
Kwan Ying Lin: Kwan Yuen Sheung

you are my kin, my grandmother,
kwan ying lin, kwan yuen sheung.
born a *nanhai*, *kow kong* woman
in the province of guangdong in 1900
you were but a few years old
when you entered your lifelong profession
as an actress in the cantonese opera.
through hard work and perseverance
you made a name at a young age
as a *fadan*, famous especially
for your role as puen gum lin
from the water margin classic,
mow chung da fu, the battle of
mow chung and the tiger.
in 1922 you first came to *gum san*
as a guest performer at the
liberty theater on broadway.
in 1923 you married actor au yun choy
at the home of your godmother
in oakland, california.
you left him after the birth of three children
continuing to support him and his household:
his wives, children and servants,
as well as your own.
your eldest daughter, au cho chiew,
was to follow your footsteps onto the stage.
you were renowned for your acting,
your beauty and the power of your voice.
my grandmother, you have endured
eighty years of work and struggle
taking the songs and legends of china
to your people in the chinatowns of vancouver,
seattle, san francisco, l.a.,
new york, chicago, hawaii; to vietnam,
hong kong, macao; to shanghai

nanhai: a country south of guangzhou

kow kong: a town in nanhai county

fadan: "flower maiden" role, a coquette, seductress, woman of the world

gum san: gold mountain, the name chinese pioneers gave to america

and provinces in southern china
my *poa poa*, i burn incense and make offerings.
i write this poem for all to know
your life,
your work.

poa poa: grandmother

Chinatown Talking Story

the gold mountain men said
there were two pairs of eyes
so beautiful
they had the power
to strike you dead,
the eyes of
kwan ying lin
and mao dan so.

kwan ying lin, my grandmother,
and mao dan so were stars of the
cantonese opera
and women
rare
in a bachelor society.

when my grandmother first came
to gold mountain in 1922
She was interned on angel island
for weeks, a young chinese girl,
prisoner in a strange land.

when mao dan so
first arrived
she came on an entertainer's visa
and made \$10,00 a year.

it cost \$1.25 to see a show,
a quarter after nine.
pork chop rice was 15¢.

when theater work was slow
or closed down
other work was found:
washing dishes,
waiting tables,
ironing shirts.

in china
families with sons
saved and borrowed
the \$3,000
to buy a bright boy
promise in a new land.

in china
girls born into poverty
were killed or sold.
girls born into
prosperity
had their feet bound,
their marriages arranged.

on angel island
paper sons and blood sons
waited
to enter *gum san*
eating peanut butter on crackers
for lunch and
bean sprouts at night.

the china men who passed
the interrogations
were finally set free.
the ones who failed
were denied entry and deported
or died by their own hands.

in 1940, the year
angel island detention center
was closed,
a job at macy's
paid \$27 a week.
only chinese girls
without accents please apply.

my grandfather had four wives
and pursued many women
during his life.
the chinese press loved
to write of his affairs.

my grandmother,
a woman with three daughters,
left her husband
to survive on her own.
she lived with another actress,
a companion and a friend.

the gold mountain men said
mao dan so was as graceful
as a peach blossom in wind.

she has worked since
she was eight.
she is seventy two.
she sits in her apartment
in new york chinatown
playing solitaire.
her hair is thin and white.
her eyes, sunken in hollows,
are fire bright when she speaks.

the gold mountain men said
when kwan ying lin
went on stage
even the electric fans stopped.

today
at the grave
of my grandmother
with fresh spring flowers,
iris, daffodil,

i felt her spirit in the wind.
i heard her voice saying:

born into the
skin of yellow women
we are born
into the armor of warriors.

To An Old Lady/ Sleepless On Night Streets

four o'clock,
morning sharp air
cold.
chinatown's lights
still
announce *jook*
and people are
heaping from cars
from bars
into the
restaurants
to eat.

walking past
in the dark,
you are hardly
noticeable.
small, hunched
in a doorway
selling the
sunday paper.

you in the cold
old as my grandma,
in a doorway,
selling the
sunday paper.

i will buy
a paper
from you, i call,
i will buy ten
if that will help
if that will help
you in the cold
old as my grandma

jook: a rice-based soup made usually with
meat, chicken or fish.

