

“Just plain old luck and good timing”

Reminiscences of a Gold Mountain Man (1988)

Gong Yuen Tim

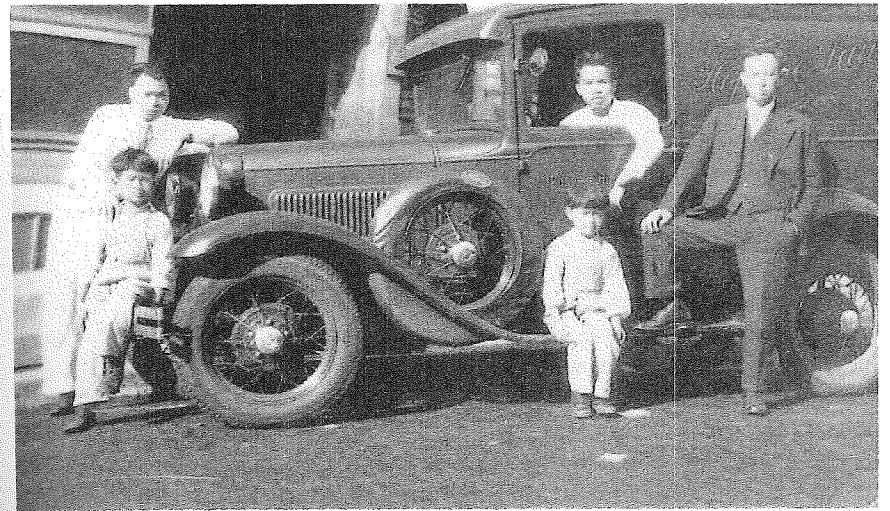
The following memoir was written in Chinese by Gong Yuen Tim for his children in 1988 on the sixth anniversary of his wife's passing. It was discovered by historian Him Mark Lai when he interviewed Gong in 1990. Lai promptly had it translated and published in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, the annual journal of the Chinese Historical Society of America. With minor editing, we have included it in this anthology as a rare firsthand account of one Chinese immigrant's struggles to succeed in America.

In 1920 Gong Yuen Tim left his young bride, Low Hop Yee, in Huaxian, Guangdong Province, and emigrated to the United States. In 1931, after working as a laundromat for eleven years and after Congress amended the Immigration Act of 1924 to admit Chinese wives of U.S. citizens, he was finally able to bring her to America. Like many other Huaxian immigrants, they entered the produce business and later operated a supermarket in California's Central Valley. They also raised a family of seven children.

Throughout his detailed and at times touching memoir, Gong attributes his success to hard work, luck, and Bodhisattva's blessings. But as his story reveals, he also had the benefit of a supportive family and kin network, reminding us of the importance of ethnic solidarity for the early Chinese immigrants and the advantages of having a devoted wife by one's side in Gold Mountain. Aside from being hardworking and resourceful throughout his life, Gong was known to be a loving husband and father as well as a respected member of the Chinese community. When he passed away in 2001 at the age of ninety-eight, a funeral cortege of eighty cars and three marching bands gave him a grand send-off to the Chinese cemetery in Colma, California.

COMING TO GOLD MOUNTAIN

I came from a family of poor peasant background for three generations. Like his grandfather and father before him, my father, Man Dak, farmed on ten



Gong Yuen Tim in the driver's seat, 1930. (Courtesy of Mary Gong)

mou of leased land¹ near the ancestral Lok Cheung Village in Huaxian [District]. He had seven sons and five daughters but no money. It was really a hard-luck life for everyone.

When I was eight years old, 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. When I was fifteen years old, Yik Hau had me come to Gold Mountain as a paper son.² The perilous journey aboard the *Shunyo Maru* 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.

The 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

1. One *mou* equals 733½ square yards; 6.6 *mou* equal one acre.

2. During the exclusion period, many Chinese immigrated by assuming bogus identities as sons of merchants or U.S. citizens.

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 \$500.

SENDING FOR MY WIFE

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 home-bound 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 \$100! I racked my brain trying to 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.

I returned to Gold Mountain in February 1930 and had to work like a mule all over again. I had planned to return to the States with my wife.³ However, the laws barred wives of [Chinese] American citizens from immigrating. In 1931, the Chinese-American Citizens' Alliance spent \$5,000 on an attorney to file a lawsuit against United States Immigration. They won, and the law against the immigration of wives was lifted. I immediately applied for a visa to visit China again. However, I was flat broke. So I borrowed \$400 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

3. Lau Hop Yee was married to Gong Yuen Tim at the tender age of thirteen. Three weeks after their marriage, Gong took off for America.

book," and sent it to my wife, telling her to memorize the contents well.⁴ As soon as I got back to China again, I went to the American consulate in Hong Kong and filed all the necessary papers. It took many rounds of running back and forth. Finally, everything was completed and I took my wife to Hong Kong. A week later we set sail for the United States.

Upon our arrival in First City, 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. Immediately I talked to my lawyer and spent \$300 on bribes. (Naturally I borrowed from Uncle Wah Fong again. So now I owed him a total of \$700.) Finally, my wife was released after spending a total of thirty-nine days at the Immigration Station. I took her to our home, which I had rented earlier. 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.

SELLING RICE WINE ON THE SIDE

My son Leung was born on March 16, 1932. His birth cost me twenty-five dollars. I had saved up, 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 "ginger and red egg" party for Leung's one-month-old celebration. At that time a banquet table cost twenty dollars; I couldn't afford that kind of luxury. Knowing that I was poor, Mrs. Yeung 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. Afterward, 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*!⁵ As I look back at those days, I shiver and wonder how I ever got through.

Mrs. Yeung also suggested to my wife that since times were tough, she would show her how to make rice wine in order to earn 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 business, she had stopped making rice wine. However, she still had all the equipment.

4. Coaching books provided information about one's family background that immigration officials were likely to ask in the United States.

5. A red envelope for lucky money.

Mrs. Yeung told me to get a one-hundred-pound sack of ground 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 it ferment for a month at the back of the apartment. Afterward 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 the 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 and 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 replied, "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 on credit. Forget it!"

By the end of the year my wife and I had saved over \$100. I told my wife, "This is your hard-earned money. Chinese New Year will be here in a few days. What would you like to get yourself for the New Year?" She said that she would like a gold coin bracelet 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 \$100.

A FARMHAND IN THE VALLEY

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 \$700 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. Well, talk about timing. One morning Village Brother Hoi Ping came to my place and delivered a letter from my paternal cousin Yim Hei, who had a 160-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.

I borrowed a truck from Uncle Wah Fong and moved to Hoi Ping's farm. We started working the next day. 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 stick shift."

