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A LAUNDRYMAN SINGS THE BLUES

Sin Jang Leung

Translated by Marlon K. Hom

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *This narrative, an autobiography of a Chinese laundryman in New York City, is an abridged version of an oral history project originally undertaken by Judith Luk and Yuet Fung Ho of the New York Chinatown History Project under the direction of Charles Lai. Professor Jeffery Chan of San Francisco State University offered numerous valuable suggestions on editing the translation from its Chinese original.*

Leung's autobiography provides excellent glimpses into the "bachelor society" of Chinese America before the sixties. Leung led the lifestyle of a pampered number-one son of a Gold Mountain family in Toisaan (Taishan), China. After arriving in America, however, he became a struggling laundry worker in Chicago and New York. Instead of achieving success, he contracted tuberculosis and ended up as a down-and-out gambler in New York Chinatown. His failure mirrors that of countless Chinese male immigrants who came to America during the period of Chinese exclusion and were therefore deprived of a normal family life. These men were overwhelmed by loneliness, illness, poverty, and despair. Contrary to the prevalent "model minority" myth and the exaggerated Chinese American success story, the American dream of the "bachelor" Chinese American before the sixties remained a dream.

Sin Jang Leung died in the spring of 1985 in New York. For an excellent study on Chinese American laundryman, see Paul C.P. Siu's 1953 doctoral dissertation, The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation *(New York: New York University Press, 1987).*

ONE day I received an American birth certificate and a "coaching book" from a Gold Mountain agency in Hong Kong.[1] My father, who was a laundryman in Chicago, sent them to me. I was delighted. I told everyone I would be going to America. I went to see my good friend, Lee, a physiognomic expert, and asked for a thorough evaluation.

Lee said, "I don't think you should go to America."

"Why not?" I asked. "America is the Gold Mountain! What can go wrong?"

"It's just not for you. It's your destiny. You'll be better off if you go to the southern seas instead of the northern ones. A lot of people think you should go to the United States, but your birth sign says you shouldn't go."

"Well, then," I told him, "I'll just go to America for a few years. When I save enough money, I'll go to Southeast Asia."

In those days children of Gold Mountain families thought that once they made it to America, there would be gold for them everywhere. So I made up my mind to go to the United States.

A NUMBER-ONE SON IN A GOLD MOUNTAIN FAMILY

I was born near the end of the Manchu rule. My family was well off. When I was born, my father had already crossed the ocean to Gold Mountain. Father returned home only once every ten years. He was in Seattle when he learned that a baby had been born into the family and that Grandmother had given the baby the name of Sin Jang [God-like Growth].

As a young lad I had no idea what Father looked like. I only knew that he sent money home from Gold Mountain. Mother hardly mentioned his work overseas; Grandmother would only say that my father was in Gold Mountain to get rich.

My grandfather had also gone to San Francisco as a prospector earlier. But some prospector he was! He worked the abandoned claims. He did return to China in his thirties with some gold dust for my grandmother to buy land. After Grandfather passed away, my uncle sold his share of the land that he inherited and came to America. Father got married and stayed home as a farmer. He didn't come until Uncle had enough money to get him over years later.

Father had six brothers; he was number three. His first brother died; the second brother was adopted into the paternal granduncle's family. Thus Father became the number-one son of the family and I, the number-one grandson. Well,

Grandmother spoiled me badly. She took care of me and let me have everything I wanted. She always took me to the marketplace on market days. Sometimes she would give me a couple of coins. Well, that was a lot of money! I would buy candy and peanut cookies, stuff them in my pocket, and munch them while she shopped. But Grandma was very frugal herself. I remember her meals – she only had a tiny salted fish on her rice. She always smelled it first and then ate a mouthful of rice. The stove in the kitchen was made of bricks. When Grandmother cooked, she would place a container of water alongside the stove. Then she would use the warm water to wash her face. That way she saved on firewood.

My mother was very strict with me. She never hit her daughters, but she beat me all the time. Sometimes I didn't even know why. I couldn't really blame her. If she made me some new clothes, I would ruin them in no time!

Father only sent money home once or twice a year – for Chinese New Year or some festival. The remittance would be enough for the children to go to school and for the family to go shopping at the marketplace which was open once every five days to sell fruit, fabric, and other luxuries. Most people couldn't afford what they wanted to buy anyway. They were farmers without any money. Those who had money were the Gold Mountain families. They could afford to spend a few dollars a month and were considered very rich. These women were called *Gamsaanpo* [wives of Gold Mountain men].

Although Toisaan [Taishan] was a large county, it was too close to salt water and had very little alluvial soil suitable for farming. You couldn't get rich by farming. Most times you would not have enough to eat.

There were bandits in Toisaan, all hiding in Dai Lung Dung [Big Cave] where the county government had lost control. In the days during the Republican period, bandits kidnapped people for ransom. They would kidnap returnees from Gold Mountain in particular because these people were thought to be rich. When the victims were ransomed, the bandits would demand that the family spend money for this much opium, that many undershirts, and so on.

We were scared to death of the bandits. They always came at midnight. When the bandits from Big Cave were closing in, we could hear them coming. Bang! Bang! Bang! They would break through the gate and enter a village. Then they would raid the next one. Afraid that our adjacent village would be next, we sent people over to warn each other: "The bandits are coming! Arm and be ready!" The villagers would mobilize against the raid. Once we were warned and

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prepared, the bandits would not risk moving towards us. They would hurriedly round up their kidnapped victims and retreat.

Many villages built guard towers as high as three or four stories. These were concrete structures with steel reinforcement. No way could bandits get through. Our village was quite affluent and we had four of these towers: one in front, one in back, and one each on the two sides.

Men took turns for sentry duty at night. As I grew older, I volunteered to stand the night watch. I carried two guns – a handgun as well as a shotgun – and five belts of ammunition. Well, I think village raids were usually an inside job – an informant who knew the village probably let in the raiders.

I went to school from the age of eight until I was fifteen. There were over thirty students of different ages, all boys. In those days we paid our annual tuition to the teacher with four or five pecks of rice. We paid respects to Confucius before we began the school year. The teacher made sure that all the students would attend the ceremony.

I learned brush writing and read the *Three-syllable Classic* and the *Book of Poetry*. We had to thoroughly memorize the pronunciation of each word although we didn't know its meaning. Well, I was quite intelligent in those days. I could memorize a very thick text. When I read, I had to do so loudly. Reading in a low voice was not allowed. I concentrated better in the early mornings. I studied in bed, reviewing the sentences one by one, such as "practice as you learn," "friends come from a faraway place" .... I memorized them all. By afternoon, however, I would begin to fool around and lose my concentration.

Well, the teacher never did explain the meaning of these texts. I just memorized "Confucius says," "Mencius says," and that was it. Years later, Mother always screamed at me: "I've sent you to school for seven years; what have you learned?"

"Not a thing," I retorted. I only learned how to read popular novels. In fact, there was a huge star-fruit tree by the side of our house. It bloomed all the time. I usually put a canvas cot by the tree where it was bright and cool. When a breeze came, the branches rustled in the wind. Right there, I read my vernacular novels, one after another. First, *The Roster of Immortals*, then *The Romance of the Vassal States in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty*, then *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. I read stories about the struggle to found the Han dynasty, on how Hong Yu [Xiang Yu] bade farewell to his favorite consort, and on how Lau Bong [Liu Bang], the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, mercilessly executed Hon Seun [Han Xin], the warrior-general who helped him establish the empire. . . . All historical romances.

When I was young, I couldn't read the letters from Gold Mountain. As I grew older, I didn't like it when Grandmother and Mother scolded me. "What's the use of sending you to school! You can't even read a letter! Here, your father has sent a letter home. Hurry and read it, and see what he says." Sometimes I couldn't understand part of the letter; I hurriedly read out how much remittance was sent and made my escape. Father's letters were all the same: "I am sending such-and-such amount of money home. Divide it up among everybody: one or two dollars for close kin, the rest for family expenses." Father never gave me a penny; and I never wrote a letter to him, not even once – I didn't know how to write a letter on my own. My teacher said to me, "I've taught you for so long. How come you can't even write a letter?" He would write a draft and tell me to copy it; but I could never remember what I copied.

I remember Father returned home when I was ten years old. One day, on my way home from school, someone in the family stopped me from entering the house, saying, "Don't go in yet." It turned out that my father had just returned from Gold Mountain. Since he wasn't home when I was born, I couldn't go into the house. I had to wait outside until he came out to call me in. It was a village custom; this was to say he's now finally met his son for the first time.

I went to Hong Kong at fifteen for school. It was an old-fashioned Confucian academy. It was no fun and I quit. My rich uncle in Hong Kong suggested that I could study in Canton and report to him on my progress. I took out my suitcase and started packing; then Uncle appeared and said, "Forget the whole thing. Canton is full of Communists. Too many students join the Communist Party and Chiang Kai-shek has rounded them all up. Why don't you stay here and study English instead? At Yukchoi Academy, you'll still have a Chinese class daily. When you graduate, you can get a certificate to go to Canada." In those days, if you finished English school, you could pay three thousand dollars for a "certificate" to go to Canada. Well, Canada was Gold Mountain too!

I attended the Yukchoi Academy in the Central District and I was also an assistant in Uncle's store, which sold dried seafood. Later I was called home to the village to get married. That ruined everything. The wedding lasted for nearly two months before I returned to Hong Kong. By the time I got back, my classmates had advanced to the upper class. I had to repeat the class; I didn't want to go to school anymore.

The rigid Confucian code of conduct in the village prohibited the freedom to choose a wife, calling it a disgrace. I couldn't do anything about my marriage; I wasn't the head of the house. Grandmother and Mother made the decision. It was an extravagant wedding because Father was in Gold Mountain. Several thousand dollars were spent. There were banquets for ten days! I had never met my wife before the wedding. It was on the second day, after we paid our respects to our ancestors, that she unveiled herself and I finally saw her face. I kept my normal composure, but inside I told myself, "She isn't pretty!" Well, I couldn't care less. Even today I still don't know much about her. I was away from home most of the time. If I didn't like what was going on at home, I'd just go gambling in Canton, Macao, or Hong Kong. I didn't really stay home.

Uncle treated me well in Hong Kong. But I wanted to leave his store. I wanted to become a cab driver, but Uncle said driving was too dangerous. I wanted to learn sewing, but Uncle said sewing wasn't a man's job. Actually it would have worked out great if I picked up sewing before I came to America, since it was a common job here. Well, Uncle wouldn't let me drive or sew, and I wouldn't let him run my life. I returned to the village, but I spent my days gambling at the *faantaan* and *paigau* tables in Toisaan City.[2]

A person always had beginner's luck. That's what happened to me. I won all the time. I went to every gambling den in the city; everyone called me a rich boy. Later I became partners with a good friend who was a *faantaan* dealer. We rented a storefront and began our own *faantaan* operation. I went home and asked Grandmother for start-up money, telling her that I was opening a Western tailor shop. Well, Grandmother gave me three thousand dollars in silver.

A gambler led an easy life. In the city I ate whatever I liked and did whatever I wanted. I went home to the village only once in a while. When we didn't have the cash to pay off our customers' bets, I would go to Grandmother for a few thousand dollars. Because I had money, I was really the boss, and whenever I talked, people would listen.

I never repaid Grandmother. Her only wish was that one day I would go to Gold Mountain because going there was like planting a money tree! Practically everyone in the village was poor. The ones who had any money and business in Hong Kong were those with money from Gold Mountain. Therefore, everyone wanted to go to Gold Mountain. Mother and Uncle wanted me to go too. Ever since I was a child, I figured that one of my numerous relatives in America would eventually get me over.

At that time Japan had already occupied Manchuria and the Japanese Kanto Army was creating many problems for China. I kept up with the news from Canton, Hong Kong, and Macao. Most of the able men in the village had left for overseas. I figured I couldn't stay home too long. Right at that time Father bought a document for my entry into America. Father had come to the United States with a labor certificate that did not allow him to sponsor his family to come. The birth certificate Father bought for me belonged to a young gambler who had the same surname. Father figured that it should be suitable for me. He spent one thousand dollars on it and I had to pay him back in installments. In those days a birth certificate sold for over one thousand dollars. Later it would cost several thousand.

