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Preface

The *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* editorial committee is pleased to launch its 2011 edition as an online journal. We are excited about the possibility of drastically increasing our readership! Last year's 2010 edition, offering both hard and online versions, was our transitional year. We hope you enjoy our 2011 totally online edition and keep in mind that we are still working on increasing accessibility and user friendliness, such as being able to download a specific article. We welcome your feedback.
This 2011 edition of Chinese America: History & Perspectives explores the status of Chinese in the United States from the 1830s to 2008. The articles provide us with insights into how White America reacted to a Chinese woman during the era of Andrew Jackson, how a Caucasian elementary school teacher encouraged children in Chicago to emphasize Chinese cultural heritage in performances throughout the city during the 1930s, how three Chinese Americans—Chingwah Lee, Laura Lai, and Arthur Tom—overcame obstacles to become successful in their respective endeavors during the mid-twentieth century, how a Taiwanese restaurant specializing in Shanghai-style dumpings established a franchise store in Southern California in 2000, and finally, how transnational travel affects the identities of Chinese children adopted by U.S. families in the twenty-first century.

“The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies: Race, Gender, and Public Exhibition in Jacksonian America” by John Haddad tells us about importers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, who had been selling expensive luxury goods from France to wealthy Americans, but by the 1830s saw that the rising middle class in the United States was a potential market for high-quality but less expensive products from China. Hoping to sell such goods as shawls, silk boxes, lacquered furniture, fans, and snuffboxes in America, the Carnes wanted a marketing strategy that would draw attention quickly and dramatically to their products. They worked with one Captain Obear, who persuaded the father of Afong Moy from the Guangzhou area to let her board the Washington, a merchant vessel laden with Chinese goods headed for the U.S. market, in 1834. Afong Moy, with her interpreter, appeared in numerous cities in the eastern portion of the United States, from New York to Washington and onward to Richmond and New Orleans, against the backdrop of beautiful Chinese products. While she was obviously used as a marketing tool, the Carnes charged the public to see her. The advertisements emphasized her tiny, bound feet—an attraction that persuaded many Americans to pay the rather high admission fee to see her. As Haddad observes, Afong Moy became a “household name” after just several months in the United States. Newspaper articles publicized her appearances, her demeanor, and, of course, her bound feet. She even met members of Congress and President Jackson himself, as well as Philadelphia doctors.

Through his research into this fascinating event, Haddad tells us about America’s perception of the Chinese, the China–United States trade, and the subtle similarities during this period between American middle-class women and Chinese women, both of whose societies demanded that females be relegated to the home. Haddad also speculates on why Afong Moy might have agreed to make such a trip, and why she stayed in the United States for some years after the Carnes’ marketing trip was over.

“Drumming Up Chineseness: Chicago’s Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band in the 1930s and 1940s” by Jeff Kyong McClain relates the story of Olga Huncke, who taught at Chicago’s Haines Elementary School, which during the 1920s and 1930s had a growing number of Chinese students. Miss Huncke organized a group of approximately fifty Chinese youngsters dressed in traditional Chinese garb to perform as a band before the National Association of Music Clubs meeting in Chicago in 1927. From that beginning, Miss Huncke incorporated more and more aspects of Chinese culture into her classes, including Chinese music and poetry. Her classes performed plays inspired by Chinese history and culture. These performances understandably generated considerable attention within the Chinese community in Chicago, but news about Miss Huncke’s students was also reported in the Chicago Daily Tribune and the North American Chinese press.

Miss Huncke began to focus increasingly on the Chinese Rhythm Band. While only approximately 16 percent of her students were of Chinese ancestry during the 1930s, she had all of her students of various nationality groups play instruments inspired by Chinese orchestras, such as drums, the pipa, and the erhu. This band performed at weddings, art exhibits, and conventions. During the Sino-Japanese War, the band was used during patriotic activities, including the visit by Madame Chiang Kai-shek to the United States in 1943 to support China’s wartime campaign. The band traveled to
various towns in the Chicago area to raise funds for China, and eventually even performed at an anti-Fascism event. Jeff Kyong-McClain's article provides us with valuable information regarding how a teacher and her band of youngsters served to rally the public around the cause of Chinese nationalism.

Jean Dere's article “Born Lucky: The Story of Laura Lai” reveals little-known but very interesting facets of the life of Laura Lai, the spouse of Him Mark Lai, whose contributions to the study of Chinese Americans were innumerable and remarkable, and to whom the Chinese Historical Society of America owes a great deal of gratitude for his constant support. While many of us know about Him Mark, fewer people know about Laura Lai. Jean Dere's article fills this gap.

The piece starts with a quotation from Laura Lai: “I was lucky.” That good fortune was reflected early in her life, when Laura’s father insisted that instead of saving a slot for a “paper son” to go to the United States, he should report that he had a daughter. Unlike her mother, who felt that boys were superior, her father treated girls and boys with an even-handed attitude. Laura attended elementary school in Hong Kong, came to the United States in 1949, and lived in San Francisco Chinatown, where she continued with her education. She regularly went to the Mun Chung club, where she eventually enjoyed participating in the club’s dramas and met Him Mark. Laura was able to pursue a successful career of her own. She started as a keypunch operator at Union Oil, then moved to PG&SE and was promoted to a supervisory position. Later she trained to be a computer operator, and again, because of her skill on the job and her ability to develop strong interpersonal relationships, she was made a supervisor at a PG&E subsidiary, Pacific Gas Transmission.

