn't have to wait long because Jerome maneuvered himself to the front of the line. Employing a trick that he would use again later, Jerome found one of the ship

captains and explained to him that he was a physician and that the ship captain needed a doctor on board his ship. One can imagine the scene on the dock, as Jerome bargained with relentless energy. Although speculative, it wouldn't be hard to believe that the ship captain gave Jerome tickets to Shanghai partly because he did indeed want a doctor on board and partly because he just wanted Jerome to shut up and get out of his way. Either way, Jerome's bargaining resulted in a quick trip back to Shanghai.

In Shanghai the Japanese were gone, and the city was trying to rediscover its past glory. For John Shen and the others who stayed in Shanghai, it seemed as if the older generation had been right to stay at home. Perhaps Jerome had been too hasty in his decision to flee. Jerome's impulse to leave Shanghai was correct, but it was five years too early. It wouldn't be until 1949 that Jerome would leave Shanghai for good. Between 1945 and 1949, Jerome made his first trip to the United States. For two years, starting in January of 1947, Jerome studied pediatrics at St. Louis University Medical School. Jerome stayed in touch with his family by writing letters, and his vantage point in America allowed him to see that a communist occupation of Shanghai was imminent. Jerome also knew that he didn't want his wife and children growing up with Mao Zedong governing China. Jerome felt there was only one thing to do. He would bring his family out of Shanghai to the U. S. For Jerome and his family, what followed in the year 1949 reads in many ways like a Hollywood-type script: a young, adventurous immigrant must leave his family to come to the United States; he then sees that his family is in danger; he returns to rescue his family from communism and bring them to democracy. And, like in a movie script, Jerome needed some Hollywood-type miracles: the enemies had to look away at just the right time and all his gambles would have to come out winners.

When Jerome returned to Shanghai, he had only ten days before Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist troops forcefully occupied the Shen estate. Before dealing with the communists, Jerome found that the Nationalist troops weren't interested in being very friendly either. In the ten days before the occupation, Jerome scrambled to get some important passport information. He ended up hiding it away inside the first page of a family album, and there it rested safely until the Shens made their escape. Though the Nationalist guards didn't find the passports, they did tear up much of the Shen estate. The once-beautiful dining room table was cut up for military purposes, the smell of human feces filled the yard and the soldiers stayed up late being loud and enjoying mahjong (a Chinese game played with tiles.) The occupation lasted about three months, and the continual late nights of noise finally drove Jerome to confront the soldiers. One night, while the soldiers were playing, he approached them and suggested that they shouldn't be playing mahjong after midnight because it kept the children up. Chiang's soldiers became extremely angry with Jerome, who had both interrupted their game and directly confronted them in a manner they weren't used to. The rest of Jerome's family was afraid that the soldiers would retaliate for Jerome's insubordination. To try and avoid problems for the rest of the occupation, Jerome's father and wife worked hard to restrain him from interacting with the troops. Jerome stayed upstairs with his family, while the soldiers lived and worked on the first floor. When anything exciting would happen below, and the Shens could hear it on the second floor, Jerome's dad made sure to hold his son back, telling Jerome, "You're not going anywhere."

Life during these three months of occupation was extremely stressful. The communists knew that the Nationalists were hiding out in the Shen houses, so they would

often fire bullets toward and into the house. Chiang's troops slept in the house and on the grounds, and there were tanks parked in the back yard. Since the Shens had so many guest beds, a number of soldiers made their temporary homes where the Shens had once entertained honored guests. There were frequent bombings, and every time a bomb dropped, the family ducked down and the kids became very scared. Jerry and Betty didn't go to school, so Theresa had to watch over them all day. It was not an easy situation to live with. Occupation by the Nationalist government eventually ended when Mao's troops seized full control of Shanghai on May 27, 1949, but four days before the official victory, Jerome knew the communists were going to win. If he wanted to get his family out, he would have to act before the communists were able to set up a strong security net. As with the Japanese, Jerome's services as a physician would have been in high demand by the communists. If he waited too long, he would never be allowed to leave the country.

To organize his escape, Jerome worked with his in-laws, the Yao family. Jerome's own father and brother didn't want to leave their homes and businesses, which were rooted in Shanghai. The Yaos, however, decided to sell their houses and move their business. Theresa's brothers T.C. and Michael and her sister Dora were already in Hong Kong, looking to get to America. Still in Shanghai, Jerome turned to the same nucleus of people who had made the journey with him to Chungking. Their first plan was to fly from Shanghai to Hong Kong on a chartered plane. They made their reservation for Saturday night, May 22, 1947, but they were never able to get on board because the plane was taken by officials and used for another purpose. Because of the late plane cancellation, Jerome's options were extremely limited. He could feel the communist presence

beginning to assert itself in the city, and waiting much longer intensified the risk. How could Jerome get his family to Hong Kong?