Mother had never given me any money before. When I was about to leave for America, she gave me a *leisi* ['lucky money' in a red envelope], saying, "When you get there, work hard and send money home!" My sister said the same thing. They knew I was a good-for-nothing who spent money like water. Now they all prayed that I would support the family. Relatives made all kinds of pastries for me. My maternal aunt also wanted me to remind her sojourning husband that life was hard at home and that he should send more money home. All my friends in Toisaan City wished me good luck and told me to earn plenty of American dollars.

I didn't dare say goodbye to Grandmother. My wife held onto my clothes and pleaded with tears in her eyes. She seemed unable to take the parting. What could I say to her? I couldn't say anything. I was hardly home all those years. My children hardly recognized me as their father! I didn't have a favorite among my children; I never spent any money on anyone nor had I favored anyone. Still, I didn't feel good about leaving them behind. I hurriedly turned my head and took off, telling myself, "When I reach Gold Mountain, they'll be the young heirs of a Gold Mountain man."

I left Seungjaak [Shangze] village and went to Toisaan City by bus. From there I took the train to Bakgaai [Beijie]. The train ride lasted from morning to evening. Then I took a boat to Hong Kong. When I stopped over in Macao, I gambled until I lost most of my money. With only a few hundred dollars left in my pocket, I quietly continued to Hong Kong.

Uncle's agency bought the steamship ticket to America for me. It cost ninety-five Hong Kong dollars. Uncle wanted to see me off, but I wouldn't let

him. Once aboard, I was wondering, "After reaching the United States, when will I be able to make it home again?"

A NEWCOMER TO GOLD MOUNTAIN

In the old days people looked up to returnees from Gold Mountain. Even village children sang a ditty:

O Man from Gold Mountain,
O Man from the Flowery Flag Nation,
If you don't have one thousand dollars,
You'll have at least eight hundred.

Everybody thought that once you came to America, you had it made. Well, I came to America by boat in 1937. It was in the summer, the sixth lunar month, and it was very hot. Many of my fellow countrymen were on board, cooped up in the steerage class below deck. Among the passengers were some returnees to Gold Mountain. They had exhausted all their savings during their home stay. They were returning to America without any money, so they took the steerage class.

On board were also three or four women from Toisaan. They remained inside the women's cabin, which was at the far corner of the steerage cabin. I never saw them come out of their room.

The voyage took over twenty days. We arrived in Seattle. After their documents were checked, the old-timers were allowed to go ashore. We newcomers carried our own luggage and followed the immigration officials to another place. Young and old, forty of us were cooped up inside a living quarter at the immigration station. There were two separate spaces housing all the immigrants.

I heard that several people had been detained by immigration for three or four years. Some were supposed to be deported because they had failed to pass interrogation for entry to America. But the war was on and they couldn't be deported back to China. So they were allowed to go ashore instead. Several others were caught when they illegally crossed the border into the United States; they were also locked up at the station. Inside the living quarters, words of complaint were carved on the wall, protesting the discrimination against Chinese.

Our movements were severely restricted inside the Seattle immigration station. For example, we had to stand in line to wait to be taken to have our meals. We ate at a long table and guards watched us from both ends. We were not allowed to send any messages outside. Guards watched the kitchen, suspicious of the cooks who might smuggle messages for the detainees. If you wanted to buy some candy or what-have-you, you had to write down the request ahead of time and ask the cook to buy it and bring it in. For clothes, or anything you might need, there was a catalog with nice illustrations. But when you ordered, the product was not always what was pictured in the catalog.

The Seattle immigration station was located in a remote area. From the windows you could see Seattle's skyline—hills on top of hills. I wondered then, is this how America really looks?

The immigration interrogators consisted of two men and one woman and a typist. The latter transcribed every sentence of our deposition. A man surnamed Chan was the translator. I hit him once when he asked me something that the officer hadn't even asked. I said to him, "Mr. Chan, what's this? Why are you asking me those questions that the officer didn't ask?"

He said, "You want to die?" I took my shoes and hit him on the head. Well, he didn't dare translate for me after that; someone else took his place.

I was asked about the number of houses, the direction of the houses, and whether or not there was a fish pond in the village, and many other things. After the interrogation, I waited three months. I didn't know I'd made a mistake; I didn't realize what I had said wrong. Later I was told that I was denied entry. How could that be? I memorized the coaching book for months. Finally, Father sent several hundred dollars to a lawyer and I was released.

I went to a place called Lai On Agency in Chinatown. Dad had made arrangements with them. The agency had an apartment and I stayed there for almost a week. I found there was a lottery in Seattle Chinatown and the winner could get up to ten thousand dollars. I lost several dollars on the game from the hundred dollars Dad sent me for my train fare to Chicago. Well, the people from the agency got me to the train station quickly after that!

It took two days and two nights to go from Seattle to Chicago. When I arrived, there wasn't much I could say to Father. He knew that I was a gambler and I didn't have a decent job at home. What else didn't he know about me! "You've wasted too much money in China and you don't know what hardship is!" He said to me, "From now on, you'll work until you die!"

"So I'll die," I retorted. "If you can hack it, so can I! So be it!"

A NOVICE IN A CHINESE LAUNDRY IN CHICAGO

The morning after getting off the train, Father took me to the laundry store owned by a cousin and there I began my life of hard labor.

Laundry work in Chicago was difficult! You did everything. You sorted and marked the soiled clothes. One day you washed; the next day you ironed. You must finish all the work for the day. As a newcomer, I was told to do it all.

Everyday I put the clean laundry in a box. Just like the fabric peddler back in the village, I shouldered a box loaded with clean laundry for delivery. Chicago was an honest city then. We left the clothes on the customer's doorsteps and no one would take them. Customers would also leave their soiled laundry there for us to pick up. I would put down my laundry box, wrap the soiled clothes into a bundle, and tie the bundle to my waist. Then I would proceed to the next delivery or pick-up point.

Sometimes along my route, I picked up firewood for the iron stove. There were no electric irons in those days. Irons were heated on a stove. We rotated the heated irons along the edge of the stove as we used them. I'd pick up wooden crates in people's yards. By the time I returned to the store, I would have bundles of clothes tied to my waist and be carrying a laundry box filled with firewood for the stove!

As an apprentice I learned how to wash, how to mix three different textures of starch, how to use a large brush to scrub shirt collars. Every day I worked until two or three o'clock in the morning and then went to bed. City ordinances disallowed living quarters in a laundry and inspectors came to check on that. So when I woke up, I hid the folding bed in the drying room or beneath the ironing table. Before dawn, at six in the morning, the alarm clock would rouse me out of bed. If I didn't get up early enough, I wouldn't be able to finish the day's work. As I struggled to get up, my head was so dizzy, spinning around as if I hadn't slept once during those few months. I felt like I had just gone to sleep and the alarm clock would wake me up. I had only three hours of sleep every day. "Hell, the way this is going, I'll die for sure." I told myself, "This line of work is so filthy and dirty! So unsanitary!"

Father would scream at me for that. "Everyone is doing that. Has anyone died from it? Who do you think you are? You think this line of work is meant for everybody else but you?"

Back in the village we learned that laundry was called a *yiseung gwun* [clothes shop]. The English on the envelope was "laundry," but we didn't know it meant "washing clothes." Before I came, I always thought it was a store where people sold or tailor-made clothes! Only after I arrived and worked at my uncle's laundry did I realize what "laundry" really meant! In China my rich uncle never talked about it. But I did remember his fingers were all deformed. I was told later on what happened to them; he fell asleep while ironing and ironed over his own fingers! When I left for the States, he did say to me, "When you get there, you'll find out what hard work is really all about!"

In those days everybody thought you had it made once you came to this country of gold. Who expected this life in America? It would have been better for me to take my chances with the bandits or the soldiers back in the village! Suffering like this in a laundry in America? I really didn't want to work in a laundry, but what could I do? I was a newcomer. I didn't know the language. Where could I go? With the war going on, I couldn't even go back to China.

I made two dollars a week when I first started working. By the third week I was paid four dollars, and by the seventh, seven dollars. I worked in my cousin's laundry for a year before moving over to my father's. After working with Father for a few months, I wasn't paid, not even when I needed to send money home. Father gambled my wages away. Once he left me with a coin – a quarter! I told myself, "I can't go on like this."

I heard New York was a good place to work. So I thought about leaving Chicago. I waited until I figured I'd saved over a hundred dollars in back wages. Then, one Saturday morning, Father went gambling. I asked his partner about paying me. That fellow said, "I am not in charge of that. Ask your own father!" I told myself to forget it and the hell with it. And I left. I rode a Greyhound bus for two days and two nights straight to New York. I never saw my father again.

A PROFESSIONAL LAUNDRYMAN IN THE BIG APPLE

I arrived in New York in the winter of 1938, near the end of the year. I got off at the bus terminal at 42nd Street, took a cab, and went to a hotel. I stayed there for almost a week before I went to see my maternal aunt's husband. His

laundry was on Broadway around 170th Street or something like that. I took a cab and told the driver the direction. Well, my English was bad. He took me to 170-something Broadway. I told him it was the wrong place. Then I showed him the written address and he said, "You mean Broadway and 170th Street!" and he took me there.

My aunt's husband was a partner in the laundry with three other people. I asked him to find a hotel for me. He said, "Hotel? You're a big shot or something?" He took out a blanket and told me to stay at his clan brother's place at 103rd Street temporarily.

The laundry was located in a basement, about ten steps down from the sidewalk. Looking up, you could only see the heels of people as they walked by. But the laundry business was good. It was in the most affluent section of the West End neighborhood.

Well, I had to start all over in New York. A clan brother noticed that I was good at ironing and he recommended me to a laundry on 9th Avenue and 82nd Street. I made seventeen dollars a week there. Every morning, before dawn, I walked to work; it was several bus stops. I wanted to save the nickel fare. Every night I walked home to sleep. The weather was very cold. It was not an easy living.

I found New York was better than Chicago. Although you could make more money as an owner in Chicago, you had to do everything. Here in New York you could send clothes out to the wet wash. That way you would have enough energy to do other work.

In those days my routine was that: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were wet wash days. The wet wash people had keys to the store. Early in the morning they delivered the washed loads, several hundred pieces. When I got up, I would check the delivery. I had to sort the shirts and prepare the starch and then straighten the collars for starching. Next was drying the washed laundry in the drying room. I sometimes sent work out to be machine pressed. The rest I prepared for ironing. To do that, I filled a container or plastic pot with water and sprayed or sprinkled water on the clothes. For some of the shirts I had to use a steam roller on the collars, cuffs, and the two front panels of buttons and button holes. After that I would iron.

After ironing, I sorted the clothes according to the marked labels on the ticket receipts. I stacked the sorted laundry on the ironing table, wrapped the bundles, and attached the ticket to each bundle, and put them on the shelves

ready for pick-up. My wrapping was always very neat; some people wrapped laundry sloppily and made it look like an ugly bag of garbage.

The shop picked up soiled laundry from customers too. We would be carrying a huge and weighty load of bed sheets, towels, and what-have-you. It was torture collecting soiled laundry. But once outside the laundry, you could take it easy: nobody knew how you spent your time. If you worked in the store, you had to work all the time.

The shop was narrow and cramped. Every night I worked until two o'clock. Whenever I heard the bells of the horse-drawn milk wagon pass by, I would hurry and spread out the bedding to go to bed. There was hardly time to eat! Sometimes I just ate some bread. The uptown laundries had food delivered by caterers. They delivered it by car, all kinds of food, roast pork, sausages, whatever. It was rather expensive, of course.

We did not know much English. Even if we wanted to learn, we had neither the time nor a place to go to learn. The only place was the Christian church. Since we could only find work in a laundry or a restaurant, we only needed to know a few essential phrases. In a laundry you would say "good morning" in the morning, and "thank you" when the customer paid. In a restaurant you had to know a bit more or you could make a fool of yourself. There was this joke: Once there was a customer in a restaurant who asked a waiter for an ashtray. The waiter went into the kitchen and told the cook, "One order of *ashtray*!"