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 120 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, however, was exactly the opposite of Seung. On the first day he asked Dai Gai to assign him some work. I said to him, "Brother Tai, you're only fifteen years old. Relax, you'll have lots of time to earn money. But 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 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, so 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.

WORKING FOR UNCLE WAH FONG

In February 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. So I moved to work for Uncle Wah Fong, whose farm was huge—400 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 a 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 plow 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. After I unloaded the truck, which took over an 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. 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. 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. Afterward

we walked down to the Produce Market, where I had 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 Gyuen. And she was seven months pregnant with Lai Yuen. As for me, I was carrying all the Chinese foodstuffs 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 Farmers 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 \$10,000 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.

TO BE MY OWN BOSS

On January 23, 1937, my daughter Lai Yuen 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 Chinese Hospital [in San Francisco] 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 \$700 plus \$60 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. 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 \$500 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 friends 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. 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 \$5,000!" I thought she was crazy. Anyway, we continued on our way afterward.

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 before. 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 \$100 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 fewer 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, every day 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!

A PERMANENT HOME OF OUR OWN

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 night 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 into. 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 New Year's Day it was 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, but the place was not for rent. Unexpectedly, with this new development, it was better than a dream come 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 \$1,300. He would take \$500 for the initial payment and the rest of the \$800 could be paid by a three-year installment of \$27 per month.

Boy, what luck! However, we had saved up only \$300. I asked Uncle Chau Dou to lend me \$300. 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 \$300 check and gave it to me. My feeling at that moment was beyond words. After all the paperwork was done, I consulted the lunar calendar for an auspicious day and we moved in two weeks later.

LEAVING POVERTY BEHIND

After a while my produce business turned the corner. I made over \$200 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 Kerby, a big restaurant. Kerby 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 \$400 after deducting all expenses. (At that time a worker earned \$70 or \$80 at the most if he worked for someone else.)

Well, we were not poor anymore! Kerby'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 that discarded produce home and asked my wife to clean it out and store it in a large refrigerator. We took the good ones and cut them up nicely, and I would then deliver them to the chef at Kerby. 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 \$600 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 anymore! In June 1939 I paid \$900 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, Hok Jik, died. 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 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. 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 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 \$1,000 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 *faat choi* [a hairy seaweed whose name sounds like the word "prosperity"]. I always pick up a chopstickful of *faat choi* and pray: "Let me have it."

A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO CHINA

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 \$50,000! 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 wanted to make my mother happy.

After [selling my business to my Clan Brother Lou Hou], 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 Yuen, ten; Ming Seung, nine; and Lai Ngan, five.

On November 24 we arrived in Hong Kong. I was going to take a ferry to Canton City 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. It took five days and altogether close to \$2,000 to make all the arrangements.

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 well 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. 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 her.) 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



Gong Yuen Tim with his family in China, 1948. (Courtesy of Mary Gong)

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. Every day 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 *mou* 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, sixty baskets of ham on shank, and 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 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 Chui Jau 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 nervous about 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 on board the SS *President Wilson* for America. Our 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 before. 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 Yat Ging Lau [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 stuff 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." 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.

At twelve midnight we started 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 Hobbs-Parson 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-laws' 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, Aunt Leung Ju was visiting Third Aunt. Third Aunt said, "Why don't you leave your kids here for tonight?" And Aunt Ju 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. Afterward 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 Kingsburg, 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." 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 \$1,000 the first month after I took the business back.

GETTING INTO THE SUPERMARKET BUSINESS

On Chinese New Year in 1950, another daughter, Lai Sim, was born. By then I had saved over \$10,000 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.

A year later, Cousin Lau Som 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 on 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 \$15,000. I put down a deposit immediately.

Afterward 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 \$3,600 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 \$30,000 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.

TIME TO TAKE IT EASY

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 at St. Francis Hospital for an operation. She was there for 101 days and came home on January 22, 1981. During her stay our five daughters took turns keeping 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 something, 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 a stroke. On March 8, at three o'clock in the afternoon, she passed away peacefully, holding onto my hands. She was seventy-seven.

I had many sleepless nights after she passed away. In our fifty years together, it was my wife who constantly encouraged me to move up. 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. I remember one Saturday when I came home earlier than usual. When I entered the house, I saw her holding a duster, about to punish one of the children. When she saw me walk in, she stopped, 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. 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."

SOURCE: Gong Yuen Tim, "A Gold Mountain Man's Memoir," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 1992, pp. 211-37. Translator: Marlon K. Hom.

OTHER REFERENCE

Him Mark Lai, "Chinese Regional Solidarity: The Hua Xian (Fa Yuen) Community," in *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press, 2004), pp. 143-76.

"I was the only Chinese woman in town"

Reminiscences of a Gold Mountain Woman (1982)

Helen Hong Wong

The voices of Gold Mountain women are finally entering the public record. Judy Yung met and interviewed Helen Hong Wong in 1982 while researching the history of Chinese women in America. A petite and spry woman of seventy-four years, Wong immigrated to the United States as a merchant's wife in 1928. During the interview she spoke quite openly about her detention experience at Angel Island, her hardworking life in the Midwest, where she was often the only Chinese woman in town, and her struggles raising a family of four children during the depression years. Although she never realized her Gold Mountain dream of a life of wealth and leisure, she nevertheless found fulfillment in her work, family, and community. Wong made her home in Chicago, where she passed away in 2001 at the age of ninety-one. Her story is one of the few first-person accounts we have of life in the Midwest, where Chinese immigrants such as her husband went to start small businesses in the 1920s.

A HARD LIFE IN CHINA

I was born in Hom Gong Village in Sunwui District [in 1909]. My *goong* [grandfather] and father owned a hemp business in the nearby town of Nam How. The Chans and the Lums were feuding and we were caught in the middle. As a result, our house was burnt down in a fire and we had to run to *jo poh's* [grandmother's] home in Ngui Hoi. We didn't have much money. Just put some bedding and clothes in some large baskets—the kind with handles that you pull rope through to carry things—and had some hired hands help us carry them to *jo poh's*. I was only eight months old and my brother was four.

After four years of hiding there, we went to Gong Moon [a seaport] to live. Then when I was seven we moved to Hong Kong. We had a hard life then. There was no work for women or children. My father worked at a fur-

Women have more rights in America. They can run the household, not like in China where the mother-in-law dictates. Even when the husband sent money home, the mother-in-law kept it. But I must admit that my Gold Mountain dream was not fulfilled. Instead of becoming a rich *gamsaanpoh*, I ended up working like a slave. When I came in 1928, things were cheap. String beans were 2 cents a pound; pork chops were 25 cents for three pounds. But no one had any money to spend and there was no food in the house. We didn't know any better at the time, only that we saw these *gamsaanpoh* with all this jewelry, fine clothes, and *mui nui*. So we assumed life was easy in Gold Mountain. But there was no gold to be picked up. Instead, we all had to work hard.