The answer, reached with help from the Yao family, was to take the first boat from Shanghai to Hong Kong. It wasn't clear to everyone in Jerome's party that it was wise to take the first boat. Wouldn't it be smarter, they suggested, to wait and see how the first boat fared? Jerome, however, viewed things differently. Sensing the communists were going to be shutting down transportation from Shanghai, Jerome wanted to take advantage of the confusion. Because their victory was still fresh, the communist troops had not yet fully set up their check points. Acting on his instinct, and not on the advice of friends, Jerome bought tickets to Hong Kong.

The decision to flee to Hong Kong was not supported by Jerome's father. With Agnes Shen no longer living, it was a difficult decision for Jerome to leave his father and the Shen estate. John Shen's position was not without merit. He had lived through a number of political revolutions, and Mao's movement must not have seemed as threatening to him as to Jerome. John had also seen Jerome flee to Chungking four years earlier, only to return immediately to Shanghai. It made sense for John Shen not to leave behind the power, privilege, and wealth that he enjoyed in Shanghai. But Jerome, after spending two years in the United States, felt that leaving Shanghai was his only option. Despite the risks and the costs of leaving behind the Shen estate, Jerome was confident that he was right. Once Jerome decided he was right, no one could talk him into changing his mind.

Sunday, May 23 was Pentecost Sunday. Theresa Yao went to Mass at 8:00 am, while Jerome was making final preparations for their journey later that day. He hid jewelry in the family album, and after saying goodbye to his father and uncles, he took Theresa,

Jerry and Betty aboard the boat scheduled to leave for Hong Kong. Once on the boat, the Shens had to wait for the communists to run an inspection of the passengers. This was the most crucial moment of the trip. The communist soldiers were checking passports and citizen papers, and were detaining anyone whose paperwork was suspicious. Because Jerome had been in the United States for two years, and hadn't received updated citizen papers from the Chinese government, his papers were a different color than they were supposed to be. He was in a very vulnerable position, and if they inquired about his background as a doctor, he would surely join the eleven people already detained. The scene for the check was a single large room in the bottom of the boat. Everyone was seated around a number of wooden round tables, and two communist soldiers carrying bayonets were walking from table to table checking papers.

For someone in Jerome's position, the story should have ended here. One of the communist soldiers should have spotted his different colored papers, started asking questions, and immediately realized that this man was not only a wealthy land-owner leaving the country, but also a doctor who could be put to good use back in his native city. Given the odds against it, how was Jerome able to get past the communist guards?

The answer is that no one knows, but he did. Just a few tables away from the one where Jerome and his family were seated, the two communist soldiers stopped checking citizenship papers. Jerome was in the clear, but he could never figure out exactly why he had been so lucky. Perhaps the soldiers were tired, perhaps they had been given instructions to let the rest go, or perhaps, as Jerome later hypothesized, it was the "work of the Holy Spirit." For such a pivotal moment in his life, it might seem strange that Jerome had so little control over its outcome. Jerome had been lucky. But Jerome had

also put himself in a position to get lucky. His series of decisions – to travel to America, to travel back to Shanghai, to leave the Shen estate behind – were necessary steps he followed before being graced on the boat. In order to bring his family to Hong Kong, Jerome had to combine luck *and* talent. On the next leg of the Shen's journey, from Hong Kong to America, Jerome demonstrated that talent when he orchestrated a boat trip through a characteristic mix of resourcefulness and insistence.

When the Shens arrived in Hong Kong, it seemed as if all of their fellow passengers already had plans. They asked Jerome where he was staying, but he didn't know; he hadn't had time to set anything up. To solve the problem, Jerome turned to one of the few documents he had been able to carry, a letter signed by the Shanghai Medical Association which instructed him to investigate public health for the government. He knew that there were two government hotels in Hong Kong, and since the Laster Hotel was already booked, he turned his attention to the Hong Kong Hotel. He asked for the manager, showed him the letter, and talked long enough to convince the manager that he was someone important and worthy of a room. The manager said they had no rooms left, but would Jerome like a suite instead? And so one night after being in the bottom of a dark boat, Jerome finagled his family into a fancy suite with a bedroom, sitting room, and a study. Jerome pulled his next coup when he had his family on a boat for America four days later. This was remarkable, given that the average time for people waiting to get to America from Hong Kong was several months.

After the hotel, Jerome and his family stayed for a few days at the apartment of one of Jerome's classmates. Jerome's classmate was afraid they would be there for a long time, but Jerome was making sure that didn't happen by negotiating with ship captains.

Jerome once again suggested to the ship captains that they needed a ship doctor, so they should take him and his family on the trip. To bolster his case, he also showed them a book from SLU Medical School which listed him as an “Instructor.” Jerome argued that he had to get back immediately because he needed to arrive before school started. Within four days, Jerome was able to secure passage on a ship. His medical services were actually needed because one of the passengers had a case of the measles, and several others became ill. In July 1949, Jerome, Theresa, Jerry and Betty sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge and into the San Francisco Bay. When they came through the turnstiles and stood for the first time as a family in the United States, Jerome would have looked like any other new Asian immigrant. But had anyone heard his story, they would have known better.

ⁱ Murphey, Rhoads. *Shanghai: Key to Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953. 21.