White boys picked on Chinese laundrymen. Sometimes they aimed their sling shots at our store windows. Once during Chinese New Year's Eve, I had just finished sorting the dirty laundry and was about to go to Chinatown to celebrate the New Year. A few white boys passed by my store after a church dance. Two of them hurled a slop can at me through the side door. It missed me but smashed the front window. They ran away, and I had to sweep up the broken glass.

When I was in Chicago, I didn't know about such prejudice against us Chinese. I learned this in New York. It is still so now, and I don't know how long this will continue. Well, no matter how nice they may appear on the surface, we can't be too sure because we look quite different – our eyes, hair, forehead, everything!

During the period of the Chinese exclusion, you couldn't sponsor your family over. There were very few Chinese women in Chinatown. On Sundays you might see a few women shopping in Chinatown, but they left as soon as their

shopping was done. Once in a while you might see a laundry with a family inside. They would use a board to partition the store; the children played behind the board while the adults worked outside.

In those days many men went back to China to get married. They stayed home for a while before returning to Gold Mountain. Once they saved enough money, they would go back to China to visit their family again. They worked year in and year out in a laundry. They wouldn't gamble away their hard-earned money. They wouldn't step out of the laundry. If they ever went to Chinatown, they would just shop for food to last them for the rest of the week. Some grocery stores offered free bags of shredded tobacco to their customers. These people would take the freebies back to the laundry and that would last them for the entire week!

Not many Chinese married whites in those days. But nobody really cared if you were seen with a white woman. It was nobody's business. At 42nd Street, some white women would talk to me, tapping me on the shoulder, saying, "Hello, honey!" Sometimes when I got out of the subway station, they would size me up. Usually I ignored them. But sometimes one would grab me to buy them coffee.

Once I went uptown to see a picture show with a white girl. She learned that I had some money and borrowed a few tens from me, saying that she would pay me back the next day. She bought herself a coat before we went to the movie. Well, she never paid me back!

I did live with a white woman for a while, a Polish Jew about my age. Like me, she had a fight with her father in Detroit and came to New York. I told her, "Don't interfere with my life, and I won't interfere in yours. This would be in our best interest to keep it that way." I was working at a shirt press at that time; I didn't go home often. Once in a while, I bought half of a chicken in Chinatown and took it to her. At that time I already had tuberculosis. However, she didn't care. She hugged and kissed me anyway. When I was hospitalized, she came to visit me in the hospital once and left some money for me. Someone took it. After I got out of the hospital, she found me and I moved to 80th Street with her. She didn't work, but she had enough money. However, she never gave me any money because she knew I was a gambler in Chinatown.

We ate regularly at Ching Yat Sik Restaurant. We went to Times Square on holidays. We went all over together. Sometimes when we rode the transit, she would hold on to my arm. White people would stare at her and she would loudly curse them, "What's there for you to look at? I like him!"

She had insomnia and took sleeping pills all the time. They took their toll. Once she fell asleep while riding the train with me. She must be dead by now, probably from an overdose of sleeping pills.

I knew her for a long time, maybe eight or ten years. Her name was Frances, and she always called me Honey.

A LAUNDRYMAN'S VIEW OF NEW YORK CHINATOWN

In those days New York Chinatown was just four square blocks. There were all different kinds of stores and it reached out to Bayard Street. However, nobody dared go near Mulberry Street because the Italians would beat them up. Italians treated the Hispanics and blacks the same way too. "Little Italy" was their territory. Even members of the On Leong Tong didn't go in that direction. When the Chinese got off the train on Third Avenue, they walked along Doyers Street instead.

Chinatown had two big tongs, On Leong Tong and Hip Sing Tong. When they fought each other, the whites called it a "tong war." There was a theater in the tall building at the corner of Bayard Street. When there was no fighting, members of the different tongs were all there peacefully enjoying the show. Whenever fighting erupted, two words, "hurry back," would be flashed from the projector in the midst of either a motion picture show or a Cantonese opera performance. That was a code cautioning tong members to leave the place immediately.

People were killed in some of the tong disputes. However, during the Sino-Japanese War, the tongs worked together to raise funds to fight the Japanese invasion in China. During that period the tongs in all cities were at peace with each other.

I became a member of the On Leong Tong. When you joined the tong, you took an oath before the image of Guan Gung, declaring, "I shall come to the aid of my tong brothers, no matter what." You see, brothers of the tong were like the limbs of your own body. After the oath new members were given a *leisi* with a quarter inside. As a member, if you wanted to do or say something, you could get the tong people to support you. Otherwise, you wouldn't stand a chance. However, I later found that the tong's ideas didn't fit my way of life and I stayed away from the tong.

Heroin addicts used to hang out in front of the Chinese Benevolent Association Building, which also housed the Chinese school. You would be sick to your stomach at their listless appearance. Those who could not afford drugs would sit idly in the sun. They never even had enough clothes to wear. When the five-dollar bags of drugs were available, they would pool their money together and come with a few dollars for a bag to divide among themselves.

It was easy to get drugs in Chinatown. I think someone at the basement cafe at 10-something Mott Street sold it. That place served baked clams, prime ribs, and wine. The owner was Italian, a fat guy, real big and tall. Even the police detectives often went there for take-out food. They would ask him to point out a few addicts so they could meet their arrest quota. Some addicts would volunteer to be arrested when they ran out of money and couldn't support their habit. They bargained with the cops for twenty dollars before the arrest. What was amazing was that the cops would negotiate and offer fifteen.

For the addicts jail meant at least a place to stay and something to eat. What a tragedy. But then, what was there for an addict to do? He would be lucky if he kicked the habit by the time he got out of jail. He could find a job in a laundry or restaurant. But when work got to him, he would end up on drugs again. Actually you needed a lift to forget the hardship at work and the drugs could work wonders. But you would need it more and more. And you were hooked again.

A LAUNDRYMAN DOWN AND OUT

People were drafted into the armed forces during the war. I was the only one left in the laundry. I closed the shop and went to work at a shirt press shop on Jerome Avenue. It was the first and only machine press in New York. I was getting seventeen dollars a week, which wasn't bad. At the machine press I made twenty. Later I also took care of the boiler at night and cooked for the crew for twenty-five a week.

The machine press was hard work. Two people worked around one press machine—the master controlled the front end of the machine, pressing shirt collars, cuffs, and the two front button panels of the shirt, while the assistant pressed the sleeves and the back. It was like a torture chamber for everyone. We always had a towel over our shoulder to soak up the sweat. We were always drenched.

But business was good. Laundry stores had to wait their turn to get their shirts from us. Some would even tip the dispatcher to get their orders pressed first. Pretty soon some workers would get lazy. They would use the iron instead of the shirt pressing machine. Sometimes they got way behind schedule and couldn't finish the work on time. Finally the owner decided to pay us by piece. That was clever—workers who usually did a hundred shirts would now do four hundred. All the work went out on time.

I was pressing shirts all day in the shop. It was hard work. Finally I became ill. One day I started throwing up blood.

I shared a bachelor's apartment on Mott Street with a dozen or so people and we used it as a gambling hangout. Everyone went there. The laundry boss also went there to hire his workers. When I became sick, I stayed there most of the time. In the beginning we usually played mahjong. Later we had *paigau*, poker, and blackjack. At that time no one dared to operate a gambling den; we were the first. Pretty soon the news spread, and many people showed up for the games.

I got arrested for gambling. My employer from the shirt press bailed me out the next day. Another time I sensed something and got out in the nick of time, just before the cops came.

Over a thousand dollars passed through my hands daily. I made a lot of money. But I didn't keep it all for myself. I'd reserve several banquet tables at South China Restaurant for everyone. On slow nights I might only make a couple of hundred dollars. But as long as I had money, I'd treat people at South China. I had lots of friends; I was a nice guy and they were all on my side. If I were just a bit late, many people would start asking for me. They called me "teacher" because I dressed like a gentleman.

After Pearl Harbor we all had to report to the draft board. I reported to the station at 23rd Elementary School in Chinatown. Like everyone else, I took an X-ray there. A doctor called me in and said, "You are very ill."

I said, "I know." Right away he wrote me a note to take to the Board of Health for treatment. I went there with someone who would interpret for me. Many people were waiting for treatment. I wasn't called the first day, and I had to wait in line the next day. For several days I waited and waited, and I still wasn't called. I gave up finally and went back to work at the shirt press. But I couldn't keep up anymore because I was getting sicker.

At first the draft board classified me as a 1B, then a 2B, then a 3B, and finally, a 4F; I didn't have to serve because I had tuberculosis.[3] I was in New York for only two years and I had TB! I felt like I was doomed.

Tuberculosis could be cured by a gas treatment then, but it was risky. You had to sign a release form before the treatment because some people died on the spot. I wanted none of that. I went to see a German doctor. He had a Chinese translator surnamed Chew. Many Chinese went to him and he charged only three dollars a visit, quite inexpensive. I went to him once a week for a period of time.

Finally, my body could not hold on anymore. I threw up blood. I went to the police station at Elizabeth Street and they took me to Bellevue. I was there for two years before they transferred me to Manhattan General Hospital for discharge.

When I left the hospital, the doctor said, "Make sure you come back later for follow-ups." However, I didn't know my way and never went back. When I came out of Bellevue, I didn't go back to 74 Mott Street. I figured that people wouldn't like my going back because of my illness. So I lived in an apartment at 72 Mott instead. In those days people in rooming apartments were frightened by the mere mention of tuberculosis because it was a communicable disease. So I never mentioned my illness to anybody, not even to my co-workers at the shirt press shop.

I felt much better after the treatment. I went back to work, taking care of a laundry in Jackson Heights. It was rather easy work. Sometimes I could even take a nap during the day. When customers came for their clothes, they just woke me up. I would tell them to find the packages themselves. Usually I sorted the soiled laundry at night when there were no interruptions. Once in a while cops on the beat would come to the laundry. They watched me sort clothes while they hid inside for a cigarette.

I went to Chinatown for some games usually once every two weeks. I would gamble away on *faantaan* and *paigau*. I just didn't know when to quit. Sometimes I would lose every single penny. Well, I wasn't into anything else. In those days gambling was the only game in town. Even if we took a boat cruise up the river, it would just be a pretense for gambling. We didn't go ashore. We just stayed on the boat and gambled.

After I came out of the hospital, gambling dens were everywhere. Rumor had it that the vice officer from City Hall owned several buildings – bought with bribes from the Chinese. All the tongs and clan associations had their own dens.

You could go anywhere to play. These operations welcomed everybody – laundrymen, restaurant workers, and so on. The games would start as soon as people showed up.

Usually there would be someone sitting downstairs by the doorway at the street level, pretending to sell newspapers or something. There would be another door upstairs with a glass window. People upstairs wouldn't open the door unless the person downstairs gave them a signal to do so. These places did not let whites in because that might lead to a police raid.

There were lots of gamblers around, trying to find work in these dens. Some worked for large clubs, such as Tou Yuen, Lee Yuen, New York, et cetera. These places were open twenty-four hours a day. In their heydays there were over thirty gambling dens in Chinatown alone. The big ones had two people working on a table; one took care of the betting money on the table, the other one dealt. Six people rotated on a one-hour shift. When they were on break, they had to stay in the club and wait for their shift. In some private clubs you could work any hours you wanted. Well, people like me could make our living working in these gambling dens. It was much easier than working in the laundry.

You weren't paid much dealing at gambling dens, but people gave you tips when they won. You could make quite a lot of tips. Some days I made over twenty dollars in tips alone. Sometimes when I dealt them a good hand, they would tip me twenty dollars just like that.

There was a popular private club at Bayard Street. I always played mahjong there. The owner said to me, "If you must rent a place to stay, why don't you just stay here?" Well, I ended up having my room and board there. This owner was fluent in English; he had worked as a translator before. He could handle the police detectives when they showed up. Still, he was arrested several times. Well, some people thought I owned the place because I was there all the time. A lot of money changed hands through me, but I wasn't the boss.