SOURCE: Helen Hong Wong, interview with Judy Yung in Chinese, Chinese Women of America Research Project, June 17, 1982, San Mateo, California.

OTHER REFERENCES

- Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* (San Francisco: HOC-DOI, 1980).
 Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and their Lives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
 Judy Yung, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986).

Second-Generation Dilemmas (1930s)

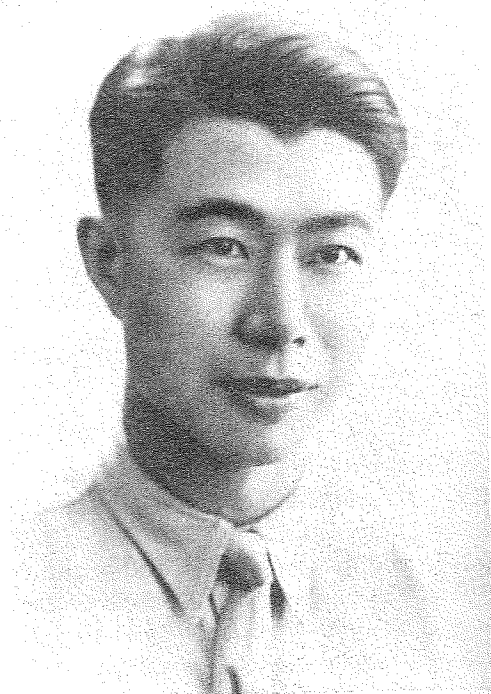
Pardee Lowe

George Cooper Pardee Lowe, born in 1904 in San Francisco, was named after the governor of California at the time. He has the distinction of being the first Chinese American to write a full-length book, *Father and Glorious Descendant* (Little, Brown, 1937). The autobiography introduced readers to Chinese American life by telling the story of the author's relationship with his father, whom he loved and respected. Good-humored in tone, the book nevertheless firmly criticized racial prejudice in America and recalled critical moments of anti-Chinese discrimination in this country. *Father and Glorious Descendant* was a commercial success and went through several editions. Lowe's work was also published in major publications, including *Asia*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Survey Graphic*, and *Yale Review*.

Pardee Lowe had prepared well for his writing efforts. He graduated from Stanford in 1930, where he studied Chinese, English, history, and public speaking. He was a star member of the university debating club and completed a thesis on the history of anti-Chinese prejudice in the United States. After graduation, he went to Harvard, where he received an MBA in 1932. He also had many friends among college-educated Chinese Americans and was personally familiar with the Chinese communities because of the family business and his own church activities.

After finding that his MBA opened no doors, Lowe returned to San Francisco and began to conduct extensive sociological research on the Chinese community, completing a major study of its demographic, economic, social, historical, and cultural features. His efforts included extended personal interviews and firsthand reports of living conditions. He completed much of this work for the State Emergency Relief Administration, but his efforts were never published. He apparently hoped to include his work in a later collaboration with a Stanford sociologist, but it too never materialized.

The following "case histories," as he called them, are a few of the fascinating human-interest accounts Lowe completed as part of his research efforts. They offer poignant insight into depression-era Chinese American lives. Lowe's own candid personal com-



Portrait of Pardee
Lowe in 1946.
(Courtesy of
Anita Lowe)

mentaries also unintentionally reveal his own frustrations and inner conflicts about being a well-educated and ambitious Chinese in a racially restrictive society.

Lowe pursued many interests in his long life: business, the military, academia, and government. He even earned a doctoral degree in Russian studies from the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1950s. He joined the U.S. State Department and was stationed in Taiwan for many years in the 1960s, after which he served as an educator in the Middle East and Africa, working for the State Department and UNESCO. Pardee Lowe died in 1996 at the age of ninety-two.

ELEVATOR BOY

This is a brief case history of an American-born Chinese young man who has had several years of college but has never graduated (1937):

- 1909 Born in San Francisco of parents who emigrated from China.
- 1915-1923 Educated in public grammar schools of Chinatown; also attended Chinese language schools.

- 1923-1927 Enters American high school, gives up Chinese school, and takes to athletics.
- 1928 Matriculates at University of California but fails to pass examinations. Spent time in Chinatown playing athletics, in attending dances and other social activities. Stated that "he couldn't find time to study; too many distractions in Chinatown."
- 1931 After a few more failures in examinations, he quits college to work in a Chinatown store. He drives a truck for a Chinese butcher store. Discharged, he claims, because he was not polite enough. Failed to greet the numerous bosses each morning according to traditional forms of Chinese etiquette. Was making \$50 per month, including found [room and board].
- 1932 Becomes a potato sorter, working with a group of Chinese "gangs" on the waterfront. Makes about \$30 per month. "Just enough for spending money," he explains, "And I must rely upon my folks for board and room." When the C.W.A. [Civil Works Administration] was formed in the winter of 1932, he was one of the many Chinese who joined up. "Found the pay swell," "best he ever earned," "they treated him like a white-man."
- 1933 When C.W.A. is closed up, he attempts to get on the rolls of the State Emergency Relief Administration work relief projects. Fails because investigation discloses that his family has just enough income to take care of him.
- 1934-1935 He has taken to doing odd jobs; anything to provide him with spending money. He has driven for the gambling houses, worked as busboy in Chinese restaurants, served as a waiter, houseboy. The last I heard of him he was working in a Jewish hospital as an elevator boy. At that time he was threatened with the loss of this job, since all Chinese employees of the hospital were being discharged in compliance with the demands of the other (non-Chinese) workers that their jobs be given to "white" people.

OWN COMMENTS: This is a fairly typical case of a Chinatown youth who has failed to make either an educational adjustment or vocational adjustment to the hyphenated world in which he lives. Chinatown has "unfitted" him for

work in its own community and he lacks something, aside from racial factors, which makes it difficult for him to hold a job in the American community.

When I have talked to him at the Y.M.C.A., where he is a member, he has been quite frank with his ideas. He would like to get married but sees no prospect of supporting a wife. He feels that his wife no doubt could find and manage to hold on to her job; but he does not see any permanent vocational employment for himself. As he put it, "I have no money of my own. I have a high standard of living, but I see no chance of ever realizing it. There are no steady jobs for the likes of me. What future is there for me?"

The young man drifts. He consoles himself with the social life that Chinatown has to offer. Every cent he makes he spends on clothes, "good times," while, as he expresses it, "my family gets angrier and angrier." His family would want him to find a job that would be permanent, so that he can marry, settle down, and forget all his foolishness.