“Chingwah Lee: San Francisco Chinatown's Renaissance Man” by Atha Fong tells us about one of the cofounders of the Chinese Historical Society of America. Fong examines Chingwah Lee's very public presence as a leader whose mission was to improve the image of Chinese Americans. Born in 1901 in San Francisco to a Chinese doctor and his wife who had immigrated from China, Chingwah was exposed to racial prejudice at a very early age. Yet his parents never shunned their Chinese ancestry: they communicated to Chingwah and his eight siblings their appreciation for Chinese artifacts, an emphasis on a strong family unit, and the belief in working hard. Fong's article shows how Chingwah was able to become a bridge to White society as well. By World War I, Chingwah had cofounded Chinese Boy Scouts Troop 3. That troop sold Liberty Bonds for the United States during the war and took over one thousand American soldiers and sailors on sightseeing trips through Chinatown.

Chingwah's intellectual pursuits took him to UC Berkeley, where he was engaged in a myriad of activities, including the Chinese Christian Students’ Association and the International Club, while taking courses in anthropology, psychology, Russian, lumbering, and agronomy, to name a few. One of the evolving themes of his adult life was that his own generation of Chinese Americans, while imbued with certain facets of Chinese culture, was also very much involved with “American” culture. He also wanted to prove that Chinese Americans were a major asset to the United States.

His career took various twists and turns as he worked as the Chinese YMCA boys’ secretary, then became Gray Line Tour’s chief Chinatown tour director, started publishing the Chinese Digest with Thomas Chinn, went to Hollywood to perform in The Good Earth, gained renown as an expert on Chinese art, and founded the Chinese Historical Society of America with Thomas Chinn, C. H. Kwock, H. K. Wong, and Thomas Wai Sun Wu in the 1960s. Atha Fong provides us with a tribute to a man who has left important legacies to the Chinese community. As she points out, more needs to be revealed about the Chinatown pioneers, like Chingwah, of the early to mid-twentieth century, whose work preceded the advent of Asian American Studies programs in the 1960s and 1970s.

William Wong’s oral history of Arthur Tom, who lived from 1912 to 2006, provides us with a fascinating picture of Oakland’s Chinatown during the early twentieth century through the eyes of Arthur, who succeeded in pursuing a fulfilling career at the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). The article traces the Chinese people who lived on Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Webster, and Harrison Streets in Oakland; it also describes the schools attended by the children in Chinatown and the businesses catering to the population there. Arthur Tom pursued an education in business while working part-time at a Caucasian-owned restaurant. He sought an opportunity to advance himself by taking a civil service exam for a clerical job with the DMV. He passed and became the only Chinese person working for the DMV at that time. While there was pervasive prejudice in Oakland against the Chinese—reflected in restrictive housing covenants, for example—Arthur never felt discrimination within the DMV itself. He received a series of promotions to supervisory positions.

With the advent of new information systems, Arthur displayed his talent in converting numerous DMV offices to the use of computers. He also helped standardize the training of new driver’s license examiners in the state. Throughout this experience, he gained the confidence of White colleagues. His work background and open personality also stood him in good stead when he joined the Army Air Corps during World War II and worked in Atlantic City taking case histories of problematic soldiers for the military’s psychiatric boards. Through this oral history, we gain a feeling for Arthur’s sense of well-being both on and off the job.

“Flexible Authenticity: Din Tai Fung as a Global Shanghai Dumpling House Made in Taiwan” by Haiming Liu presents the unique history of a popular Chinese restaurant in Taiwan that successfully expanded to many countries in the world, including the United States. Liu initially summarizes the history of Chinese restaurants in the United States, from the early days of Cantonese restaurants to the post-1965 restau-
rants, which reflected the wide range of culinary regions of China from which immigrants came. His article then focuses on the Din Tai Fung restaurant in Taipei, a city known as a center of Chinese regional cuisine. Founded by Yang Pin Ying and his wife, Li Pam Mae, Din Tai Fung specialized in Shanghai-style steamed dumplings. Its owners tried hard to simulate the dumplings that people remembered from eating Shanghai-style dumplings in mainland China. Customers indeed saw the dumplings as authentic, and the restaurant was so popular that it drew long lines of patrons every day.

By 2000 Din Tai Fung had established restaurants in many metropolitan areas of the world, and its owners decided to open a franchise in Arcadia, California. Liu describes the family’s approach to this new opening. He also relates why the Arcadia restaurant’s customer base grew beyond the local Taiwanese immigrants. The article suggests that Din Tai Fung is one of many Taiwanese-based business enterprises that have met with success in the United States, and analyzes the reasons for this phenomenon. Din Tai Fung has now established stores in mainland China as well.

Jillian Powers joined a group of Chinese children adopted by American families as these families took their adoptees back to China for a “homeland tour” in 2008. “Chasing China: Adoption Tourism, Images of China, and the Negotiation of Asian American Identity” provides us with numerous insights into these families as well as a sociological look at transnational adoptions. She describes the differences between adopting parents of the past, who did little to socialize their children into their birth cultures, and parents now, who feel that their adopted children should maintain some connection to their cultural heritage.

While traveling with the three American families in China, Powers focused on observing and interviewing members of the families. She relates how some families reacted to the poverty evident in China, how some parents connected with the children’s former caregivers, and how distanced some of the children felt from China itself. Powers concludes that during the tour, the children’s attempts to pass as Chinese, which usually failed, tended to bring the children together. As Powers states, “While [the children] were engaging with the homeland and the people in the land of their birth, they were not of them, but they were of each other.” The children had a generalized pan-Asian identity that fits into the current trend of multiculturalism in the United States—that is, to claim and respect separate ethnic identities. Powers’s article is an important addition to our understanding of American families and multiculturalism.