There were times I won over a thousand dollars in one hand; just as often I lost the same way. I constantly tried out different gambling strategies, hoping to win big, so that I could have enough to return to China. When I first started gambling, I figured that if I could win a dollar a day, I would have ten dollars in ten days, and so forth. I tried chain betting, thinking that as soon as I had several thousand dollars saved up, I would be ready for home. Well, you could win a lot doubling up, but you got wiped out just as quickly too. I tried again and got creamed again. Then there were always those who were just plain lucky. They

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stuck to mahjong for several months and won enough to go back to China as a successful returnee from Gold Mountain! I never had that kind of luck.

There were the other kind of people who never gambled, of course. Well, I remember when I worked at the machine press, many workers suffered through everything. No matter how boiling hot the machines were, they just kept on working. Their minds were set on earning enough money to go home. They worked fast and spent nothing. After a few years they saved over ten thousand dollars and returned home.

War had broken out when I arrived in the United States; news from home stopped. I heard many people died of starvation back in the village. After the war ended, someone from my village told me, "Your family's gone!" I told myself, "So they're all dead; so be it. There's nothing I can do about it." Besides, I had tuberculosis the second year I was here. I knew my days were numbered. If I were healthy and wealthy, I would of course cherish the hope of returning home and taking care of the family. But I couldn't even take care of myself here; how could I take care of my family? I knew everyone had it tough at home, but there was nothing I could do. I hardly wrote home. No need to write if I couldn't send money. It would only make us all miserable.

Many years later someone told me that my family was not dead and that they had moved out to Hong Kong. At that time, I was ill and did not have any means of support. Even though I knew their whereabouts, I couldn't do anything about it.

In 1968 I met Lee Mou in New York. We grew up in the village together. He learned that I was a down-and-out gambler in Chinatown. He said to me, "How could you end up like this? Look at you! Back home you were a prince, the Gold Mountain family heir. You've come to Gold Mountain, but look at you now!"

I told him that I still had tuberculosis, but I couldn't afford to see a doctor. I couldn't work either. When I needed to find a place to sleep, I usually went to an all-night den and took a nap on a bench or a sofa, until someone woke me up. I would get up and leave.

Lee Mou said, "We could rent an apartment and stay together." Lee and I didn't have any money, but we managed to find an inexpensive place for ourselves.

There was a tenant in our apartment who was very helpful. Once I asked him for information on welfare assistance. He reported my case to the Office of Social Security. Someone came to me and asked many questions about my

illness, to see if I was under any medical care. That person also wanted to make a copy of my citizenship certificate. I told him, "This is a government document and no one is allowed to copy it."

He said, "I work for the government." Well, soon after that I received a Medicaid Card. I didn't know there was such a thing as welfare. Nobody told me about it.

Well, my health is getting a little better. For the last two years I have been able to go places with a walking cane. Still, I don't want any friends to come visit me. I am ashamed of myself. Everybody has come to Gold Mountain; so have I. But look at me:

Suddenly, I am awakened, decades later,
from the Gold Mountain Dream;
What do I get for the forty long years?
A body in poor health,
A life of infamy.

Notes

1. During the period of Chinese exclusion and until the fifties, a Chinese American who filed for immigration sponsorship had to be interviewed by the immigration office. The Chinese Americans called it hau gong (a deposition). Various tedious questions would be asked and all answers would be transcribed, kept on file, ane would be used to ask/interview the prospective new immigrant. Mismatched answers would be detrimental to the latter's chance of getting permission to enter America. The sponsor who was interviewed in America would do his best to remember all the questions and answers. He would then send this information, detailing all the questions and answers, to China for the prospective immigrant to memorize in preparation for the latter's interview. This information is commonly known as the hau gong bou (deposition book) or "coaching book."

2. Faantaan (turn over and display) and paigau (arrangement in nine) are popular games of chance among the Cantonese people. Paigau is a game of dominoes. Faantaan is a simple counting game. In a faataan game a dealer takes a handful of coins or beans and counts them off four at a time, until four or fewer coins/beans remain. Gamblers bet on "odd" or "even" and from one to four. For example, if there were three coins/beans left, those who bet on "three" and "odd" would win. This is the most common game because the gambling apparatus is simple and can be improvised easily. Another popular game is mahjong. Like bridge, it requires four players and is a time-consuming game; thus, it is popular among social clubs and associations. Gambling dens that cater to fast-paced gambling games such as blackjack, poker, paigau, and faantaan would not operate mahjong tables.

3. The Selective Service System, commonly known as the draft board, was charged to induct physically qualified young men for at least two years of military service. It used four numerical

categories of classification to determine the eligibility for military service of young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six, from immediately eligible (1A) to physically ineligible (4F). In between are categories that postpone or exempt a person from military service: hardship, sole surviving son, college education, agricultural work, et cetera. Criticized for protecting the rich and the privileged who could seek various deferments to escape military service while the poor and less fortunate were drafted, this system was amended in 1968 during the height of the Vietnam War. In its place a lottery system that determined eligibility by one's date of birth was instituted. In the early seventies, the United States Congress mandated the Armed Forces to become all-volunteer units and the draft system was no longer enforced. However, young men reaching the age of eighteen are still required to register their eligibility.

A GOLD MOUNTAIN MAN'S MEMOIR

Yuen Tim Gong

Translated by Marlon K. Hom

EDITORS' NOTE: Hua Xian, or Fa Yuen in Cantonese, is a county north of Guangzhou in Guangdong Province, with emigrants in thirty nations all over the world. In the United States, Hua Xian people are concentrated mostly in California. Since most originated from a small area in the county, the group had great cohesiveness.

Early Hua Xian immigants were mostly unskilled workers, particularly in laundries and on farms. Around the end of World War I some learned butchering skills and began to open meat markets in rural towns in Central California. After World War II many meat markets expanded into groceries and then supermarkets. By the mid-seventies supermarkets owned by Hua Xian people were a part of many rural towns, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

The autobiography of Tim Yuen Gong tells the particular experience of one person. However, this narrative of Gong's trials and tribulations as he struggled for economic and social betterment is also a reflection on a personal level of the development of the Hua Xian people in California.

Titling and sub-headings are done by the translator.

I came from a family of poor peasant background for three generations. In the third year of the Haamfung [Xianfeng] reign [1853], some 135 years ago, great-grandfather Chin Sing moved with his three sons, named Lei Song, Chai Song, and Ding Song, to a place approximately one mile northeast of the ancestral Lokcheung village. He built three crude houses there and named his new home the Longwu [Dragon Lake] Hamlet.

They had a place to stay, but no means to live on. So, Great-grandfather leased over ten *mu* of rice fields from the landlord at Dukhing Ranch to support

the entire family through farming. Lei Song, my grandfather, followed his father's footsteps and continued to farm on the leased field. Grandfather had lots of children—eight sons and five daughters—but hardly any money. When the children were young, Grandfather had to feed so many mouths with no one helping in the fields. A year of hard work yielded some thirty baskets of grain, half of which would be paid to the landlord. It was really a hard-luck life for everyone.

My father, Man Dak, was also like his father; he had seven sons and five daughters but no money. He, too, farmed those ten-plus *mu* of rice fields. I could never figure out how he made ends meet. My older brother Yik Hau went to school for only a couple of years. Well, he had to take care of the younger siblings and tend after the water buffaloes. It was really hard work.

COMING TO GOLD MOUNTAIN

When I was eight years old [1913], our paternal uncle Chaap Kuen sponsored Older Brother Yik Hau to come to Gold Mountain. After that, we received remittances from America and I was able to attend school for eight years. In the ninth year of the Republic [1920], when I was fifteen years old, Older Brother Yik Hau had me come to Gold Mountain under the "paper son" practice [as a United States citizen]. On New Year's Eve that year, I left for America on board a Japanese ocean liner, *Shunyo Maru*. The journey of perilous wind and waves lasted for thirty-one days. I reached First City [San Francisco] in February 1921 and was detained at the [Angel Island] Immigration Station for two days.

Economy was bad when I landed; I couldn't find any work. It was not until April that year that I finally found work ironing clothes at Hop Lee Laundry. There was a rule at the laundry: a newcomer must apprentice for twenty weeks. When you were an apprentice, the laundry fed you, but you didn't get paid. After that you would become a regular worker. I endured those 140 days before I began to earn ten dollars a week.

In 1923 the Hop Lee partners, all ten of them, saw that I had been a hard worker. Besides that, I was the only person at Hop Lee with a driver's license. Hence they made me a partner; I was in charge of pick-up and delivery. We kept our books on the laundry this way: Each Saturday evening we tabulated the income and expenses. We would divide whatever amount we made into eleven shares. Our earnings varied weekly—sometimes each of us cleared twenty or

thirty dollars; sometimes only a few dimes! At any rate, I calculated my total 1923 earnings to be less than five hundred dollars.

A HOME-BOUND GAMSAAN HAAK

By 1928 I was twenty-three years old and had been in America for eight years. I wanted to return home to China for a visit. I taught a partner to drive in order to take care of the pick-up and delivery. Then I prepared for my homebound journey. I had saved, including the coins in my pants pockets, only $450. I spent $85 on a boat ticket and, through a lawyer, over $10 for an exit permit. In addition, I made out a money order for $1,000 in Hong Kong dollars so that I would have money for my return fare from Hong Kong. At that time, the exchange rate was U.S. $1 to $5.70 in Hong Kong currency. So I spent U.S. $175 for that money order. I also bought a Western suit for $30, and a pair of leather shoes for $3. After all these expenditures, I only had a little over $100 left in my pocket. Yet I went home "triumphantly" with that much cash on hand!

I reached home on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month in 1928. Two weeks later I had a benediction banquet and invited all my friends and relatives for a feast. While everyone was having a wonderful time, I was counting how much money I had left—less than one hundred dollars! I racked my brain trying tó figure out what to do from then on. I figured that if I avoided all socializing by returning to school for perhaps a year with Mr. Yim Geng of the Lik Bui Village, I could save whatever I had left. I kept this game plan to myself and didn't share it with anyone.

A HOMESTEADING GAMSAAN HAAK

I returned to Gold Mountain in February 1930 and had to work like a mule all over again. But there was a labor dispute in the American steamship company at the time, so I couldn't get return fare to America. After much rushing around in Hong Kong, I was able to buy a ticket to Seattle from a Canadian steamship company. On board were fellow returnees Daipau ["Big-Mouth"] Ji, Leiyau ["Beast"] Woon, Cheungyan ["Tall-Man"] Ngou, Lou Gwai, and others. We all landed in Seattle, and from there we took a ferry to First City.

On April 10 I went back to Hop Lee Laundry with only a nickel in my pocket! Lucky for me I started work the next morning. Otherwise, I couldn't imagine what would have happened to me.

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I had planned to return to the States with my wife. However, the immigration laws disallowed the wife of a [Chinese] American citizen to immigrate. In 1931, the Chinese American Citizens' Alliance spent five thousand dollars on an attorney to file a lawsuit against United States Immigration. They won, and the law against the immigration of wives of [Chinese] American citizens was lifted. I immediately applied for a visa to visit China again. However, I was flat broke. So I borrowed four hundred dollars from Uncle Wah Fong and commissioned a lawyer to file a petition for me to return to China to bring my wife over. I quickly prepared a "coaching book" and sent it to my wife, telling her to memorize the contents well. On the sixteenth day of the fifth lunar month of that year [1931], I was back in China again. I went to the American consulate in Hong Kong as soon as possible and filed all the necessary papers. It took many rounds of running back and forth. Finally, everything was completed by the end of the ninth lunar month. On the sixteenth day of the tenth lunar month, I took my wife to Hong Kong. A week later we set sail for the United States.