"In fact," he adds, "they would be willing to loan me the money on which to marry if I would only agree. But what for?" he questions. "I would only be tying myself down, forever in debt. Forced to do whatever the old folks say. As long as I don't marry, I'll still be able to keep my independence, to do as I please."

Actually, however, the young man hasn't the independence he imagines. His freedom of action is definitely limited. He can find no job among Americans. He has thus far failed to hold one among his own people. His economic opportunities are limited and precarious, apt to be cut off at any time. If it were not for the generosity of his parents who keep him with room and board, he would never be able to maintain the high personal standard of living which he desires.

China holds no place for such an individual and the young man realizes this.¹ His only chance for a living, good or bad, is in Chinatown. But whether the young man has yet awakened to this fact or not remains to be discovered. Some of his more serious comrades have warned him of the danger of drifting. But he seems, or gives the impression, of being wholly enamored of American ways. He is ashamed of the old culture; and makes every effort to be as American as possible. This is manifested in every conceivable manner possible—in dress, speech, slang, ideas, sports, entertainment, and reading matters.

PULLMAN STEWARDESS

This is the brief case history of a second-generation American-born Chinese girl (1936).

1. Second-generation Chinese Americans who went to China during the 1930s for employment opportunities and/or nationalist reasons were generally well educated or trained in aviation.

She is born in San Francisco's Chinatown. Is about 28 years of age, with a high school education. Appears to have only a little formal Chinese education, although she speaks it well. Has no family and lives at the Chinese Y.W.C.A., considered to be the finest living accommodations in Chinatown.

She works on the Overland Limited railroad train of the Southern Pacific as a girl stewardess. She must wear Chinese clothes, namely jacket and trousers, but detests the idea. She makes \$80 a month, plus tips. Explains that her monthly total income varies between \$125 and \$150 per month. Finds her work not too distasteful. The cultured and professional American classes she finds very interesting and tolerant. Can't stand salesmen and their families. Their ignorance of Chinese-American ways antagonizes her. Says: "They always are so surprised to see me reading American books and magazines and exclaim, 'Oh! Do you read English too?' They also are amazed at my fluent English. As if we could not speak, read or write. It gets my goat!" Explains that she has very little to do on the trains except to manicure fingernails and give high-class maid service to the wealthy travelers who desire it. Is extremely well thought of by the train-crew who treat her with respect. Has little to do with the Pullman porters or dining-room waiters. While somewhat sorry for their racial plight, she expresses the typical American woman's aversion toward Negroes. Compares the situation of the Chinese in this country with them, realizes that there isn't much future for a native-born Chinese. Concludes, "My job is not bad at all. There aren't many girls who can make as much as I do and the work is not difficult. I am satisfied to hang on to it until I get married."

She is engaged to a native-born Chinese college student, who is majoring in physical sciences. Just as soon as he receives his degree they plan to go back to Canton and live. Feels that China is the only place for American-born college graduates to live. Admits that the adjustments will be terrific, but is willing to make the attempt. Since there are so many who have returned and made the grade, she feels that she and her fiancé should be able to do likewise. States: "In China, we can be somebody. We can even walk the streets, without being stared at. I understand that there is a feeling of 'belonging' that is absent in America."

Although she has never explained the reason, she does feel racial discrimination very keenly. Speaks very strongly on the point of intermarriages. "I hate the idea of Chinese boys marrying white girls." When pressed for the reason, explains that such unions, so she has read and believes, end "unhappily." Her attitude in regard to interracial relations, however, is not consistent, for in the next breath she speaks with pride of her American and Japanese friendships, mainly with boys of her own age. Does not hesitate to go out with them if they invite her. This was before her engagement. Since she has promised _____ to accept him, she has discontinued her old interracial friendships. Concludes, "I might still go out with some of my old

boy friends (regardless of race) if it were not for the fact that Chinatown gossips. The 'talk' is so bad that one gets a bad reputation immediately. It would never do for me to court disaster since my boyfriend is studying in the East and I would have no opportunity to explain to him in person why I accepted So-and-So's invitation. Therefore, I have considered it wisest not to go out with anybody except girls. I protect myself that way."

Despite an income of approximately \$150 per month, she finds herself almost broke every month. Explains, "Easy come, easy go!" "When I stop off at Chicago," she continues, "I go to all the best shops and buy presents for myself and my friends." Insists upon \$14 shoes . . . evidently because this compensates for her racial disadvantages. Maintains charge accounts at a number of the more exclusive shops in San Francisco and Chicago.

OWN COMMENTS: Typical native-born girl. Not exceptionally good-looking but has a very attractive, vivacious manner. Well turned out. Is extremely attractive in Chinese garments, which she detests. Her American clothes, however, err on the side of being a little too stylish. In other words, she, due to her opportunities of observing the wealthy society women on the Pullman trains, buys what they do, anticipating the style trend.

While stressing her Chinese background, herself, she is or gives the appearance, except for racial physical characteristics, of being just another American girl. In other words, her actions belie her claims. From the tone of her conversations, I gather that she would gladly remain in America and become an American if it were possible. Because of the advantage of money and travel, she unconsciously adopts a patronizing air toward the young people of her own race.

Have met her a number of times. Best opportunity for observation was when I made my last trip eastward. Observed that she kept very much alone, nothing much to do. Gather the impression that the Southern Pacific Company and the Pullman Company wish to exploit the Chinese atmosphere as much as possible. Even the bar stewards on many of these crack trains are Chinese, usually older men who are American-born. She had nothing to do with the bar-steward, explaining, "It's a better idea not to get too friendly with anybody—train crew or passengers—on a Pullman train. You never can tell what will happen."

Adds: "My best times on duty have been with well-to-do people of our own race, who are glad to have somebody to talk to. Also with cultured Americans, such as college professors, who seem to have a sympathetic understanding of our problems."

CONSUL GENERAL'S BANQUET

This long report begins with a careful description of a dinner hosted by the consulate general of China in San Francisco for prominent "second-generation" Chinese Amer-

icans in an effort to improve relations between the consulate and the Chinese community. Lowe included the following comments in his report about the second-generation guests.

The general characteristics of this group may be drawn as follows: Approximately one-quarter of the group were born and raised outside of Chinatown. In fact, the most interesting individuals, the ones who had become famous in the community either from a professional or social service viewpoint, were non-Chinatownians, driven back into S.F. Chinatown in order to find a place to exercise their talents and training. Practically all, men and women, are of the middle-class bourgeoisie. With hardly an exception, they are children of comparatively poor families who have early come into contact with Christian missionaries, their schools and training. As a result of this contact, their parents have been able to get ahead in business because of their knowledge of English or of American customs and the children have received the education and much of the training of Americans. Most of them have had to work their way through college since the family due to the large number of children cannot support them. This also accounts for the large number of the group who have attended the state university rather than some private college.