Chinese transliterations are consistent within each essay but not throughout the publication.
The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies
Race, Gender, and Public Exhibition in Jacksonian America

John Haddad

INTRODUCTION

In 1830, Harriet Low, the niece of a China trader, strolled through the narrow streets of Canton, China. Though this activity may seem routine, she was actually acting in bold defiance of a Qing law that forbade the presence of Western women in China. Not surprisingly, Low attracted a crowd of Cantonese onlookers, most of whom had never before seen a White woman. In her journal, Low commented on their behavior: “I think the Chinese are much more civil than either American or English people would have been if a Chinawoman with little feet had appeared in our streets, dressed in the costume of her country. Why, she would be mobbed and hooted at immediately!”1 Four years later, her prediction was tested when a merchant vessel arrived in New York Harbor conveying just such a passenger.

When shipping news columns in the city papers announced her arrival, the curiosity of New Yorkers was piqued. In the days that followed, they would scour the dailies for updates on Afong Moy, the young woman who would come to be known as “the Chinese Lady.”

This article tells the story of Afong Moy, focusing on the shrewd marketing scheme that brought her to New York, the American views of China she faced and helped reshape, the intense public interest her exhibition generated, and her extensive tour of the United States.2 Moy visited some of America’s largest cities after departing New York, drawing crowds everywhere she went. In Washington, she even provided President Andrew Jackson with a private performance in the White House. Yet “performance” may not be the appropriate term, for performing was conspicuously absent in the exhibition of Afong Moy. Indeed, the following list of Boston-area amusements hints at the difference between Moy and some of the other popular attractions of Jacksonian America:

Mr. Maelzell burns Moscow in an improved style. —The eastern Magician, Bahad Marchael, astonished crowds by raising and laying ghosts, and shows himself to be the most expert professor of legerdemain and necromancy that has ever visited the city — The Chinese lady, Afong Moy, has arrived there from the south — and last, as well as least, there is an exhibition of trained fleas.3

Unlike most acts from this period, Afong Moy did not juggle, work with trained animals, or profess to communicate with the dead — yet American audiences did not seem to mind. For they required only that the Chinese Lady be exactly that: authentically Chinese and a woman of affluence, elegance, and refinement.

Indeed, Afong Moy’s nationality, gender, and class were absolutely crucial to her popularity, because without each of these, she would not have possessed the remarkable physical feature that set off a firestorm of interest everywhere she went: her diminutive feet. Like many Chinese women, Moy had undergone the painful process of foot binding as a child. During her exhibitions, men in the audience tended to fixate on her small feet, deeming them inexhaustible sources of anatomical fascination, moral disgust, or erotic pleasure. While women also studied Moy’s feet, they were equally drawn to her surroundings—a luxurious setting composed of Chinese home furnishings and decorative objects. In other words, the Chinese Lady appealed to men and women alike, but their consumption of her performance tended to be actuated by different desires and concerns. While the male gaze was motivated by impulses we could classify as moral, physiological, and sexual, the female gaze was often driven by commercial and aesthetic concerns.

We can best understand the highly gendered response to the Chinese Lady by situating her exhibition in its larger economic, cultural, and historical contexts. As Americans flocked to see the exotic Asian beauty with the tiny feet, their behavior in her presence and subsequent written accounts were, to a large degree, shaped by sweeping changes transforming American life: the market revolution and rapidly industrializing economy, the rising tide of religious revivalism and reform movements, and the advent of new gender
roles in a reconfigured home. One reporter from Baltimore was keenly aware of the peculiar American behavior Moy was witnessing daily; he reported in jest that she was considering publishing her observations on the "domestic manners of the Americans"! His joke underscored an important irony: the exhibition of the Chinese Lady, while offering some insight into Chinese civilization, shed plenty of light on American society in the age of Jackson.

THE RAREST OF SIGHTS

Though Afong Moy was not the first Chinese person to touch American soil, she was probably the first Chinese woman. This fact is not surprising, given the closed nature of China before the Opium War (1839–42). Back in 1760, Emperor Qianlong, desiring to control the empire's foreign intercourse, had adopted a highly restrictive policy regarding the movement of Westerners in China. The latter were confined to the southern port of Canton and banned from traveling to other parts of the country. If China was largely unknown to the West, affluent Chinese women were utterly enveloped in mystery. Since wealthy Chinese men sequestered their wives and daughters from the public, these women seldom ventured onto the streets, leading an existence that was almost exclusively domestic. The ancient practice of foot binding, which became widespread in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), further intensified their seclusion by inhibiting their mobility.

In Canton, women with small feet were so hidden from view that Americans residing there treated their attempts to see one like a game. "A Chinese lady I have never seen," wrote John Latimer, a trader, in the 1820s. "They never walk, indeed I believe they cannot owing to the barbarous custom of confining the feet while young." He added that a Chinese friend had promised him a pair of shoes, 3½ inches long, once worn by that individual's wife. Brantz Mayer, a travel writer who visited Canton in 1827, described the "well-born lady" in China as "a hot-house plant, grown under glass and watched as carefully as the choicest bud"; her "paleness" was a symptom of her "concealment" and "seclusion." At the time of writing, Mayer had successfully secured a pair of the sought-after tiny shoes. According to Osmond Tiffany, another travel writer, foreigners' intense fascination with foot binding eventually reached the awareness of Cantonese shopkeepers, who, eager to profit from this curiosity, began to sell clay models of "contracted feet, painted flesh color and set into shoes."