We arrived in First City on the fifteenth day of the eleventh lunar month. My wife was detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station for processing. She made several mistakes and was denied entry by the immigration office. She was about to be deported, but fortunately she was into the sixth month of her pregnancy. The deportation was delayed. What actually happened was that the immigration official was corrupt. Immediately I talked to my lawyer and spent three hundred dollars on bribes. (Naturally I borrowed from Uncle Wah Fong again. So now I owed him a total of seven hundred dollars.) Finally, my wife was released on the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth lunar month. She spent a total of thirty-nine days at the Immigration Station.

On that day, the Immigration Station telephoned me at 3:00 P.M. and told me to be at Pier No. 5 at 4:30 P.M. to meet my wife. Well, Pier No. 5 was not too far from Hop Lee Laundry, only four blocks away. At 4:30 P.M. I drove over to pick up my wife. I took her to our place, which I had rented earlier as our home. It was a one-bedroom apartment located a few buildings across from Hop Lee Laundry [at 538 Jackson Street]. The rent was nine dollars a month, including water, electricity, and garbage. We settled down at last.

AN URBAN MOONSHINER

My son Leung was born on March 16, 1932. His birth cost me twenty-five dollars. I had saved up several tens, so I knew I could handle it. However, Mrs. Yeung, our landlady, was so delighted by the birth of my son that she suggested I should have a banquet for Leung's one-month-old celebration [i.e., a "ginger and red egg" party]. At that time a banquet table cost twenty dollars; I couldn't afford that kind of luxury. Mrs. Yeung knew that I was impoverished; she told me to buy two dozen eggs, which cost fifteen cents per dozen, a bottle of ginger pickled in vinegar, and a bottle of red dye. She helped me cook the eggs and colored them red. Afterwards, I took them over to my co-workers at Hop Lee, announcing the birth of my son. My ten partners each gave a quarter in a *leisi!* Right now, as I look back at those days, I shiver in fright and wonder how I ever got through.

In 1933 Mrs. Yeung suggested to my wife that since times were tough, she would show my wife how to make rice wine for sale in order to make some money. Our son Leung was one year old and she couldn't find any work. Well, she tried to sew at Ou Lei Sewing Shop one block from our apartment. She took Leung to the shop with her. For two weeks, she made five dollars and twenty cents. As for myself, I only made a little over a dollar a day. Making wine was a better option. Mrs. Yeung had done it herself some few years earlier. Now that her husband was making a good living working in the lottery operation, she had stopped making rice wine. However, she still had all the equipment.

Mrs. Yeung told me to get a one-hundred-pound sack of grounded sweet rice, which cost $1.90, and a pack of yeast cakes. She then taught my wife how to cook the rice in the kitchen, pour it into four large earthen containers, and then let them ferment for a month at the back of the apartment. Afterwards the containers were heated, one by one, for about two hours; each would yield one gallon of rice wine. In one night's work we made four gallons. Our cost was about five cents per gallon.

I drove down to the Chinese shrimp camps in the southern part of the city [Hunter's Point] and sold the wine at the price of one dollar per gallon. The workers at the shrimp camps were dirt poor. They even asked for credit for a one-dollar sale.

One day I went to the Ferry Terminal [Pier No. 5] to pick up laundry. A group of Filipinos there asked if I had any Chinese rice wine for sale. I

immediately recognized this good jackpot for our business. I said yes and that it cost four dollars a gallon.

When I got home that evening, I took out the rice wine in gallon jugs, poured out half of the wine into another jug. I boiled some hot water, sweetened it with rock sugar, and mixed the water with the rice wine in the jug. The wine was sweet and yellowish, and the Filipinos loved it! They said, "Wow! Chinese wine tastes great! Bring us as much as you can!" With this, I cleared eight dollars per gallon! Some time later, when I was picking up laundry at the shrimp camps, the Chinese there asked me, "Ah Tim, why don't you bring us any rice wine anymore?"

I would reply, "Hell, I'm now selling my wine at the price of eight dollars per gallon, cash! You choosy guys want 90 percent proof and pay only one dollar a gallon and for credit. Forget it!"

By the end of the year my wife and I had saved over one hundred dollars. I told my wife, "This is your hard-earned money. Chinese New Year will be here in a few days. What do you like to get yourself for the New Year?" She said that she would like a gold coin bracelet that cost five dollars and a jade brooch. Right away I took her to Tin Fook Jewelry Shop on Jackson Street and let her pick what she wanted. Together the bracelet and brooch cost less than one hundred dollars.

A GAMSAAN HAAK ON THE MOVE

By January 1934 I was still making about a dollar a day at Hop Lee Laundry. I saw no bright future working like that. Furthermore, I still owed Uncle Wah Fong seven hundred dollars and I had to think of a way to pay him back. My wife and I talked about what to do. We concluded that I should find something else. At that time a fellow villager Doujai ["Pocket-Knife"] Yuen, had a laundry in Crockett and he wanted to sell it. I drove out there with my wife to take a look. He asked for $350 for the business and all equipment—washer, iron, and a used car. I asked him how was business each week. Yuen said around twenty dollars. I didn't think it was a good deal and that was that.

I visited my older brother in Redwood City in March. He has been a partner with Uncle Chan Yum in the Gwong Li Laundry for several years. Each had put in one thousand dollars when they started. Older Brother said, "Since you know how to drive and my partner and I don't, why don't you also put out one thousand

dollars to join us? We'll just split whatever we earn into three shares." I thought it was not a bad deal at all. After I returned home to San Francisco, I talked to fellow villager Hoi Fo and he immediately lent me one thousand dollars.

Older Brother then said to me, "Before you come, get a wagon similar to the one that you are driving now, so you can use it for pick-up and delivery."

I knew very little about automobiles. So I sought Chui Chaan, proprietor of Nanking Garage, and asked him to help me. Chui was an American-born and an automobile mechanic; he knew a lot about cars. Chui took me to a Ford dealer in the 2900 block of Mission Street on a Saturday morning. The moment I entered the shop, I saw an identical Ford. It cost six hundred fifty dollars. I was going to buy it right away. However, the salesman said, "This one is last year's model. If you come back on Monday, we'll get you an identical one. It will be a new model because the new models will come in on Monday." I asked if I needed to put down a deposit. He said, "If you pay cash, no need to put down any deposit."

So Chui and I made a date that he would come to my place at eight Monday morning to go to the Ford dealer together. Well, talk about timing. At six o'clock that morning Village Brother Hoi Ping came to my place and delivered a letter from my paternal cousin Yim Hei, who had a one-hundred-sixty-acre vegetable farm in Madera. My cousin asked me in the letter to work for him. He would pay me sixty dollars a month. In addition, he said in the letter that my wife could also earn a dollar or so every day sorting and bundling vegetables in the barn. He would also hire my brothers Seung and Tai, who had just arrived from China a few months earlier.

It was a good offer. First, I wouldn't have to rent a place for my family. Second, I could return the thousand dollars I borrowed from Brother Hoi Fo. When Chui Chaan came to my place at eight o'clock, I said to him, "Brother Chaan, I'm sorry. I've changed my mind. I've decided not to buy the car." Well, what a difference two hours made! If Hoi Ping had showed up after eight o'clock that morning, I would have gone with Chui and bought the Ford. With that, I would have had no choice but to go to work at Redwood City. As it turned out, it was really my good luck. The business at Gwong Li Laundry went downhill later on. They finally shut down. As I thought about it, I was glad that I was not in that mess.

Meanwhile, I had to look for someone to replace me at Hop Lee Laundry before I could leave. I talked a clan brother, Leung Wing, into replacing me.

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However, Leung did not know how to drive. So every night I drove down with Leung to Battery Street and taught him how to drive. It took him several weeks before he was confident enough to apply for a driver's license. By then it was near the end of May.

On May 31 I borrowed a truck from Uncle Wah Fong and moved. On the day before leaving First City, I told my younger brother Seung, "Well, we'll all be going to a small town to work in a vegetable farm. It will be long hours of work under the hot sun. There won't be any rest on Sundays. You have never worked in China before you came. Can you take this kind of hardship?"

Seung replied, "I'll do anything and everything you ask of me."

A CHINESE FARMHAND IN THE VALLEY

We reached Hoi Ping's farm at nine o'clock that evening. We started working the next day. During the months of April and May, farmers would get up around four or five o'clock in the morning. Seung got up, washed his face, put on his new overalls, and asked Clan Brother Dai Gai, "Older Brother Dai Gai, what do you want me to do today?"

Dai Gai suggested, "Why don't you drive the tractor and plow the field? This tractor's easy to operate. Just turn on the ignition and shift into gear with the stickshift."

Seung confidently drove off to the field. It was five o'clock in the morning and there was a cool breeze. He said, "Easy work." By ten in the morning the sun was hot; the exhaust from the tractor was hotter. It was close to one-hundred-twenty degrees driving the tractor. By twelve noon he drove back for lunch and said to me, "This is like working in hell! I might make some money, but I'd rather skip it altogether." He refused to work the next day.

Younger Brother Tai was, however, exactly the opposite of Seung. On the first day he asked Dai Gai to assign him some work. I talked to him, "Brother Tai, you're only fifteen years old. Relax, you'll have lots of time to earn money. But not now. Right now I want you to go to school for at least one year before you start working. Besides, you will get out of school by 3:30 P.M. every day. You can work in the barn after school, bundle the vegetables, or whatever. You'll still earn a quarter or more a day. You know, you'll learn English at school and that will help you in the future."

Well, he attended the same school Hoi Ping's daughter Giu attended. Every day after school at 3:30 p.m., he went to the barn and bundled the vegetables. Hoi Ping then said to him, "Well, you don't go to school on Saturdays and Sundays, do why don't you work during these two days? I'll pay you a dollar a day!" Tai was overjoyed because he was able to make an additional eight dollars a month working during the weekends, while earning a quarter or so a day during weekdays.

So I began my hardworking days at Hoi Ping's vegetable farm. On September 14 my daughter Lai Heung was born. I delivered her. No doctor or midwife. My wife could not work after childbirth. At night she changed diapers and fed the baby. I would start working at five in the morning and drive the tractor out to the farm. My day's work ended at eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

My second daughter, Lai Gyuen, was born on December 26, 1935. Again I played doctor at her birth. The small house in which we lived was a forty-dollar ready-built trailer. It was freezing cold in the winter. So I went into town and bought a small iron stove before Lai Gyuen was born. I collected discarded pieces of wood for firewood and burned them to keep the room warm. Lai Gyuen was born at three in the morning! I was out in the field on the tractor working by five o'clock! Well, I was only thirty then. I could take anything and everything.

A FARMER ON THE WAY UP

On February 15, 1936, Uncle Wah Fong came to talk to me, "I'm making a trip back to China. After I leave, no one will drive my truck to San Francisco for delivery." He wanted to ask me to work for him while he was gone.

I said, "I think you should discuss this matter with Brother Hoi Ping. I'm working for him now. If he says it's all right for me to go and work for you, then I'll go."

Uncle Wah Fong went and talked to Hoi Ping, "I would like Tim to work at my farm while I am in China. When I come back, he'll come back to work for you."

Hoi Ping said, "You're my uncle. No problem." So on March 1, I moved to work for Uncle Wah Fong whose farm was huge—four hundred acres in size. Beyond my wildest imagination, Uncle Wah Fong paid me ninety dollars a month and put up a forty-dollar trailer on the farm for my family. After he made

all the arrangements, he took off for China. I felt grateful for his generosity and worked hard on his farm. Well, I had to; otherwise, how could I take such a high wage?

Uncle Wah Fong had nearly one-hundred Filipino farmhands; he paid them around nine or ten dollars a week. They worked from dawn till dusk. He also hired about twenty Chinese farmers, paying them accordingly, with the highest at sixty dollars a month and the lowest at thirty dollars, and fed them three meals a day. So, I felt good and grateful that I was paid so much. I worked extra hard to earn my keep. For at least three nights a week, I drove the delivery truck to First City. During the days when there was no delivery, I would drive the tractor and plough the field and supervise the Filipino farmhands.