Practically all of the living of this group is gotten through Chinatown or the Chinese. Only one doctor (a woman) and one architect depend upon Americans for their source of livelihood. They live on a hyphenated Chinese American standard of living and where their income is sufficient, they are expected to support their parents and their brothers. (This includes purchase of homes, sending the brothers and sisters to college, aiding them to get started in business or helping them to get married.) In the period of prosperity, namely before 1930, when professional competition in the community was not so keen and everybody had money, this group was comparatively very well off. It owned its own homes, or lived in luxuriously furnished apartments, owned high priced automobiles, dabbled in the stock market, took extensive vacations, and gave constant and expensive parties both to their American and Chinese friends. Despite the depression, this group still manages to hold its own economically. Even though it may constantly run into debt, the old standards of living are still maintained.

With one or two exceptions, all of the men have married girls who have not had the same educational training as themselves. This can be explained by the fact that the old style families did not believe in giving their daughters more than high school training. Those girls who did succeed in acquiring a college education were of unusual character and ability and usually seldom married. Marriage was difficult for them, for few of the uneducated Chinese dared ask them for their hand and the group of college-educated Chinese was highly limited.

It is interesting to note that out of this small group of 100 or so young people there were four who had contracted interracial marriages, all of them outside of the state of California. A Chinese male artist had married an American college girl (non-Californian); a Chinese lawyer (from Hawaii) had married an American woman teacher in Honolulu; a Chinese woman insurance broker had married an American architect (non-Californian); and a Chinese male research assistant had married an American musician (non-Californian). All four inter-married couples were present at the banquet. No discrimination was shown.

Although most of the group has been married for some time, only about 15 couples (out of a total of 50) had children. Two couples had three children each, two couples had two, and the rest, 11 couples, had one each. (Since then, 1933, some four years have passed, and of the same total group, there have been only 5 babies added.) From general conversation with couples in this group and from general hearsay, there is definite indication that birth control is being practiced. The mothers of this group invariably go to the hospitals for confinement and are accustomed to both pre- and post-natal medical attention; also to the well-baby clinical services. Child rearing for them is less arduous than for their parents, who usually raised six or more children at the same time, but more expensive since they will not accept anything but the best for their infants.

The foods eaten by this group are mainly American; breakfast and lunch is always American; much of it being ordered from the Chinatown restaurants. The main meal of the day, dinner, is usually Chinese. Quite often the main dishes are also ordered from Chinatown's Chinese restaurants. The ease with which this can be done and the economical prices charged for dishes induce housewives to constantly fall back on this practice. If desired, no meals need to be prepared at home. Should one be hungry at any time during the 24 hours, day or night, a simple phone call will bring piping hot Chinese or American meals to one's home within 15 minutes.

Clothing is always as expensive as the couple can afford. For the women, at least, much of their time is spent in shopping for American clothes, which are the external symbols of prosperity. To be in style is very important for one's local personal prestige. One woman's organization boasts that none of the members ever attend their numerous social functions in the same costume twice. While there is not the same competitive stress on clothing among the men-folk, there is no apparent slovenliness. This desire for neatness in appearance and for fashionable men's clothes stems from a desire to appear no different than other non-Chinese Americans in the eyes of the general public. In other words, there is an intense desire for conformity, which finds its expression (or one of them) in wearing the same style of men's clothing. Man for man, the Chinese-American white-collared individual far outshines the American in neatness of dress and in style. As one young Chinese-American

put it, "It's bad enough to be a Chinese in America without drawing added attention by being shabbily or improperly dressed. Besides, no one wants to be classified as a 'greenhorn' newly arrived from the old country."

Housework is not a very important item with the women of this group, especially for those who live in the modern apartments. Vacuum sweepers, carpet cleaners and modern cleaning equipment make household cleaning comparatively easy. Where many of the meals are ordered from the Chinatown restaurants, dish washing is unnecessary, as the restaurant dishes are invariably returned unclean. In case of heavy housecleaning such as washing windows and cleaning kitchen walls, Negroes and Filipinos are hired at the rate of \$2 per day to do the work. Very little of the laundry is done at home, except for the women's personal linen. Chinatown's laundries are good, speedy and cheap.

There is much leisure for the wives of the professional group, if they are disposed to enjoy it. Where their children are old enough to go to both Chinese and American schools, little of their time is required to train them. For those whose husbands' incomes are insufficient to meet the ever-expansive wants of a typical middle-class Chinese-American family, the wives usually engage in some occupation such as working the garment-sewing factories (a social as well as an economic activity), serve as clerks in stores, or do odd jobs. Where the husband's income is sufficient, however, outside work for the wife is no longer a necessity. For such a fortunate wife, there are innumerable outlets for her social activities. First and foremost, there are the countless games of *ma jong* and bridge which are played every afternoon and evening in the homes of many of the wealthier groups of Chinatown. *Ma jong*, particularly, does not draw the line between generations of Chinese women. At the same table may be found women who are grandmothers, young matrons, and even girls not yet out of high school. The latter group [is] fairly rare and are only invited to play where there are insufficient players. According to the older women, it is not right for young children not yet economically self-sufficient to gamble. The point to be emphasized, however, is that by means of *ma jong* and other games of amusement the older and younger generations of women in Chinatown are brought very close together. The *ma jong* table becomes the training-school, as it were, where the older generation of women pass on the traditional lore by word of mouth to the younger Americanized women. Bridge is mainly a younger generation game and is mainly indulged in when the women's modern social groups get together for their periodic teas and celebrations. Poker and blackjack are Western card games in which the older women sometimes join the younger ones.

For the women who do not care for games, there are other outlets. She may join any one of a score of clubs sponsored by Chinese, religious or educational organizations. The chief of these, of course, is the *FIDELIS COTERIE*. This organization is like the Junior League in conception and in its

activities. Stress is laid on giving monthly luncheons at the very best American hotels, periodic parties at home, entertainments for "sweet charity's sake." As observed, the organization is made up of the non-college educated wives of the more successful professional men of Chinatown (including San Francisco and the East Bay). The organization tends towards snobbery and aims to be exclusive. Presumably divorcees and the poor are ineligible for membership. Whether because the younger college graduates do not wish to be associated with a group with ultra-Babbitt virtues, or whether it is because they do not have the income with which to meet the excessive expenses attached to such a membership, it is nevertheless true that few of them join this group. The age of most members is in the forty-year group. This also constitutes a barrier. So often has the boast been heard from members of this organization that its motto should read, "Money can do anything!"

Most of these women are able to drive automobiles. In the wealthier families the wife always has her own car. Weekend trips and long automobile excursions during vacation periods are very common.