A Chinese Banquet

for the one who was not invited

it was not a very formal affair but
all the women over twelve
wore long gowns and a corsage,
except for me.

it was not a very formal affair, just
the family getting together,
poa poa, kuw fu without *kuw mow*
(her excuse this year is a headache).

aunts and uncles and cousins,
the grandson who is a dentist,
the one who drives a mercedes benz,
sitting down for shark's fin soup.

they talk about buying a house and
taking a two week vacation in beijing.
i suck on shrimp and squab,
dreaming of the cloudscape in your eyes.

my mother, her voice beaded with sarcasm:
you're twenty six and not getting younger.
it's about time you got a decent job.
she no longer asks when i'm getting married.

you're twenty six and not getting younger.
what are you doing with your life?
you've got to make a living.
why don't you study computer programming?

she no longer asks when i'm getting married.
one day, wanting desperately to
bridge the boundaries that separate us,
wanting desperately to touch her,

kuw fu: uncle
kuw mow: aunt

tell her: mother, i'm gay,
mother i'm gay and so happy with her.
but she will not listen,
she shakes her head.

she sits across from me,
emotions invading her face.
her eyes are wet but
she will not let tears fall.

mother, i say,
you love a man.
i love a woman.
it is not what she wants to hear.

aunts and uncles and cousins,
very much a family affair.
but you are not invited,
being neither my husband nor my wife.

aunts and uncles and cousins
eating longevity noodles
fragrant with ham inquire:
sold that old car of yours yet?

i want to tell them: my back is healing,
i dream of dragons and water.
my home is in her arms,
our bedroom ceiling the wide open sky.

Call Me Goong

SCENE: AN OLD BUILDING OFF GRANT AVENUE IN CHINATOWN. THERE ARE NO CURIO SHOPS OR RESTAURANTS IN THIS ALLEY, ONLY RUN-DOWN RESIDENCE HOTELS WHERE THE OLD WOMEN AND MEN OF CHINATOWN LIVE. A YOUNG GIRL, FIFTEEN, IS STANDING IN A DARK CORRIDOR HOLDING A WELL-USED PAPER BAG IN ONE HAND. SHE KNOCKS ON A DOOR.

GIRL: Phew! Thank goodness this is the last stop. What a hot day to work!

SHE PUTS THE BAG DOWN AND WIPES HER BROW WITH THE BACK OF HER HAND. THERE IS NO RESPONSE FROM INSIDE THE ROOM SO SHE KNOCKS AGAIN.

GIRL: Hey, Ah Bahk! Wonder what the old man's doing? What's taking him so long?

SHE KNOCKS HARDER, THEN PRESSES HER EAR AGAINST THE DOOR.

GIRL: Hey, Ah Bahk, it's your lunch. Open the door. What's keeping the old man? Gee, I hope he's okay. Why doesn't he open the door? He's gotta be inside, he can't go out on his own.

SHE KNOCKS AGAIN AND SHOUTS:

Hey, hey, Ah Bahk, open up, it's your lunch. Lunchee! Are you in there, Ah Bahk? Your lunch is getting cold. See tiew ngow yuk today!

THE DOOR OPENS.

GIRL: Gee, I was getting worried about you.

AH BAHK: Hey, whatsa big hurry? Me in bathroom.

THE OLD MAN TURNS AND WALKS SLOWLY BACK INTO THE ROOM WITH THE HELP OF A WALKER. THE GIRL FOLLOWS. SHE TAKES OUT TWO CARTONS OF FOOD FROM THE BAG AND SETS THEM ON A TV TRAY BY THE BED. THE OLD MAN SITS DOWN HEAVILY.

AH BAHK: You early. Not your time yet. My belly know. It not complaining!

GIRL: Well, I thought I'd come a little early today. Got lotsa homework. Okay, hope it's still hot. Gotta run. See ya tomorrow.

AH BAHK: Whatsa big hurry? Tell me what the day today?

GIRL: I think it's the 31st. Yeah, it is.

AH BAHK: Aiyah, gotta get my check from the box fast before bad man take it. Some of the old folk here, they not

goong: grandfather

Ah Bahk: "old man," familiar form of address

see tiew ngow yuk: beef fried in fermented black bean sauce

get check. Bad man break box and take it.

THE GIRL HESITATES.

GIRL: You want me to run down and check the mail for you?

AH BAHK: Ah, you good girl for old man.

GIRL EXITS. REAPPEARS SOME MINUTES LATER WITH HIS MAIL.

AH BAHK: How come so many? No check in here. Mebbe come tomorrow, the 1st. Whatsa allow this other stuff? You tell me. Long time no see so many letter.

GIRL: Well, this package is full of coupons.

AH BAHK: What for, coupons?

GIRL: Shall I open it?

AH BAHK: Yeah, yeah.