By the time of Afong Moy's arrival in 1834, this image of the Chinese woman as a delicate flower, hidden from society, had already filtered into Americans' collective consciousness. In 1831, James Kirke Paulding (1778–1860), a member of Washington Irving's literary circle, composed a story for the New-York Mirror entitled "Jonathan's Visit to the Celestial Empire." Since Paulding had never visited China, he almost certainly gathered the raw materials for his fictional travelogue from the published accounts of missionaries and merchants. In the story, Jonathan discovers wild ginseng growing in his native Salem and decides to sell it to the Chinese. After voyaging to Canton, he enjoys several adventures, one of which involves his accidental intrusion into the inner sanctum of a Chinese home. Once inside, he becomes privy to the rarest of sights—a genuine Chinese lady.

He approached her still nearer, took up the guitar, and begged her to play him a tune... Jonathan was... as handsome a lad as might be seen; tall and straight, with blue eyes, white forehead, and red cheeks, a little rusted to be sure with the voyage. The pretty creature with the little feet, whose name was Shang-tshee, ventured at last to look at this impudent intruder, and, sooth to say, he did not appear so terrible at the second glance as at the first. She smiled, and put out her small foot for Jonathan to admire. She then took her guitar and played him a tune.

Jonathan's chance meeting with a Chinese lady provides both parties with an erotic encounter. Though nothing becomes of their flirtation (when he gets too close, she scratches his face with her long, sharp fingernails), Paulding's story nevertheless foreshadows Afong Moy's relationship with many of the men in her audience: she would sing to them and show off her small feet as they gazed upon her with thinly veiled sexual curiosity. With Chinese women being so tantalizingly difficult to see, it is not surprising that Westerners treated them almost like mythic creatures. They yearned to witness one in the flesh. After all, to look upon one, as Jonathan does in the story, was to have access to a sight that was doubly forbidden: a woman secluded from society inside a country sealed off from the world. Clearly, an individual who could smuggle a woman with small feet out of China and exhibit her in America stood to benefit financially. Yet the Chinese Lady, unlike many of the so-called human curiosities displayed in the United States, was not the creation of a showman like P. T. Barnum. Rather, her story is interwoven within the larger economic tapestry of Jacksonian America.

A NOVEL PLOY FOR A NEW ECONOMY

When Captain B. T. Obear of Beverly, Massachusetts, sailed the ship Howard from Canton to New York in 1832, Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, the vessel's owners, placed the cargo of Chinese goods up for auction. Though this event perhaps seems rather ordinary in the mercantile world, it actually signaled a new development in the China trade. Prior to the Howard's venture, the Carnes had specialized in importing luxury goods from France intended for New York's upper-class consumers. However, a change in the economic climate prompted the Carnes to place a stake in the China trade. Before the Jacksonian era, the market for Chinese goods had possessed only two tiers: luxury goods, including high-grade porcelain and fine teas, for wealthy Americans and low-grade
ceramic wares and cheaper teas for everyone else. However, when the market revolution of the 1830s effected an expansion in the middle class, more Americans than ever before possessed some disposable income.\textsuperscript{11}

To profit from the new customers, the Carne brothers proposed adding a third tier to the China trade: fancy but affordable items for the emerging middle class. Affordability was crucial because these customers had been known to practice frugality in the past. Seeking cheaper goods, the Carnes turned from France to China as their locus of production. In the early 1830s, the Carnes sent samples of French goods to Canton, where Chinese craftsmen attempted replicas. Satisfied with the results, the brothers hired the Chinese to manufacture the same items in bulk. While transacting business with China, the Carnes also became enamored with articles of genuine Chinese finery. Convinced of the commercial potential of the latter, the brothers had both kinds of goods—imitation French and authentic Chinese—shipped to New York on the \textit{Howard}.\textsuperscript{12}

Because the auction catalogue for the \textit{Howard}'s cargo survives, we can examine a list of the exact items the Carnes imported. Missing are many of the standard items that had come to characterize the China trade. One sees neither the exquisite luxury items coveted by the wealthy—such as fine porcelain, silver, and jade—nor the inexpensive ceramics used by lower-income American families. Instead, the catalogue presents an assortment of affordable goods that one would classify as fancy non-necessities: pongee handkerchiefs, crape shawls, colored window blinds, fireworks, silk boxes, lacquered backgammon boards, ivory chessmen, snuffboxes, feather dusters, colored paper, walking canes, lacquered furniture, baskets, and multiple varieties of fans.\textsuperscript{13} With products such as these, the Carne brothers endeavored to fill the new niche in the market.