For the men, fishing, the cultivation of indoor fish pools, trap shooting, hunting, golf, motoring, as well as the common forms of gambling—usually poker and *ma jong*—are the chief recreations. To this should be added "good food."

Religion does not play too prominent a part in the lives of this group. Although all are members of early Christian families and have a "sound" Protestant training, few are actually active church members. They do, however, send their children to Sunday School in order, as they express it, "to learn how to do good," "to learn morality," and to "keep them out of mischief." They subscribe to their churches during financial campaigns but not generously. They observe baptisms and deaths and weddings in the Christian manner, but aside from these family crises they do not participate actively in religious rites. Easter and Christmas see them usually attending church. Their attendance is conditioned partly by their own childhood training, partly by their desire to conform to the ideals of their non-Chinese fellow citizens, and where they have children, by the desire to see their children perform in the services.

This group does not believe in the old Chinese religious superstitions. It is not above tolerating them, however, and will, if compelled, observe them at funerals, weddings, christenings, etc. Its dominant religious beliefs are colored by Protestant Christianity—as are its morals.

As a group the second-generation professionals and their wives believe in performing their American citizenship duties. They do this not only in order to justify their citizenship but also to impress the outsiders (namely Americans) that they are worthy of this privilege. It might be mentioned also that they vote in order to protect their own interests as much as possible. For the last two presidential elections, this group has been evenly divided between the Republicans and Democrats. As with the Americans, the same motives

impelled each group of Chinese professionals to vote as they did. The wealthier Chinese believed that Republicanism would preserve their status better, while those not so well to do wanted the Democrats to win so that they could get better jobs. It was a case of the "Haves" versus the "Have Nots." A secondary factor was the belief that the Republicans were primarily pro-Open Door and friendly to China and that the Democrats were more inclined to let such a dangerous policy lapse. It was also believed that the Republicans would give the Chinese a better deal since they have been traditionally pro-Chinese as regards the Chinese domiciled in this country. The Democrats were still considered to be anti-Chinese through and through. Neither of these last two factors, however, had much to do in swaying the Chinatown electorate.

While voting at every opportunity, these professionals and their families are none too hopeful that every right, implicit as well as explicit, will be granted them by the American government. Such a goal will eventually be attained, they believe, if Chinese immigration restriction continues and the Chinese become entirely Americanized and the Americans a little more understanding and tolerant of the Chinese-American background. In order to achieve this end, this group always eagerly joins any Chinatown organization whose purpose is to improve the conditions of Chinatown and its inhabitants. "The Oppose Anti-Exclusion" activities of the Six Companies; the Americanization efforts of the native-sons organization; and the civic improvement efforts of the Chinatown Progressive Association meet with its approval.

This group believes in keeping healthy. It relies mainly upon Western medicine and medical methods. However, it is willing to also experiment with Chinese herbalists and herbs where Western medicine fails to give relief. Healthy recreation, mainly out-of-doors, and the pursuit of hobbies represent health-contributing activities.

This group also believes in the Community Chest communal type of care for the "down and out" of Chinatown. However, in regard to its own personal family, it still retains the old sense of familial responsibility. It does not particularly favor the old methods of caring for the unable, which relied upon the district organizations and sub-organizations.

Little of the news either of Chinatown or of the outside world is obtained by this group from Chinatown's five [Chinese-language] newspapers. Reliance is mainly based upon the reading of the American daily newspapers for outside news; the *Chinese Digest* for news about the Chinese second generation; and gossip and the "grapevine telegraph" for news about the old folks in Chinatown.

In conclusion it might be well to speak a little about what the dinner party that the Consul General gave was for. When the Consul General, a native-born Chinese of Singapore, educated partly in China and then in the higher institutions of the United States, became the Consul General of San Francisco, he wished to bring about a closer sense of cooperation between the

consulate and the older and younger generations of Chinatown. In order to meet the most representative group of the younger people, he had his consulate staff prepare an invitational list. A series of American banquets in a Chinatown dine and dance palace followed. The first and chief banquet was the one which I attended. It was an extremely representative group of second-generation young people. The program of the evening included dancing and speeches. The speeches included one for the introduction to the newly arrived Consul General and the other was made by the Consul General himself. The gist of the latter's remarks was that the separation of the viewpoint of the younger and older generation of Chinatown was both great and tragic; and that unless such a gap were bridged, he could see little hope for the future of the community; and that it would be his duty to see that such a gap should be bridged.

For the two years that this Consul General served here, he did all that he possibly could to bridge this gap. While he did not succeed in any great measure, he did contrive to win the affections of the younger generation. In the minds of the younger generation, he represents the best Consul General yet sent by the Chinese Government. Because of his efforts, they believe that the Chinese Government is actually a little bit interested in the welfare of the Overseas Chinese.

SOURCE: Pardee Lowe Collection, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University.

OTHER REFERENCES

- Pardee Lowe, *Father and Glorious Descendant* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943).
 K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan, eds., *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
 Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

I Am Growing More Chinese— Each Passing Year! (1934)

Anna May Wong

In this interview with Los Angeles columnist Harry Carr, twenty-nine-year-old Anna May Wong reflects on her Chinese American identity at the pinnacle of her successful career as a film actress. The second child in a family of seven children, Wong was born in Los Angeles in 1905. She made over sixty films in an acting career that spanned two world wars and that, more often than not, was limited by stereotypical and demeaning roles of the Mongol slave or spurned Chinese mistress. As she tells Carr in this interview, Anna May Wong had always wanted to be an actress, even if it meant going against the wishes of her parents, who operated a laundry outside Chinatown. Opportunities opened up to her because she was in the right place at the right time, but also because she was persistent, hardworking, and talented. However, racial discrimination in the guise of American orientalism and "yellowface" typecasting prevented her from ever realizing her full potential in Hollywood.

At the time of this interview, she had just returned from a successful tour in Europe, where she played leading screen and stage roles and was widely acclaimed by German and British critics. In the afterglow of her European achievements, Anna May Wong spoke with self-confidence and assurance about her future as a Chinese American actress. No longer the "defensive little Hollywood flapper," she said, she now found "solace and philosophy in the tradition of my own people."

With every passing year I feel myself more Chinese; it is as though I were taking up the heritage of my race. Yet I have never seen China.

My father came from a little town near Canton.¹ He is Chinese to the bottom of his soul, charitable, tolerant, wise.

I was born in Los Angeles. My real name is Wong Luie Song²—which

1. In other accounts, Anna May Wong said that her father, Wong Sam Sing, was born in Michigan Bluffs, California, and her mother, Lee Gon Toy, was born in Oakland, California.

2. Anna May Wong usually spelled her Chinese name Liu Tsong.



Anna May Wong in the 1930s. (Courtesy of Elaine Mae Woo)

means "Yellow Frosted Willow." I did not learn to speak English until I went to school.