The delivery trip to First City was not an easy drive. It was a distance of 160 miles from Madera to First City. It took eight hours, nonstop, to drive the truck, which weighed more than ten tons with a full load, from Madera to San Francisco. After I unloaded the truck, which took over one hour, it would be three or four o'clock in the morning. I would then rent a $6.50 room at the Mandarin Hotel on Jackson Street and sleep for a few hours. At seven I would get up and check on the prices of vegetables and their sale. Then I would drive the empty truck back, and by three or four o'clock in the afternoon, I would be back in Madera. Right away I would drive the tractor out to the field and work until dark. After supper, I would work in the barn—rinsing the vegetables. I usually stopped at around eleven o'clock. By then I would have worked more than eighteen hours a day! Well, I didn't mind the hard work. I was paid to do that.

It was also my good fortune that my wife worked just as hard alongside me. She earned over a dollar a day working in the barn. I admit that she worked extremely hard those days. She started working before sunrise for over ten hours a day. At night she took care of the children's needs—sewing clothes, knitting sweaters, whatever. We had a large family with several children. I remember in 1936, when it was close to Chinese New Year, I took the family with me to First City to buy some Chinese provisions for the New Year. The night before New Year's Eve, we reached First City at three o'clock in the morning. As usual I rented a $6.50 room at the Mandarin and we slept until dawn. We finished running around at noon and took the children to lunch. Afterwards we walked down to the Produce Market where I parked the truck (it was too large to drive inside Chinatown). On our way there my wife held onto our four-year-old Leung

with her left hand and two-year-old Lai Heung with her right hand. On her back was one-year-old Lai Geun. And she was seven months pregnant with Lai Ngin. As for me, I was carrying all the Chinese foodstuff with both hands. As we walked down Jackson Street to the Produce Market, the white folks stared at us. What a sight!

At year's end in 1936 Uncle Wah Fong returned from China. He was extremely pleased to see that I had managed his farm superbly. Anyway, I told him, "The delivery truck is getting too old and besides, it's too small. Why don't you get a five-ton, ten-wheeled Westmoreland instead? But that will cost $2,700." Immediately he agreed, without a second thought. And he went with me to buy one, paid full in cash.

The next day I drove the truck on a delivery trip to First City with a load of over ten tons of vegetables and melons. The truck had a huge engine that burned gasoline like mad. I filled up with eighty gallons when I started. By the time I reached First City, the tank gauge showed that it was almost empty. Well, gasoline cost about ten cents a gallon then. Still, it was not at all economical. So I asked the dealer why it consumed so much gasoline. He said, "That's because the truck has a large gasoline motor. If you switch it to a diesel engine, it'll be seven times more powerful and the diesel fuel would cost only five cents a gallon. However, it will cost $2,700 to make that change." Immediately Uncle Wah Fong put out another $2,700 in cash to change the motor. Altogether that truck cost him $5,400. By today's value, it would be close to $100,000! My co-workers on the farm began to slander me, saying that I had conned Uncle Wah Fong!

However, lucky for me, in January 1937 Uncle Wah Fong planted forty acres of spinach. Ordinarily a case of spinach sold for about one dollar. But the Teamsters went on strike at that time, and all vegetables were in short supply at the Farmer's Market in San Francisco. The price of spinach reached three to four dollars a case. During the strike I drove out to First City every night for two weeks straight, with a full load of over three hundred cases of vegetables per trip. We cleared over ten thousand dollars just for that! Uncle Wah Fong and the farmers thought I was some kind of a wonder man to foresee such a move—well, without that big truck, we wouldn't have been able to ship over three hundred cases of vegetables per trip. Hell, I was no fortune-teller. It was just plain old luck and good timing. Nevertheless, everybody shut up after that.

ON THE MOVE TO BE MY OWN BOSS

On January 23, 1937, my daughter Lai Ngin was born. Of course I played doctor again during delivery. My wife went back to work at the barn three days after the birth.

I learned in July that Uncle Kai Yee had passed away in the Chinese Hospital and that there was no one to take over his produce business in Visalia. When he was alive, he had worked with his wife. His wife did not speak English; she became totally helpless after he died.

At that time I had just paid back Uncle Wah Fong the seven hundred dollars plus sixty dollars interest. My wife and I discussed whether or not we could buy Uncle Kai Yee's business. By doing that, we could at least become our own bosses and expand the business in the future. It would be a lot better than working for someone else for the rest of our lives. Besides, I remembered when Uncle Kai Yee was alive, he came to see me on a few Sundays and suggested to me, "Dear Nephew, what you are doing is hard work. Why don't you do what I do—get a truck and sell produce? At least you'll have Sundays all to yourself."

Well, I told Uncle Wah Fong that I was leaving. Of course he was not pleased. He said, "Tim, if you're leaving because I'm paying you too low, I'm ready to pay you $120."

"It isn't that," I said. "You pay me more than what I deserve. It's just that I have so many kids and I have to plan for our future. I thought it would be better if I could start my own business. Besides, when you left for China last year, you did tell Brother Hoi Ping that I would only work for you during your absence. Now that you have returned, maybe I should go. It is not that I am quitting on you. I just want to let you know, so you can find a replacement."

Seeing that I was determined, he said, "Well, how in the world can you come up with five hundred dollars to pay Kai Yee's wife for the business?" I did come up with that money. How? Well, my wife saved up all her earnings from working in the barn. In addition, she put aside all the money that our friend and relatives gave to our children during Chinese New Year. She kept the money, a total of $550, in a savings account at a bank that is now called Bank of America.

So I moved my family to Visalia on August 10. My wife and I had only twenty-seven dollars in our possession. We couldn't afford to stay in a hotel, nor could we find a house to rent ahead of time. We were going to take our chances when we arrived in Visalia. We left Uncle Wah Fong's farm at eight

o'clock in the morning. Approximately four miles down the road, my wife told me to stop the car beside a big tree by the roadside. Well, she had brought along some incense, candles, and what-have-you. She got out of the car and walked over to the tree. She lit these sacrificial items and started praying under it. "Almighty Bodhisattva! Almighty Heaven! Give us your blessing that we'll find a place to stay! Give my Tim your blessing that he'll earn five thousand dollars!" I thought she was crazy. Anyway, we continued on our way afterwards.

Well, that was a Sunday. When we got to Visalia, we learned that a village brother, Chan Hung, and his wife had just rented a large, six-bedroom house a few months ago. It cost him thirty dollars a month. I proposed to him, "How about letting me lease half of the house for the time-being? You live in the front, and we'll live in the back. When I find a place to stay, we'll move out." Well, just like that and we found a place to stay right away!

I had to come up with some cash by nightfall for village brother Siu Jong to buy the produce in Fresno. Fortunately I was able to borrow one hundred dollars from Uncle Si Jing. Early next morning I had to get up and go to the Produce Market to pick up the produce. By eight in the morning I hit the road with Uncle Kai Yee's widow to sell the produce. The first day we had less than twenty customers, taking in only $6.80. On the second day we went to the mountains and had over twenty customers, taking in $19.20.

It was frustration beyond description for two weeks. Most of the customers were twenty or thirty miles away from Visalia. There were huge orange groves. Uncle Kai Yee's widow did not know the addresses, she only knew how to get there—turn left, turn right, over this street corner, whatever . . . . Worse yet, she was grieving and mourning over her husband's death. Something might remind her of him along the way and she would start crying. It bothered the hell out of me. But what could I do? Not much but to bear with her during those two weeks. Finally, after a couple of months of hustling, I picked up more customers, close to forty orders a day. By month's end I subtracted all the expenses and still had $150 in profit. Not bad at all.

Well, everyday I drove the truck around trying to make new sales. I remember well the day before Thanksgiving that year, when I worked late into the evening. By the time I finished with the last customer, it was ten o'clock at night. I didn't get home until eleven. The kids were all asleep, but my wife was still up, knitting jackets and sweaters. She had cooked supper for me. After the meal she went with me to the garage and took care of all the odds and ends and

prepared for tomorrow's business. We didn't go to bed until one or two o'clock. By seven in the morning I had to be up and go to the Produce Market to pick up my vegetables. A long day's work!

I still remember the second day of September that year. It was boiling hot. We didn't have a fan in the house. So I put my third daughter, Lai Ngin, who was less than one year old, in a wooden crate for a nap under the shade of a tree in the back of the house. Well, she didn't wake up. My wife had to rub her frantically with Tiger Balm ointment for a long time before the baby came back and made a crying sound.

HOME SWEET HOME

Of course, as business picked up, I became all the more ambitious. I was fanatic; I didn't feel tired at all working long hours everyday. However, I was concerned with the fact that we didn't have a permanent home. Chan Hong and his wife had no children; they were quiet and neat people. However, we had noisy children. Sometimes they cried at nights and asked for food, disturbing everybody's sleep. Chan and his wife might not say anything, but I felt bad about it. My wife and I talked it over and decided to find another place to live. Every Saturday and Sunday afternoon we would take the children and drive all over town, looking for a place to move. But it was not at all easy. There were rental units, but when the landlords saw the children, they would always say, "Sorry, I've rented the place out this morning." It was like this for several months until January 1, 1938.

My son Leung and Uncle Chau Dou's son Syu were in the same first grade. Uncle Chau Dou's house was about two blocks away. Syu would always come over to play with Leung after school. On January 1 it was the Western New Year and no work for me. Syu came over and the first thing he said was: "Uncle Tim, there's a 'For Rent' sign out there." My wife and I walked over to take a look. Well, it was a "For Sale" sign. For the last couple of months, when we went house-hunting during the weekends, we usually would pass by this house, and we had always said to each other, "I wish this house were for rent." The house was located on the outskirts of town. It had a large open area in the back and two big trees in front at the corner. It was perfect—we could raise chickens and grow Chinese vegetables. Well, all this time we just drooled over the prospect. The place was not for rent. Unexpectedly, with this new development, it was

better than a dream came true! My wife and I immediately went knocking at the door. The landlord was a young man, about nineteen years old. He said he had found a job in Fresno and was putting the house up for sale, asking for thirteen hundred dollars. He would take five hundred dollars for the initial payment and the rest of the eight hundred could be paid by a three-year installment of twenty-seven dollars per month.

Boy, what luck! However, we had saved up only three hundred dollars. I asked Uncle Chau Dou to lend me three hundred dollars. He agreed in no time. So I arranged to go with the White man to City Hall on January 17 at ten o'clock in the morning to complete the ownership transfer. At nine o'clock that morning I went to see Uncle Chau Dou at Gong's Market to get the loan. Well, Gong's Market was only two blocks away from City Hall. I thought I would have the money right away. I didn't realize that the Market was a partnership among three brothers. Uncle Chau's younger brother, Uncle Chong, was in charge of all the money. The three brothers had to co-sign all the checks. Well, the three of them went into a room and talked it over. I was standing outside waiting nervously. The wall was partitioned by a thin fiberboard, and I could hear Uncle Chau Dou screaming, "Hell! Tim is not using this money to gamble! What's there not to trust?" Finally they co-signed the three-hundred dollar check and gave it to me. My feeling at that moment was beyond words. After all the paperwork was done, I consulted the lunar calender for an auspicious day and we moved in two weeks later.

FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

After a while my produce business turned the corner. I made over two hundred dollars a month, after subtracting all the expenses. My wife and I were so happy. In fact, it was all the more wonderful because our son Seung was born on February 14, 1938! I didn't go out to sell produce that day. So I went to the garage and checked out the truck, oiling it and making minor repairs on the engine. Well, the garage was across the street from Karby, a big restaurant. Karby used one hundred pounds of potatoes and one case of lettuce every day. Its boss asked me if I would be interested in making that kind of delivery every morning. Of course I said yes, and just like that, I signed up a big customer. This big order increased my business volume by 50 percent! By the end of the month I took in over four hundred dollars after deducting all expenses. (At that time a

worker earned seventy or eighty dollars at the most if he worked for someone else.)

Well, we were not poor any more! Karby's boss was impressed, and he told the chef that from now on, I would be responsible for providing the restaurant with the vegetable items on the menu. Well, that gave me a great idea. I recalled that over ten produce trucks would be parked at the produce market every night. The owners would sort out the leftover vegetables and throw the unsellables into dumpsters. I took those discarded produce home and asked my wife to clean them out and store them in a large refrigerator. We took the good ones and cut them up nicely and I would then deliver them to the chef at Karby. The chef liked what I did because my cleaning and cutting saved him a lot of work. Well, I didn't spend any money on those vegetables! By the end of the month I made over six hundred dollars in profit.