Though we cannot state for certain how the cargo of the \textit{Howard} fared in the marketplace, we do know that the arrival in 1834 of the Carnes’ similarly laden vessel, the \textit{Thomas Dickinson}, coincided with an economic slump. As a result, the Carnes were unable to collect a high return on their investment. In addition to the sorts of commodities brought by the \textit{Howard}, the Carnes were now also importing patterned silks and watercolor paintings by Chinese artists. According to Walter Barrett, a clerk who later wrote a book about New York’s merchants, the Chinese silk weavers not only had imitated European varieties “to perfection,” but had actually “improved on the patterns.” As for the paintings, Barrett reported that they came bound in silk albums, each containing about twelve pictures, and covered a wide array of Chinese subjects. Though the Carnes may have been disappointed with the cargo’s overall sales, they were encouraged to learn that when these paintings reached consumers, “they took amazingly.”\textsuperscript{14}

Undeterred by the market downturn and buoyed by the success of Chinese watercolors, the Carne brothers became determined to avoid a repeat of the \textit{Thomas Dickinson}’s troubles with their third cargo, carried by the \textit{Washington}. Toward this end, they apparently worked with Captain Obear to develop a marketing ploy to draw attention to the new kinds of Chinese goods being introduced. Their strategy involved exhibiting a Chinese woman in New York before a luxurious background of Chinese decorative objects and home furnishings. People would come to see the exotic Chinese woman with small feet, they hoped, and in the process develop a taste for Chinese fancy goods—which, conveniently, would be for sale elsewhere in the city.\textsuperscript{15}

Though the plan was clever in theory, execution promised to be difficult given the previously noted closed nature of China and confinement of Chinese woman. Though the exact story is not clear, newspaper accounts and promotional materials explain how Obear succeeded in reaching an agreement with Along Moy’s father, described as “a distinguished citizen” of China “residing in the suburbs of Canton.” In addition to receiving “large sums of money,” Moy’s father extracted from Obear the promise to bring his daughter home on the captain’s very next voyage to Canton, planned to be on the \textit{Mary Ballard}. According to this agreement, Afong Moy would be apart from her family and away from China for a span of roughly two years, a good portion of which would be spent at sea.\textsuperscript{16}

Though one can understand how pecuniary considerations might convince a father to release his daughter for an extended length of time, it is harder to comprehend the latter’s willingness to go. One American reporter who apparently possessed at least rudimentary knowledge of Confucian piety speculated that it was “filial love” or “the pure love she bore her father” that convinced Along Moy to “violate a fundamental law of the empire” and “consent to be smuggled out . . . on board an American ship” to secure wealth for him in a distant land. This same reporter also cited the “chivalrous” and “dauntless” character of Moy as a factor. Her “natural fire and vivacity, rather than patient submission to her destiny,” he wrote, had “buoyed up her spirits, and screwed her courage to the resolution of so bold a voyage.” Her bold gamble ought to awaken in Americans “the strongest desire to make her exile as happy as it is possible to render it.”\textsuperscript{17}

How did Americans treat the Chinese Lady?

\textbf{CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA}

Afong Moy’s mostly positive experience in America was unique, the product of a set of propitious circumstances that would vanish mere years after her arrival. Students of Chinese American history are quite familiar with the racial antagonism confronted by thousands of Chinese living and working in the United States, and particularly out West, during the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{18} Though Afong Moy visited the United States only a handful of years prior to the start of Chinese immigration in the late 1840s, these were pivotal years during which Americans’ collective opinion of
China underwent a dramatic—and unfortunate—reversal. In the 1950s, Harold Isaacs, as a part of a larger project examining American perceptions of China and India, attempted to identify and label the major trends of the past. Americans, he discovered, were anything but consistent in their thinking on China; as if following a sine curve, China periodically rises and falls in popular estimation over the course of two centuries. Employing Isaacs’s general framework, we can place Afong Moy’s 1834 arrival on the top portion of a bell-shaped arc that is about to enter a precipitous decline. The Chinese Lady, in short, caught the end of a generally favorable time period that Isaacs called “the Age of Respect.”

Several factors contributed to Americans’ early fondness for China. In the eighteenth century, leaders of the American Enlightenment, most notably Benjamin Franklin, had admired Chinese civilization from afar and had appreciated the harmonious social order espoused by Confucius. In addition, China’s near seclusion from Western nations produced a void in knowledge, an empty intellectual space, that conferred undue relevance on the outdated accounts of Catholic missionaries. Written back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these accounts often portrayed China as a benevolent despotism governed ably by a ruling class of educated elites. For example, in 1556, Gaspar da Cruz, a Dominican friar, augured success for Christian missions in China because “the Chinas exceed all others in populousness, in greatness of the realm, in excellence of polity and government, and in abundance of possessions and wealth.”

While Franklin’s writings and the accounts of European missionaries reached mainly a small and highly educated audience, two more potent streams of imagery effectively entered and influenced the minds of ordinary Americans during the early decades of the nineteenth century. First, one of the most popular literary works of the era offered magical descriptions of the Chinese empire. For any literate child, the Arabian Nights was almost standard reading. According to the preface to an 1848 children’s edition, “the Arabian Nights are to our childhood what . . . the writings of Shakespeare are in after life.” Though we often associate the stories with the Middle East, several tales are actually set in China, a fact not missed by nineteenth-century readers.

Second, the United States imported vast quantities of inexpensive Chinese ceramic bowls, cups, and plates, which brought blue and white landscape scenes into countless American homes. Thus, as ordinary Americans consumed their daily meals or sipped their afternoon tea, they enjoyed gazing upon a splendid vision of China—one composed of bountiful fruit trees, meandering streams, fishermen on Chinese junks, and picturesque pagodas. One should note here that the traders who conveyed cargoes of Chinese ceramics from Canton to various American ports often harbored ambivalent feelings, if not outright disgust, for the Chinese. Yet because any given trader communicated his views primarily through letters and spoken conversations, his ideas found only a small audience. In contrast, the flood of ceramic objects that he unleashed onto the marketplace reached thousands of Americans and presented them with an enchanting vision of China that they could only adore. Afong Moy—exotic, delicate, and beautiful—seemed to step right out of this “Oriental” wonderland.