My first school was in the old building on California Street. I was very miserable. The American boys used to chase me around at recess, called me a Chink and pulled my little pigtail.

I don't think I resented it bitterly or ever hated them. To me it was a vague impersonal danger and misery. Later I went to another public school where I was treated kindly.³ When I was old enough, my father sent me in the evenings to a native Chinese school where I learned to read and write Chinese.

NO SHINING STUDENT

I am afraid I did not shine as a student, either by day in the American schools or in Chinese in the evenings. The whole thing seemed like a vague dream.

3. The racial harassment got so bad that her parents ended up sending the children to the Chinese Mission School in Chinatown. Later, Anna May Wong attended Los Angeles High School, where she said she faced no discrimination.

However, I must have tried hard because Chinese writing is terribly complicated and difficult and I learned to read and write.

At a very early age, I went movie-crazy. I used to play hookey from schools to go to the 5-cent movies. With Chinese logic, my father used to protest that if I had to be a bad girl and play hookey, why didn't I play hookey from the American school, which cost him nothing, instead of the Chinese school where he had to pay tuition.

We always celebrate Christmas at our little house. My sister Ying begged for a big doll with flaxen curls who would squeak Mama and Papa when her tummy was squeezed. I asked for a whole lot of little dolls. I had a purpose:

MY BED A STAGE

Using my bed for a stage, I arranged the tiny dolls for actors and made up all sorts of dramas of my own. When my brother Jimmy got old enough, I pressed him into service and we two acted plays that I made up. Jimmy, being all boy, finally struck and refused to play-act any more.

One day I happened to see a movie in which was a Chinese actor. I ran around to an old Chinese who helped out the movies by getting Chinese actors for them. He looked me over critically. "Well," he said, "you are a big girl and you have big eyes; you will do." I felt flattered until I learned that he had just had an order for 600 Chinese actors in a hurry and hadn't been able to find but fifty.⁴

SO I RAN HOME

I ran home and announced to my parents that I had decided to be a motion-picture star. To say they were displeased is not to express the idea. They simply hit the ceiling. The Chinese had old-fashioned notions about play-acting.

I defended myself, saying that I didn't see anything wrong with a business in which so many of their old friends were engaging. They were staggered. Just then a squadron of buses stopped at our house to pick me up. There were about 150 Chinese on the way to the studios to play extra parts and my father and mother knew most of them. They stayed so long gossiping in front of the house that the picture was kept waiting; but meanwhile I had slipped without further objection into the van.

That first day I simply walked around with a mob of Chinese. Later the director told me to come back for another picture in which I could play a part as one of three girls who could carry lanterns. I felt the responsibility for the whole movie industry on my shoulders.

4. James Wang, an actor and casting agent, was looking for Chinese extras for the film *The Red Lantern* (1919).

I had noticed that actresses were "made up" on the sets, so I produced a grand scenic version of myself. I borrowed my mother's rice powder rag and fairly kalsomined my face. With the most painstaking effort, I managed to curl my straight Chinese hair. As a finishing touch, I took one of our Chinese red papers, wet it and rubbed off the color onto my lips and cheeks.

The director looked at me with astonishment and gasped: "Good God!"

Two costume women, under his orders, seized me, rubbed off my fine red cheeks and washed down my head until they got the curl out of my hair.

When the picture came out, I went without lunch for more than a week to save money enough to take five girl friends up to the top gallery of the old California Theater on Main Street to witness my triumph.

All we saw were three dim Chinese girls walking by with lanterns. "Which is you?" my girl friends asked. "I . . . I don't know," I faltered. "I think I must be the outside one."

I had a long wait, but finally Mickie Neilan gave me a real part. I was the Chinese mistress of Noah Beery in a drama.⁵

Finally I was lucky enough to be cast in an early picture of Norma Talmadge's—made in color.⁶ I had a tragic part in which I had to cry. I cried so that I could not stop crying. Finally the cynical assistant director called out: "Someone throw Anna May Wong a raft."

I had in the meantime become Anna May. We chose the first name because all of the children of our family had American names with four letters. I added the name "May" because Anna Wong didn't sound well and I liked the suggestion of springtime in "May."

My big chance came through Douglas Fairbanks when he gave me a part in "Thief of Bagdad."⁷

Just as I was finishing that picture, I had an offer to go to Germany.

I felt it was a crisis in my life. In a way I was running away from something that was beginning to develop into at least a good chance of a career in Hollywood—yet the door opened and I walked through.

There have been three events that were psychological mileposts in my life.

The first was when the worm turned, so to speak, and I ceased to be on the defensive. When I was about 17, a truck came booming down the street and the driver yelled for me to get out of the way. He called me "Chink." To my own surprise I blazed back a remark equally insulting at him and he wilted. That was the turning of a corner for me.

5. Marshall Neilan took a liking to Anna May Wong and wrote the part of Toy Sing for her in *Bits of Life* (1921).

6. In *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), Anna May Wong played the leading role of Lotus Flower, who dutifully commits suicide after her white lover abandons her for someone of his own race.

7. Anna May Wong's supporting role as the "Mongol slave" in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) stole the show, and from then on she was known as Hollywood's "Oriental siren."

NEXT MILEPOST: BERLIN

My next milestone was in Berlin. The first picture in which I appeared made a hit.⁸ Crowds waited in the lobby for me to come out. Weaving my way through that pack of admiring fans, I seemed suddenly to be standing at one side watching myself with complete detachment. It was my Chinese soul coming back to claim me. Up to that time I had been more of an American flapper than Chinese. That was also the turning of a corner.

Other film offers came up in Germany, but the producer of my first picture advised me to go to France and to England first, then come back to Germany.⁹

That early stay in England was a wonderful experience for me. The English are a cool, detached, broad-minded people. I made warm friendships that helped me. I studied German, French and music.

Strange to say, the more deeply I studied, the more did my Chinese blood call to me. I found solace and philosophy in the tradition of my own people.

My friends say that my appearance and manner have changed since my early Hollywood flapper days. I know that I feel differently in my consciousness.

I don't believe that anything would ever worry me again. Those pigtail pulling days of my terror and unhappiness could never come back.

TIMELESSNESS, A SAVIOR

I suppose what I feel is the racial philosophy of the Chinese, and that philosophy could be expressed as timelessness.

This is such a short life that nothing can matter very much either one way or another. I have learned not to struggle but to flow along with the tide. If I am to be rich and famous, that will be fine. If not, what do riches and fame count in the long run?

Above all else, Chinese blood beckons to a great tolerance. Sometimes one hears that even the Chinese coolies have a feeling of superiority. That is not strictly true. What he feels for other and more hectic struggling races is a vast pity. He feels sorry for them as one feels sorry for a squirrel madly running around a wheel in a cage. Nowhere to go and taxing his strength to get there.