Now I could hire a contractor to fix up my house and build a big double garage with a large refrigerator inside. Everything turned new and splendid at home. I was not a struggling poor soul any more! In June 1939 I paid nine hundred dollars in cash for a brand new, four-door Hudson sedan. Well, no one bought new cars in those days!

Just that week Uncle Hing's eldest son Hoi Jik died. The funeral service was in Madera. My wife and I drove our brand new car up to Madera for the funeral. Everybody stared at us and gossiped among themselves, "Tim couldn't afford a car like that. It must be a rental." Well, Clan Brother Victor walked over to my car and checked the registration. He told everybody, "It *is* Tim's car!"

When I left the Madera farm two years earlier, Uncle Wah Fong was mad at me. He told everyone, "No one has ever found a better job after leaving my farm. We'll all watch and see how he'll rot." I was indeed in poverty then—with less than thirty dollars in my pocket and a family of toddlers. The co-workers also thought that I was wrong to quit Uncle Wah Fong's farm. They all felt that I wouldn't be able to afford a brand-new car in two years.

When we first moved down to Visalia, my wife would always remind me, "Tim, everybody looks down on you. Show them that they are wrong about you." So I worked extra hard and I worked until midnight. Now everybody saw that I had become rather rich since I left two years ago. Even Jau Yau came over to congratulate me, "Wow, two years in Visalia and you have become a rich man and given birth to another son!" We showed them at last.

In 1942 the United States government inducted many men into the armed forces because of the war in Europe. I was too old for the draft because when I first came to the United States, I was two years older on paper than I really was. Besides, I had a large family to support. As my workers packed and left for the army, I hired Chubby Lung to work for me for seventy-five dollars a month. However, Great Eastern Cafe in First City also wanted to hire him, paying him five dollars a day. Of course he left for First City. With only me left, I thought the produce business wouldn't last for long. But I was a married man with a family.... I made up my mind to take care of everything myself. I would get up earlier to go to Fresno to buy wholesale produce; then I would be home by early dawn. My wife and I worked together to clean and sort the produce for sale. To my surprise, even though I lost all my workers, my business volume increased several times! I cleared over one thousand dollars a month. My wife and I were delighted by the turn of the business. Ever since then, on every second day of the Lunar New Year, we always cook a "hairy seaweed" dish [*faatchoi*, homonym for "prosperity"] and a fish dish [*yu* for "surplus/profits"]. I always pick up a chopstickful of *faatchoi* and pray: "Let me have it."

PREPARING FOR A HOME-BOUND JOURNEY

I was ambitious all those years! In June 1947, however, I received a letter from my father saying that my mother was extremely ill and wanted to see her grandchildren before she died. I had known for a long time that my mother was in poor health. Besides, she was already seventy-five years old. I would be an unfilial son to deny her last wish. I discussed the matter with my wife, and we decided that since I was only forty-three years old, I still had time. Besides, I had saved up over fifty thousand dollars! I planned to return home to buy some land and build a four-story house. Furthermore, my children were growing. I wanted them to study some Chinese. And, mostly, I would make my mother happy.

Before leaving, I had to find someone to take over my produce business. I asked $7,200 for the business and all the equipment. Older Brother Yik Hau came over and said he was interested. I said, "If you want to buy it, I can't ask for the full price. But you have to know how to drive the trailer-truck. It won't be easy because you'll have to climb through mountains twice a week." Well, he couldn't do it.

Sometime later, Gong Gam Wah, a native of Seung Bou Village, expressed interest. He was a skinny person who weighed less than one hundred pounds. One look at him and I knew that he couldn't hack it. Nevertheless, I told him to show up at eight in the morning to try out the mountain route. Well, he showed up early in the morning. We started at eight o'clock, after breakfast. By three in the afternoon, he was perspiring all over and couldn't even walk straight or carry a sack of potatoes on his shoulder. I told him, "We still have half more to go." It was eleven at night by the time we returned to Visalia. He changed his mind about buying the business.

Two days later Clan Brother Lou Hou and his mother showed up at my place early in the morning. He handed me seventy-two crisp hundred-dollar bills. I recognized the fact that he was in his mid-twenties and very husky; he could handle everything. I asked him, "I know you want to make a few more bucks. But why this business?"

He replied, "Yeah, I am making $150 a month at the Mandarin Butcher Shop in Fresno with no days off. I want to make $500 a month."

"You hold onto this money," I said. "If you fail to make one thousand dollars a month in this business, I won't take any of your money. The only thing is that you have to know how to drive the trailer-truck. Here is the ignition key. Let me see you drive it out of the garage."

He took the key and went to the garage. For over twenty minutes he was all frustrated, perspiring and everything; he couldn't do it. My wife suggested, "Why don't you teach him how to do it?"

"He'll learn," I said. Well, thirty minutes later he drove the truck out. See, driving was all a matter of logic. Once you figured it out, it was easy. He was all happy as he walked back to my house. I said to him, "Come back at eleven tonight. I'll go with you to Fresno to show you how to buy produce. But let me make this clear: I won't carry a dime. Everything's on you—buying the produce, lunch, and everything."

Well, by Friday night that week he figured he had made over $270. For three weeks I taught him the business.

After taking care of everything, I left with my family for First City to make preparations for the trip to China. We purchased first-class tickets and packed everything into nine trunks, each weighing over three hundred pounds—kids' toys, skates, BB guns, whatever. On November 8 we went on board the *SS President Gordon* for Hong Kong. Ming Leung was fifteen years old; Lai Heung, thirteen; Lai Gyuen, twelve; Lai Ngin, ten; Ming Seung, nine; and Lai Ngan, five.

A TRIUMPHANT MAN FROM GOLD MOUNTAIN

On November 24 we arrived in Hong Kong. I was going to take a ferry to Canton immediately. But I learned that the Chinese government was in chaos. A journey by boat in southern China was dangerous because pirates were all over. I was told that it would be better if I went by land. However, I would have to pay a hefty sum of duty for all the goods I was bringing home. It was suggested to me that I should get someone to help me through the back door with customs. After much running around, I was introduced to this person, Chan Liu, who was a native of Gai Tai City of Toisaan and a train engineer with the Kowloon-Canton Railway.

It took five days to make all the arrangements. Finally, on the morning of November 29, we left Nathan Hotel for the train depot. I didn't expect the coolies who handled our baggage would demand such high fees for a short distance between the hotel and the train depot—almost six hundred Hong Kong dollars. The customs official was also extremely arrogant. Fortunately Chan made some arrangements with him. I paid one thousand dollars duties and all my baggage was exempt from open inspection. It was a good deal. I had many new items that might have been subjected to duty.... In addition, I had with me several catties of gold jewelry for friends and relatives. It was forbidden to bring gold across the border. If all were confiscated, I wouldn't have known what to do. So I had no choice but pay on demand. Altogether I spent close to U.S. $2,000 for the five days in Hong Kong.

The train reached Canton at two in the afteroon. I thought I could rent a car to go home to Fa Yuen. I didn't realize, however, that the road to Fa Yuen was infested with bandits. News was circulating that someone had just been kidnapped outside Yan Wo Marketplace. Everyone was frightened. So we decided to stay in Sun Wah Hotel in Canton for the time being.

We rented two rooms, each costing CN $300,000 [Chinese dollars] a night, not including meals. Well, we had just arrived and we didn't carry any Chinese money. Luckily Mr. Yim Gwaan lent me one million Chinese dollars. I was able to take my family and friends, altogether twelve of us, to Tai Tung Restaurant for dinner. When the check came, the million dollars were not enough; I had to

add six Hong Kong dollars. Well, the exchange rate was H.K. $1.00 to CN $22,500. I couldn't sleep all night, wondering what we should do next. My hair almost turned white that night.

Next day I rented a bus and a truck from the Hop Kwan Bus Company, stipulating that there should be no stops along the way to Fa Yuen. The charges were CN $1,030,000 for the bus and CN $800,000 for the truck. However, they would only go as far as Lung Hao City. This was because there were two motor coach companies along the Canton-Fa Yuen highway, each claiming certain territorial rights and not encroaching on the other. Well, the home-bound journey between the Canton bus depot at Lau Fa Bridge and Ping Saan Market was shorter than the distance between Visalia and Fresno! What could I do? Well, I ended up renting from the On Hong Motor Company at Lung Hao City. It took another CN $900,000. Altogether, it cost me over CN $7,000,000 before I reached Ping Saan Marketplace.

When we arrived, it was a market day and there were many shoppers. I went to see friends at the Tin Sing Hardware Store. I wanted to know the price for everything—rice, CN $450,000 per 100 catties; roast pork, CN $45,000 per catty; dried bean curd, CN $7,000 per piece.... Bank notes valued at $1,000 or $500 were left on the streets and nobody would bother to pick them up. Everyone carried bundles and bundles of cash; there was more money than goods available.

As I was talking with friends, Second Sister-in-Law Yeung saw me. She ran over and said, "Hurry home! Mother-in-Law is seriously ill. She hasn't eaten anything for five days! She hasn't talked for the last two days!"

I quickly gathered my family and rushed home. As I entered the village, I saw Father, who, with a worried look, shook his head and said, "What took you so long?" (Well, I did write from the States that I would be home by November 25th. I didn't figure on the delay in Hong Kong.) Father continued, "Your mother doesn't look good at all."

I took my wife and six children into my mother's room. She was lying in bed, eyes closed. She was thinner than a vine and pale as a ghost, hardly breathing. I felt her hand, which was as cold as a popsicle. My wife held me back, afraid that I might catch some kind of disease through contact with a person who was near death. All my children came to the bedside and said, "Hello, Grandma." Each of them presented her with two United States gold coins. (Well, back in the States I'd told them that Grandma loved gold coins

from America, so they got that as presents for Grandma.) My kids kept calling her, "Grandma, Grandma!" After a while she finally half-opened her eyes and squeezed out a faint smile. If we'd come home an hour or two later, I believe that would have been it. My wife and I were so relieved that she was alive. Bodhisattva was on our side again!

The family had a big feast that evening. The maid, Ah Jum, fed my mother. Everyone was surprised that she ate some food. Well, after that my wife and the children and I would keep her company every day. She was so happy that after two weeks she was able to get out of bed. With Ah Jum helping her, she would walk to the front door. We made sure that Ah Jum had all kinds of food for her. Now that she was happy, my wife and I were also very happy.

Since returning home, I did notice, however, that the Chinese currency had dropped in value rather rapidly; it was worth less daily. My bank checks were in American currency, so I was not affected by the devaluation too much. Anyway I hired a builder to build me a four-storied mansion and an agent to buy some farmland. Everyday my wife and I went shopping at the marketplace; we spent quite a lot—rolls and rolls of Chinese money. My father was a frugal man; he was startled by our spending spree. He reminded me, "Your house is only half built! Besides, you need to have some money for your trip back to America!"

I said, "Don't worry. I have paid in full for the house. I still have a lot of money in American bank checks. If you want to buy eight or ten *mu* of farmland, I'll buy them for you!" Father was so happy to hear me say that.

Well, the house was finally completed. I spent $15,000 on it. On the fourth day of the fourth lunar month in 1948, my first son was married and we all moved into the new house. What a day of celebration! We had a fifteen-course banquet—abalone, shark fins, and all kinds of exquisite delicacies. All the friends and relatives were invited—altogether 128 tables! I specially ordered a forty-foot string of firecrackers from Canton City for the occasion!

It was bright and clear that day. Relatives and friends presented us with fifteen roasted pigs and sixty baskets of ham on shank. Kwan, Woon, and Ji Wing presented us with several baskets of firecrackers. When the firecrackers were lit, the entire alley was clouded with smoke, and we couldn't see anyone. Mother, supported by the maid Ah Jum, went up to the top floor of the house to view the excitement—people bustling all over and a line of people carrying my

daughter-in-law's dowry coming into our house. . . . She was brimming with joy.