Finally, the historical timing of Moy’s visit contributed heavily to her positive reception because a critical event, the Opium War (1839–42), had yet to take place. Though Americans did not participate in the war, coverage of the Anglo-Chinese conflict in the American press convinced many Americans to downgrade their opinion of China. Prior to the war, Americans had assumed that the Asian colossus must possess a powerful military, one befitting such an old, proud, and populous nation. Yet in the pages of the daily newspapers, Americans read of a surprisingly ineffectual and outdated Chinese military that failed in repeated attempts to repel the smaller but far more technologically sophisticated British forces.

In the eyes of many, China had been exposed, and the popular conception of China began to deteriorate rapidly as a direct result. The American missionary Samuel Wells Williams observed this disturbing shift in American perceptions. Williams had first embarked for China in 1833, mere months before the arrival of Afong Moy. Upon returning to the United States in 1845 after a twelve-year residence in Canton, he was alarmed by the mockery and ridicule ordinary Americans now expressed in casual conversations when discussing China. China, he wrote, had become “the object of a laugh or the subject of a pun.” In particular, Williams was bothered by a derogatory poem that, to his annoyance, people seemed fond of repeating in his presence:

- Mandarins with yellow buttons, handing you conserves of snails;
- Smart young men about Canton in Nankeen tights and peacocks’ tails.
- With many rare and dreadful dainties, kitten cutlets, puppy pies;
- Birds nest soup which (so convenient!) every bush around supplies.

In Williams’s mind, these demeaning verses portraying the Chinese as laughably foppish and grotesque epitomized the new attitude toward China. Clearly, the “Age of Respect,” to
A RECEPTION IN NEW YORK

When the Washington sailed into New York Harbor on October 17, 1834, New Yorkers reading the shipping news could see that the cargo included some tea and the expected assortment of fancy non-necessities that had become the Carnes’ stock-in-trade. But what made this ship’s arrival extraordinary was one of the passengers, who received special mention in the New York Daily Advertiser: “The ship Washington, Capt. Obear, has brought out a beautiful Chinese Lady, called Julie Foochee ching-chang king, daughter of Hong wang-tzang tzee king. As she will see all who are disposed to pay twenty five cents. She will no doubt have many admirers.”

A short article in another paper, the Commercial Advertiser, printed her name as “Miss Ching-Chang-foo” and provided a detailed description of the practice of foot binding, which caused a frown of indignant rebuke. The reporter also described the advances of a “professional gentleman” in the audience, presumably a medical doctor, who harbored an intense desire to examine “the anatomical distortions of the foot” uncovered by a shoe or slipper. Regarding the removal of footwear as a violation of her privacy, Moy summarily rejected his request. Though Afong Moy did not speak English, visitors could communicate with her because she was accompanied by her interpreter—a Chinese man named “Atung.” Since audience members wondered about her life in China, the practice of foot binding, her long voyage to America, and her appearance, admission had risen to fifty cents, and the Chinese Lady had dropped her lengthy Chinese moniker, adopting the simpler “Afong Moy.” These advertisements also offered the first physical description of the Chinese Lady. She was nineteen years of age, four feet ten inches in height, and “dressed in her national costume,” and she possessed feet that were “but four inches in length,” the result of her having worn “iron shoes” in childhood. Starting on November 10, the general public was welcome between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., and then again from 5:00 until 9:00 p.m.

When that date arrived, Captain Obear allowed in a crowd of curious ticket holders by opening the front doors, adorned with large gilt Chinese characters. Included in this group was a reporter dispatched by the Commercial Advertiser. He described his experience in a rather lengthy article that, when it appeared several days later, stood out in a newspaper that ordinarily dispensed the news in small capsules of text. At ten o’clock, he wrote, Afong Moy emerged from her quarters and discovered that “a number of ladies and gentlemen were already occupying her drawing rooms.” The reporter described Moy as a “princess,” wearing a costume befitting a lady “of her rank,” who “resembles a healthy, bouncing girl of 14.”

The reporter then proceeded to offer a detailed account of the activities undertaken by Afong Moy that were intended to show off her most remarkable physical feature—her small feet. At first, she did little more than sit upon a “throne of rich and costly materials,” displaying her feet by elevating them on a cushion. As she wore special shoes or slippers, her feet were not directly exposed to the audience. As women in the audience approached her to take a closer look at her feet, Moy would bow her head approvingly and smile. However, when males made similar advances, she was less accommodating. “[W]e saw on her brow,” the reporter observed, “a frown of indignant rebuke.” The reporter also described the advances of a “professional gentleman” in the audience, presumably a medical doctor, who harbored an intense desire to examine “the anatomical distortions of the foot” uncovered by a shoe or slipper. Regarding the removal of footwear as a violation of her privacy, Moy summarily rejected his request.

During this three-week period, odd rumors involving the Chinese Lady appeared in the newspapers. For example, the New York Journal of Commerce recounted what transpired when the Chinese Lady witnessed a person sewing with her left hand. Having “never before seen a left-handed person,” she gazed for some time “to comprehend the mystery,” then “burst into an immediate fit of laughter.” Apparently, the Chinese Lady aroused such curiosity that newspaper editors deemed the most trivial incident newsworthy.