Chinese are imbued with the consciousness that each of us is only a link in a long life chain. The important thing is the family. What does it matter that one link shines more brightly than another? Chinese are good business men, but a Chinese merchant never hurries and never struggles. He keeps his same little shop and saves his money.

8. Anna May Wong received rave reviews for her performance in *Song* (1928), in which she portrayed a German-Malayan woman in a doomed love affair with a white man.

9. Richard Eichberg, an independent German producer, was Anna May Wong's mentor and adviser during her European tour.

CHINA IS ROOTED SOUNDLY

Time adjusts all things. China knows that it is rooted in sound philosophy and inward strength. It has gone its slow serene way and seen empires rise and fall; nations rise to grandeur and power; then to perish.

It is the Chinese way to sit still, enjoy each day and each period of life—serene in the knowledge that an all-wise Providence is working out a plan of which each of us is a part.

We can't hurry the slowly grinding mills of the gods; and we do not wish to.

China will be a great nation one day. We know that. What does it matter if it is in this decade or next century or the century after that.

I—that flustered, worried, defensive little Hollywood flapper—found happiness when I ceased to worry about time.

No one can give me what belongs to some one else; and no one can take away that which is mine.

In 1935 Anna May Wong was turned down for the leading role of O-lan in The Good Earth, and the part was given instead to the white actress Luise Rainer. Devastated, she traveled to China for ten months to study Chinese theater and to visit her father, who had retired to his home village in Taishan. There, to her dismay, she was chastised for portraying roles that demeaned the Chinese. On her return to the United States, she found roles in films that were more sympathetic to the Chinese, as in Daughter of Shanghai (1937), thanks to the allied relationship between China and the United States during the war years. She also did her part for the war effort by fund-raising for China and by entertaining American troops in Alaska and Canada. Then she faded into obscurity, working only intermittently in film and television, until she died of a heart attack in 1961 at the age of fifty-six.

SOURCE: *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, September 9, 1934, p. 3. Reprinted by permission of the *Los Angeles Times*.

OTHER REFERENCES

- Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003).
- Judy Chu, "Anna May Wong," in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, UCLA, 1976), pp. 284–89.
- Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- Karen Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- Anna May Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl," *Pictures*, August 1926, pp. 28–29, 106–8; September 1926, pp. 34–35, 72, 74–75.

Declaration of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (1933)

The anti-Chinese movement that culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 succeeded in reducing the overall Chinese population as well as driving Chinese workers out of the more desirable occupations. By the turn of the century, one out of every four Chinese men was eking out a living as a laundryman. Although laundry work required ten to sixteen hours a day of tedious and menial labor, Chinese gravitated to it because it did not require English fluency or much capital. The largest concentration was in New York City, where there were estimated to be 3,550 Chinese laundries when the Great Depression hit.

In 1933, the non-Chinese laundries in New York City convinced the Board of Aldermen to pass a city ordinance requiring all laundrymen to pay an annual licensing fee of \$25 and a security bond of \$1,000. It also required U.S. citizenship of all laundry operators. The new law was obviously intended to drive the Chinese competition out of business. When the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) proved ineffectual in dealing with the crisis, the Chinese laundry workers took matters into their own hands and created the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA).

The following declaration, supported by 254 laundrymen, came out of CHLA's founding meeting. The Alliance went on to successfully challenge the new law. The licensing fee was reduced to \$10 and the security bond to \$100, and, most important, Chinese were exempted from the citizenship requirement. Reflecting the rise of radical politics in the country at the time, it was the first time that a leftist group had openly challenged the power structure of New York Chinatown.

Soon after, CHLA's membership grew to more than 3,000 and the organization became actively involved in supporting China's War of Resistance against Japan while criticizing Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime. In the 1960s and 1970s, the CHLA supported the civil rights movement and called for the normalization of U.S.-China relations. By then, however, its membership had dropped to about 100 as a result of



Artwork from the cover of a 1938 Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance pamphlet, showing a laundryman breaking the chain of "unequal laws." (Courtesy of Renqiu Yu)

FBI harassment during the McCarthy period and the overall decline of the hand laundry business.

Ever since China's fence of insulation was broken by European and American capitalist-imperialism, the Chinese socioeconomic basis was fundamentally shaken.¹ The rural economy was bankrupt, and urban industries shut one after another. Unable to make a living [in China], we were forced from our families, to leave our hometowns, and to go overseas to seek petty profits. But we do not have large amounts of capital to invest in commerce, therefore most of us in this country are engaging in the hand laundry business. So, this trade became the lifeline of the Chinese community, and our wives and children back home depend on it too.

1. In reference to foreign incursions into China in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Recently the New York City Council of Aldermen proposed a discriminatory ordinance against hand laundries. If the ordinance is unfortunately passed and becomes effective on July 1, tens of thousands of Chinese laundrymen would be stranded in this country and our wives and children back home would be starved to death. . . . That's why we have to fight against it with every effort.

However, we Chinese laundrymen in New York City never had a formal organization of our own. The organization that existed in the past exploited us in disguised names.² It failed to protect our interests and, worse, it damaged our business. This has been proven by our experiences in the past. Therefore we have to organize a formal organization that truly represents our own interests in this campaign to fight the discriminatory ordinance. Without such an organization, there is no hope to abolish the discriminatory ordinance. The CCBA and the organizations under its control cannot represent our case to the City government. They are but taking this chance selfishly to serve their interests.

Based on these reasons, we set up the preparatory committee of the New York CHLA, expecting to establish as early as possible an organization that truly represents the interests of the Chinese hand laundries. [With such an organization] we can not only unite ourselves to fight the City government collectively so as to abolish the discriminatory ordinance, but also prevent such discrimination from occurring again in the future. Moreover, our own organization will be able to solve the problem of the rapid decline of service charges as a result of competition among hand laundries. Collective efforts will make the service charges rise again. In short, to establish a collective organization is indeed an urgent task for us.

—Two Hundred Fifty-four Hand Laundrymen

SOURCE: *Chinese Nationalist Daily*, April 24, 1933, p. 1, and as translated in Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, to Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 35. Reprinted by permission of Renqiu Yu.

OTHER REFERENCES

- Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, N.Y.: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
 Him Mark Lai, "To Bring Forth a New China, to Build a Better America: The Chinese Marxist Left in America to the 1960s," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 1992, pp. 3–82.
 Leong Gor Yun, *Chinatown Inside Out* (New York: Barrows Mussey, 1936).
 Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

2. According to sympathizers in the CHLA, previous laundrymen's guilds had been more interested in extracting fees and dues from their members than in representing their interests.