GIRL: Here's a free sample of shampoo.

AH BAHK: Hey, no use for me. Got no hair on my head! You good girl, you keep it.

GIRL: This is for cat and dog food.

AH BAHK: No good. Only thing in this room that eat is me! No use for them. Throw allow out. What else?

GIRL: Something from Time/Life Books.

AH BAHK: What kinda book?

GIRL: It's a brochure about their cooking books.

AH BAHK: No use! Me, old timer eat only Chinese food. Not like you young kid now eat too much junk: ham-bur-ga, meew shake, fry potato like strings. Yeech! Only thing I like is rare row-see beef. The rest no good.

GIRL: Hey, here's a letter for you but I don't know who it's from. I don't read Chinese.

AH BAHK: A letter? For me? Ah Fong never get no letter.

GIRL: I guess it's for you. It's got your apartment written on it.

AH BAHK: Let me see. Hey, no use, cannot see. Where my glasses? Haven't used them for so long now. Old man, old memory no good. You see them anywhere?

THE GIRL WALKS AROUND THE CLUTTERED ROOM.

GIRL: Nope, I don't see them.

AH BAHK: Where I put them? Old man no memory, mow gay sing. When the old woman was here, she take care of me. Now cannot find my eyes!

GIRL: When was the last time you had them?

AH BAHK: Hey, how I know that? If I know that I know where my glasses are!

GIRL: Okay, I guess so. Don't get so excited over it.

AH BAHK: Of course I excited. Not every day I get letter. Where it from?

GIRL: I don't know.

AH BAHK: Look at the *see-dam*.

GIRL: Oh yeah. It's from Hong Kong.

AH BAHK: *Heung Gong*? Who could it be? I only want good news. Bad news no good. If it bad news send it back to *Heung Gong*!

GIRL: How am I going to know what it is? I don't even know the language!

AH BAHK: You young kid now speak American, write American, eat American. Pretty soon you gonna look like American too. Forget about Chinese, forget about China. Good thing I never had *kidee*. Big shock they allow turn out like *bak gwei*. My old woman die in her bed sooner!

GIRL: Well, I'm not your kid so why are you getting on my case? You're beginning to sound just like my grandma!

AH BAHK: Young kid *mow lai*, no manner. Should not be yelling at the old folk. *Mebbe* I no see good but I hear pretty good!

GIRL: Okay, *Ah Bahk*, sorry. Want me to see if your neighbor can come read it?

AH BAHK: No way he home. Nice day allow old man go talk in the park. Me too, I used to go down every day, me and the old woman. Allow the *ah mow* see us coming and say, here come *Ah Poo* and the umbrella man!

GIRL: How come they called you that?

AH BAHK: I have trouble walking. My old legs no want to hold up this body. *Mebbe* I work too hard allow my life. Got no money to buy a cane and the old woman cannot hold me up. One day we find umbrella in the garbage pile. One got the holes in it and the other don't want to open. No good for the rain but okay for old man to walk with one in one hand and one in other hand. That's why they call me the umbrella man!

GIRL: Say, that's pretty funny—*Ah Bahk* the umbrella man! You got a walker now, huh?

AH BAHK: Yeah. One day the umbrella break and I fall. Good thing a girl help me. She a *sew-sho* worker lady. Got

see-dam: stamp

bak gwei: white devils

ah mow, *Ah Poo*: old lady

sew-sho: social

me this walker, say it better than the umbrella. Well, what we do now? You one girl can't read, me one old man can't see and this letter we both can't read. Girl, you look in drawer help old man find his eyes, okay?

GIRL: Well, I gotta go pretty soon...

AH BAHK: Pretty soon okay, but not right away. Old man needs his eyes, okay?

GIRL: Okay, I'll help you find your glasses. Guess I'd be lost if it were me.

AH BAHK: Hey, good girl! I get you some *jew-goo-lit* to eat, help you see better find old man's eyes!

GIRL: It's okay, *Ah Bahk*, I already eaten lunch.

AH BAHK: *Jew-goo-lit* not luncheon, it candy. I know allow you kid like candy.

GIRL: It's really okay, I'm not hungry.

AH BAHK: No *ah-goo-mun*. Young girl supposed to listen to the old folk, okay?

THE OLD MAN GOES TO THE DRESSER AND RUMMAGES AROUND. HE TAKES OUT A LARGE BAR OF CHOCOLATE NEATLY WRAPPED IN A BROWN PAPER BAG.