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On November 6, when the first of many lengthy advertisements began to appear in city papers, two changes were apparent. Admission had risen to fifty cents, and the Chinese Lady had dropped her lengthy Chinese moniker, adopting the simpler “Afong Moy.” These advertisements also offered the first physical description of the Chinese Lady. She was nineteen years of age, four feet ten inches in height, and “dressed in her national costume,” and she possessed feet that were “but four inches in length,” the result of her having worn “iron shoes” in childhood. Starting on November 10, the general public was welcome between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., and then again from 5:00 until 9:00 p.m.

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Though Afong Moy did not speak English, visitors could communicate with her because she was accompanied by her interpreter—a Chinese man named “Atung.” Since audience members wondered about her life in China, the practice of foot binding, her long voyage to America, and her impressions of New York, Atung fielded such questions and translated them into the Cantonese dialect for Afong Moy. Atung also made sure Moy did not remain seated for long; every few minutes, he would say a few words in Chinese, prompting Moy to rise from her chair and hobble with difficulty across the room before returning to her seat.

Though scornful of the custom of foot binding, the reporter was, on the whole, enchanted by the novel spectacle
he witnessed on the Chinese Lady’s first day of exhibition. He concluded his article by stating that he did not need to write any more to “induce our citizens to attend.” As it was, Afong Moy was already “receiving more calls every day, than any other young lady of our acquaintance,” and the reporter doubted that the public’s curiosity would be sated during her sojourn in the city. Despite his endorsement, not all New Yorkers flocked to see the Chinese Lady. Some viewed the public display of a woman, regardless of her country of origin, as blatant exploitation. The New-York Mirror published an editorial explaining why the magazine had elected not to cover the Chinese Lady in its pages: “We have not been able to see Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese lady with the little feet; nor do we intend to perform that universal ceremony, unless we should find the notoriety which the non-performance must occasion inconveniently burdensome. . . . The lovely creatures were made for anything but to be stared at, for half a dollar a head.” That this editor bothered to print his justification for not attending is indicative of the tremendous public interest her exhibition sparked in New York.41

TO WASHINGTON AND BEYOND

While Afong Moy’s display in Manhattan was ongoing, newspapers across the nation frequently reprinted articles from New York’s papers or summarized their contents.42 Yet if most Americans’ initial encounter with Moy was through the print medium, her subsequent national tour solidified her fame. After departing New York, Moy embarked on an odyssey that took her to some of the country’s largest cities: New Haven, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, Charleston, New Orleans, and Boston.43 In fact, Moy became so visible on the American landscape, both in person and in print, that when Samuel Goodrich, the popular author of juvenile literature, wrote about China in his children’s periodical, he could assume with confidence that his young readers knew of her. Writing under the pseudonym “Peter Parley,” Goodrich wrote, “You have heard of Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese lady who has lately been showing herself and her small stinted feet, in some of our cities. Perhaps you have seen her. We have told you . . . that a great many of the females in China have these small feet. . . . Miss Afong Moy would charge you twenty-five or fifty cents, I suppose, for a view of hers.”44 After only several months in the United States, Afong Moy had become a household name.

Though her performance varied little from one venue to the next, Moy eventually added Chinese songs to the program and started to use the English she was studying. As for Atung, he began writing the names of guests in Chinese characters; for a modest fee, one could depart Moy’s saloon with this paper souvenir.45 At the nation’s capital, Moy met with members of Congress and even paid a visit to President Andrew Jackson in the White House.46 According to the Washington Globe, Moy harbored extremely high expectations for her interview with the American head of state. Though he did not sit on a regal throne and lacked “outward grandeur,” she nevertheless enjoyed his “kind and courteous manner.” Jackson was “a very good man,” she stated through her translator, “but not so fine an Emperor as they have in China.” As for Jackson, he “expressed himself much pleased with the interview.”47

Since the above account is all that survives from Moy’s encounter with the president, we do not know what concerns motivated Andrew Jackson to request a meeting with her in the White House. He may simply have regarded the Chinese Lady with bound feet as an intriguing diversion from more pressing matters of state. That said, the growing importance of the China trade within the larger American economy perhaps played some role. In the first half of the century, nearly all Americans drank tea, and all tea came from China. While American consumption habits meant that tea would always be in demand, Afong Moy’s arrival coincided with a major surge in tea imports: between 1830 and 1834, the amount of tea entering the United States more than tripled, going from just over five million pounds annually to over sixteen million pounds.48

For the Yankee traders who carried tea cargoes from Canton, Americans’ love for the beverage could translate into stunning profits. However, it also presented a practical dilemma: what could be exchanged for tea at the port of Canton? To answer this question, resourceful Yankee traders hunted for things that the Chinese would find attractive. They found some success with sandalwood from Hawaii, bêche-de-mer (sea slugs), edible birds’ nests, and furs from the Pacific Northwest. Additionally, some entrepreneurial traders tried to sell American ginseng in China, a fact that did not escape the notice of James Kirke Paulding, who worked it into the aforementioned short story. Unfortunately, these sorts of products were not nearly enough to offset the enormous sums spent purchasing tea and, to a lesser extent, ceramic tablewares and silks. In the 1833–34 fiscal year, the trade imbalance reached a record high: the United States imported nearly $8 million in Chinese goods but exported to China goods worth just over $1 million. Yankee traders covered the alarming gap of nearly $7 million by sending boatloads of silver specie to Canton. Thus, when Afong Moy arrived in the United States, silver was steadily flowing out of the American economy and into the Chinese, at least temporarily.49