Well, everything was done—house built and land bought. The next thing was for me to hire a teacher to teach my children the books. After that I had done all that we must do. For the next few months we spent most of our time in the marketplace. We would buy some goodies for my parents to eat. On the seventh day of the seventh month, my mother died in her sleep. As for my wife and me, I truly believe we had been very filial to her.

COMING BACK TO AMERICA

One day in February 1949 I went to Canton City. There I saw a lion dance and dragon parade celebrating a decisive victory in Cheui Jau [Xuzhou] against the Communist insurgents. When I went to the bank for some Chinese currency, the exchange rate had doubled. I felt something was wrong, because the Chinese money shouldn't drop so badly if it was a decisive victory for the government. The more I thought about it, the more I became frightened by the prospect of staying in China. After returning home, I talked to my wife and children about going to the United States Consulate in Hong Kong to prepare ourselves to return to the United States. Soon after that my wife and I took our children—Lai Heung, who was fifteen; Lai Gyuen, fourteen; Lai Ngin, twelve; Ming Seung, eleven; and Lai Ngan, seven—on board the *SS President Wilson* for America. Our seventeen-year-old son, Ming Leung, returned later because his bride's visa was being processed.

Well, my obligation of filial piety was the main reason for calling it quits in America two years ago. I thought I would make my parents happy and proud with my triumphant and successful return. I had sold my business and house in the States; what would become of us now? I was worried during those fifteen days crossing the Pacific. My wife noticed my sour face and said, "No need for that. Bodhisattva will protect us."

We arrived in First City at six in the morning. I took my wife and children by taxi to Chinatown. We stayed in the basement of the Yi King Restaurant for the time being. After lunch I tried to see if I could get someone to drive us back to Visalia. Well, talk about luck! I met this man Louie who had just bought a new truck. He said he planned to be a mover in Chinatown. I said, "Well, would you be interested in moving our stuffs to Visalia today?" He said he had not

driven out of town before. I said, "I have been driving trucks all my life. I'll drive it to Visalia, and you just drive it back. It's a distance of 220 miles." He asked for $55 and wanted to know when we could start. I said, "At twelve midnight tonight; we'll reach Visalia at dawn."

Well, he went home and drove his new truck over to my place, handed me the ignition keys, and said, "I'll be back before twelve." My wife and I moved all our belongings to the truck. We also made a canvas canopy to cover the truck bed so that our five children could have some cover along the way.

Louie came before twelve and we started. I drove down Highway 99. I was concerned about what to do when we reached Visalia—where to take my children, where to settle down again.... I kept thinking about all this as I drove along. It was almost dawn by the time we reached Fresno. I passed Albertson Produce Market and saw Lou Hou's truck parked there. I stopped and went over to talk to him, "This is Wednesday, why are you here so early?"

Lou said, "I was invited to a baby party and stayed overnight at my in-law's place here." Before he finished, he added, "Brother Tim, I'd like to return the truck and the produce business to you." Well, I thought he was joking and I didn't pay attention to him. I got back to Louie's truck and continued on to Visalia.

I stopped at Third Uncle Bing's place, unloading my luggage with him for the time being. Well, Auntie Leung Ju Baak was visiting Third Aunt. Third Aunt said, "Why don't you leave your kids here for tonight?" And Aunt Ju Baak also suggested, "Yes, you and your wife could stay with us in my daughter Siu's room. She's in college in Los Angeles." Well, that solved the sleeping arrangements for the night. Right away I went to Third Uncle Bing's market to find out how I could get a car. Living in the valley without a car was like being a cripple. Both Third Uncle and hare-lipped Hoi gave me a car key, saying, "Use the car for the time being." I drove over to a Buick dealer and bought myself a used, full-sized Buick.

When I went back to the market, Uncle Chan Yum was there too. He said to me, "Tim, I rented a house two months ago for thirty dollars a month. I painted the place over. I also bought a new refrigerator and a new stove; I plan to move in there in a few days. But if you need a place to stay, why don't you move in first? When you find your own place, I'll move in after you move out."

Well, just like that my housing problem was solved. It was something I wouldn't dare dream would happen. It must have been some supernatural help!

Next morning I got my children back to school. Afterwards my wife and I were alone in the house. We looked at each other. What next? I was already forty-four years old. It wouldn't be easy for me to find a job. Even if I could find one, it would, at the most, pay $250; it wouldn't be enough for household expenses. I came to regret my trip back to China, for which I sold off my business and house. Well, I couldn't take back what I had done.

For two weeks we couldn't come up with anything to resolve our worries. Then suddenly one day my wife said, "On our way past Fresno, didn't Lou Hou say he wanted to sell the business back to you? Why don't you go and ask him if it's for real?"

I said, "He's only joking. I don't think it's for real." But her suggestion made sense. That day was Wednesday. I knew Lou would return from Fresno at three o'clock in the afternoon. I took my wife in our Buick and went to see Lou.

As we drove near Kingsport, we saw Lou returning with his truck. I stopped him and asked if what he said that morning in Fresno was serious. He said, "Of course I'm serious. I want to go into the supermarket business now." I asked him for how much he would sell the business back. He said, "Two years ago you sold it to me for $7,200. I'll take back that amount. Why don't you come to my place this Sunday so we can talk it over?"

I thought I was dreaming. What luck! On Sunday my wife and I went to his place and gave him the seventy-two hundred dollars. Lou said, "I haven't lost one customer since you went to China. In fact, beginning tonight, why don't you go to Fresno yourself for all the produce? I don't think I have to go with you. Besides, I've been telling all the customers that you were only vacationing in China and that you would be back. As for this house, I'll move out and let you have it back after two weeks."

Well, that meant we could move out from Chan Yum's house in two weeks. My wife and I were so relieved and happy. We went home and immediately killed a chicken and offered thanks to Heaven. I made over one thousand dollars the first month after I took the business back.

ON THE MOVE AGAIN

Life went on. On Chinese New Year in 1950, another daughter, Lai Sim, was born. By then I had saved over ten thousand dollars in the bank. In 1952 I felt that my truck was getting old; besides, it was getting too small for the

business. I traded it in for a brand new 1952 big truck. My business picked up further.

In May 1953 cousin Lau Sau came to visit us. He noticed that all my children were growing and that they did not work after school. He said to me, "Cousin Tim, with all your growing kids, you should find a supermarket. They could pitch in and I am sure you'd make more money."

My wife and I agreed. Every Saturday afternoon and every Sunday, we would drive around to find a nice lot to build a modern supermarket. Well, I knew I couldn't compete in First City. We aimed to open our store in a small city. We drove around thirty small towns and couldn't find anything that we liked. . .

On September 1, I attended a wedding party in First City. I drove home to Visalia along Highway 33. I went through Patterson and saw a lot that I really liked. However, it was not for sale. A few days later I went back to Patterson to show my wife what I saw. Anyway, her eyes were sharp. She noticed a "For Sale" sign by a tree in that lot. There was only a telephone number on that sign. I immediately called. Well, a doctor in Modesto owned that lot and he was selling it for fifteen thousand dollars. I put down a deposit immediately.

Afterwards I drew up my own design for the structure, hired a contractor, and ordered all necessary materials. I rushed about and got everything done by December 20. Well, our market had its grand opening on June 15, 1954. My elder son Leung had just been discharged from the military after serving in the Korean War. He had worked as a helper in the butcher shop owned by Third Uncle Bing ever since he was nine years old. He was a pro in the butcher shop. So I put him in charge of the meat department. As for my produce business and house in Visalia, I sold them all for only thirty-six-hundred dollars to Chan Yum. It was dirt cheap, but I was grateful for his generosity to my family when we first returned to Visalia.

I only had a little over thirty thousand dollars in savings to start the market. Everything was bought on credit—the mortgage, the machines, the grinder, the band saw, the truck, the cashier's machines.... I had to pay monthly installments for three years for six major items. Fortunately business was good. Still, I couldn't hire any help. Instead my wife and my children pitched in. Everyone worked until eleven or twelve o'clock. Even my twelve-year-old daughter, Lai Ngan, would come after school and work behind the third check-out cash

register. Well, it was like this for three years until we paid off everything and didn't owe anybody anything anymore.

TAKING IT EASY AND TAKING A LOSS IN LIFE

On July 1, 1957, I took off my apron. I bought a new car and moved back to First City with my wife. I would go to the market for a few days each week and spend the rest of the week in First City. Well, I had enough savings by then. I might not be considered very rich, but I was not that poor. Both my wife and I had worked very hard in the old days; now it was time to relax for a change. So I spent most of the time driving around in our Cadillac and had a nice time with my wife.

We had retired and we were taking it easy, no more rushing about. In the summer we would take a pot of nicely brewed Pu-erh tea and a box of *dim sum*, and drive my air-conditioned Cadillac to either Golden Gate Park or Seal Rock. We would sit under the shade of a tree and enjoy ourselves. Life was without worry for us now. Sometimes we would prepare a pot of steamed rice with dried scallops and preserved pork belly and drive to a mountain campsite. Under tall trees we would put out our cots and relax, eat our food and enjoy nature's beauty.

During those twenty years of retirement, my wife and I were always together, enjoying everything and sharing happiness and laughter. On August 10, 1980, when she was cutting her toenails, she accidentally cut her toe. She thought it was something minor, but it became a serious infection. She was hospitalized on October 12, at St. Francis Hospital, for an operation. She was there for one hundred and one days and came home on January 22, 1981. During her stay our five daughters took turns keepimg her company twenty-four hours a day. After she came out of the hospital, I would also drive her all over for fresh air. If she said she wanted to eat a certain thing, I would get it for her. For instance, once she said she remembered eating some fried fish in a restaurant in Modesto. I immediately called up all my daughters and made arrangements to eat a fish dinner in that restaurant at Coffee Street in Modesto. I wanted to keep her happy all the time.

Well, on February 19, 1982, my wife was hospitalized again at St. Francis Hospital because of an infection in the brain. In March 8, at three o'clock in the afternoon, she passed away peacefully, holding onto my hands. She was seventy-seven.

My wife came from a rich family, surnamed Lau. As the youngest daughter, she was pampered as the young Miss Lau. She was married to me at thirteen. Three weeks after our wedding, I left for Gold Mountain, leaving her behind in that run-down ancestral house all by herself. I didn't return until the autumn of 1928. I stayed home for one-and-a-half years, and I came back to Gold Mountain again. She didn't come to join me until the end of 1931. In our fifty years together, it was my wife who constantly encouraged me to move up and obeyed all my wishes. If I said the sky was called earth, she would say, yes, the sky was called earth. Sometimes because of financial problems, I would become so frustrated that for no reason I would yell at her just to vent my frustration. She would take all that abuse with a smile. Her tenderness would rid me of all my rage and frustration. She was so at ease with everything that I never saw her lose control of her temper. During the years after her arrival, the economy was bad and we had children to feed. Other than their socks and shoes, everything our children wore was made by her. She made clothes for the children late at night and got up early the morning to help me in the produce business. Yet I never heard her complain once during those years. When our children were about six or seven years old, she constantly instructed the children not to make me unhappy. "Daddy works very hard to make money for all of us. Don't ever make him angry at home." I remember on May 16, 1940, it was a Saturday, when I finished work early and went home earlier than usual. When I entered the house, I saw her holding a duster, about to give the children a good punishment. When she saw me walk in, she let go of it, turned to me with a smile, and fetched me my slippers instead. I felt so bad that she had to keep up with disciplining the children and with making me happy at home.

I had many sleepless nights after she passed away. But I have thought it over. Had I died before her, she would have had a more miserable time than I am having now. With that thought, I feel a bit more relieved and can close my eyes to sleep.

During the spring and autumn festivals, I get some flowers and go to the cemetery; I wipe her tombstone clean with a white handkerchief and talk to her: "Wait for me, I am coming. We will be together again in our next life."

Written in memory of my wife, Lau Hopyee, on March 8, 1988, the sixth anniversary of her death.