AH BAHK: The old lady buy this last year. She like *jew-goo-lit* but no can read. Bring it home and find it got the nuts in it. Us old folk got no teeth to eat nut. You go 'head, still good.

GIRL: Thanks but I'm not supposed to eat chocolate.

AH BAHK: How come? Allow kid like *jew-goo-lit*. Whatsa malla you?

GIRL: I got acne and the doctor told me not to eat it.

AH BAHK: *Ac-ne*? Whatsa *ac-ne*? Me so many year in gum san never hear of *ac-ne*.

GIRL: See all these bumps on my face? They're pimples.

AH BAHK: Hey, never mind. They don't know what they talking about. The old woman eat lotsa *jew-goo-lit*, never get one bump allow her life!

GIRL: Well, I don't think so...

AH BAHK: Go 'head, girl, never mind what they say.

GIRL: Oh, alright, guess one piece won't hurt. D'you want-me to start with these?

THE GIRL OPEN DRAWERS AND GOES THROUGH THEM.

AH BAHK: You a Chinatown girl?

GIRL: Yeah, born at Chinese Hospital.

jew-goo-lit: chocolate

ah-goo-mun: argument

AH BAHK: You live with your ma and bah in Chinatown?
GIRL: No, they died when I was young. I live with my poa poa. She works as a cashier at the Diamond Restaurant.
AH BAHK: Too bad about them. What about your goong?
GIRL: I don't have a goong. I never knew him. My poa doesn't talk about him, even when I ask. It's not so bad now, but when I was a kid, I really missed not having a goong 'cos I didn't have a bah either.

THE GIRL FINDS A WORN BROWN CASE AND TAKES IT OUT OF THE DRAWER.

GIRL: Hey, I think I found it. Is this it, huh?
AH BAHK: That from second drawer? Me *jen mow no*, no brains. That where she allow time put them so I no forget. Ah, that old woman of mine, been with me long time. Okay, give me letter. I read what good news.

HE OPENS THE LETTER. A SAD LOOK CROSSES HIS FACE.

GIRL: What is it, Ah Bahk?

AH BAHK: My good friend, Lao Wang, he pass away few week ago.

GIRL: Gee, sorry to hear that.

AH BAHK: Lao Wang and I, we work up at Lee's Cafe D'Lite on Stockton Street for twenty year. I the dishwasher and he the cook. One day he say to me, been in *gum san* too long. Work day in, day out for what? Now old man got nothing to do but play checker at Portsmouth Park and talk to the old folk. I go back to Heung Gong, mebbe have some fun before I die. He single man can go back. But I got old woman. Well, no reason to get you young girl sad too. Old folk supposed to die.

GIRL: You know what, Ah Bahk, I get lonely too sometimes. I don't have brothers and sisters and it's hard for me to make friends at school. I feel different from the other kids. All they do is talk about clothes and boys. It's boring to me. I like to read and I write in my diary. D'you get lonely?

AH BAHK: Yeah, ever since the old woman die. Now I all alone. It hard when you live with someone for a long time. We were together forty year. One morning she no wake up. It good, it just like she want, go in her sleep. But she allow time tell me take her bones back to China. How can do? Every month wait for gold

bah: father

check, wait for green check. Pay for room, pay for food. No more money. So I tell her, old woman, you and me been together same room here long time now. I dress her in her new year *mien lahp*. I ask the old man next door go buy one of those big magazine from China with the color picture in it. I take down allow old calendar and paste up picture of China over allow the wall. Then I use blanket cover up the window. She not need blanket now, she not cold no more.

GIRL: How come you covered up the window?

AH BAHK: In the dark the old woman think she back in the fields in Guangdong. She be happy. But they take her away. She crazy mad now. They bury her in Californ'. I can do nothing. When they find her here, they think me crazy, want to send me to a hospital. Hah, they all think me crazy old man. This room, this my home. Me go no place else. Forget it!

GIRL: Gee, I'm sorry to hear about your wife. D'you have other family?

AH BAHK: No. No kidee, no family, just me.

GIRL: I'm glad I talked to you, Ah Bahk. Sometimes I get depressed and think that I'm the only one in the world who's lonely. At least my poa and I got each other. Well, I gotta go now and do my homework. My poa probably thinks I'm reading story books at the library. Bet you anything she'll yell at me the minute I walk in the door. Ah Bahk, maybe when I come tomorrow you can tell me some more stories.

AH BAHK: Sure thing, girl. See you tomorrow. Hey girl...

GIRL: What is it, Ah Bahk?

AH BAHK: Call me goong.

mien lahp: a padded Chinese jacket