As if the hemorrhaging of silver were not bad enough, the economic situation seemed even more distressing when American officials considered that the ultimate home for the country’s precious metal was England, not China. Like Americans, the English enjoyed their Chinese tea; however, English merchants, unlike their American counterparts, did not need to scour the earth for commodities the Chinese might like to buy. England, after all, enjoyed a monopoly on all
opium grown in India, and so English traders could always use opium as their medium of exchange. While American traders also trafficked in opium (purchased in Smyrna, Turkey), estimates indicate that the drug constituted only a tiny fraction of America’s total imports to Canton. Yet for English traders, opium dominated the ledger. In fact, since China’s appetite for opium exceeded England’s demand for tea, the Chinese ended up transferring silver obtained in the American trade to English merchants to cover the difference. In sum, Americans purchased vast quantities of Chinese tea mostly with silver specie, some of which eventually found its way to America’s foremost rival in global trade.50

Clearly, the China trade played a role in determining America’s overall economic health. Though we do not think of Andrew Jackson as a president who devoted much attention to Asia, he is on record as supporting the little-known diplomatic efforts of Captain Edmund Roberts of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in the early 1830s. Under the auspices of the U.S. government, Roberts sailed to Cochin China (Vietnam), Siam (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the Malay Peninsula), and Japan to create opportunities for trade and formalize relations. President Jackson even provided Roberts with letters and gifts to be presented to Asian monarchs. After returning in the spring of 1834, Roberts tried to convince Jackson and Congress to back another mission to Asia, one that would include a visit to northern China. Roberts, it seems, quite boldly sought to open up new Chinese markets for American merchants. Jackson eventually supported the new trade mission, and Roberts set sail for Asia a second time. Unfortunately, he contracted malaria along the way and died in Macau in 1836 before achieving his objectives.51

Returning to the Chinese Lady’s visit to the White House, we can safely assume that Jackson did not hold out any serious hope that Afong Moy could do anything to enhance America’s trading prospects in Canton. After all, she was a traveling performer, not an official envoy. However, Jackson’s support of Edmund Roberts’s far-flung diplomatic efforts suggests that the president had not dismissed Asia as distant and irrelevant. That the China trade was on his mind perhaps sheds some light on the interest he took in the Chinese Lady.

UNBOUND POCKETBOOKS

Though Captain Obear and the Carne brothers certainly profited in the short term from revenue generated by ticket sales, the more lasting gains were to be made in the long term through the sale of Chinese fancy goods. As has been explained, the Carnes believed that Afong Moy’s exhibition would stimulate consumer desire in the early stage of their commercial experiment; she could help create a vogue for the sorts of Chinese imports that the Carnes were beginning to introduce to the marketplace. Toward this end, Moy appeared before audiences not in a spare or sterile environment but rather as ensconced in a rich and lavish Chinese setting.

More than merely providing Moy with an exotic “Oriental” backdrop, these Chinese handicrafts and decorative objects formed an integral part of the presentation. Advertisements for the Chinese Lady stated as much: “At the same place are also to be seen various objects of Chinese curiosity, in themselves well worthy of the attention of the curious.” One New York reporter described his initial encounter with the novel decorative scheme: “We were received with great civility by Capt. Obear, under whose protection she is, and who ushered us immediately into the apartments which he has so beautifully furnished à la Chinoise for her accommodation.” The reporter commented at length on the “rich dazzling colors” and “elaborate workmanship of Chinese furniture and ornament,” and enumerated the many attractive objects on display: hanging lamps, illustrated screens, paintings, porcelain vases, cushioned chairs, mirrors, ornamental boxes, and models of pagodas and junks.53 Similarly, the Commercial Advertiser called Moy’s temporary home a “fashionable mansion” that was “furnished in a style becoming a princess of the ‘celestial empire.’” It was the epitome of “oriental magnificence.”54

However, along with enjoying Chinese decorative objects, guests were encouraged to purchase them and transport them into their own homes. After all, the Carnes were concurrently putting similar Chinese goods up for sale. And in New Orleans, the broadside specifically stated that one could purchase on the premises the same sorts of Chinese paintings that were on display alongside Moy (fig. 1). In this way, American women encountered not only a Chinese woman of affluence but also a Chinese ornamental style and art aesthetic that would have been excitingly exotic and novel to them. Those who were willing to open their pocketbooks could bring the elegant world of Afong Moy into their own homes.

The timing of the Carnes’ commercial experiment was advantageous, to say the least. The Jacksonian era marked the first period in American history in which middle-class women, especially those residing in large cities like New York, would collectively turn their attention to the tasteful decoration of the home. This new focus on interior decorating took place for reasons that were both economic and cultural. First, the advent of superior utensils—kitchen tools and cleaning implements—freed up a housewife’s time by rendering chores less onerous. Second, factories were now mass-producing some of the staples of everyday life, such as soap and cloth, which families previously had made by hand. Third, the period witnessed a dramatic rise in the employment of domestic servants, who, by providing help around the home, allowed wives and mothers to engage in other pursuits. Taking these developments into consideration, cultural historian Glenna Matthews has concluded that “nineteenth-century American women had more time for tasks that were ornamental or ceremonial.”55
Along with the luxury of additional time, many American women also had compelling social incentives to engage in decorative work. Members of the rising middle class saw the importance of presenting a prosperous face to the world. Indeed, what better way was there to show off one's improving class status than to engage in what Jean Gordon and Jan McArthur have called "consumption that is self-consciously upwardly mobile"? According to Gilda Lerner, middle-class women also viewed consumption as a way to separate themselves from working women. Since America's industrialization took place during a labor shortage, factories depended on the labor of women and children. Leisure activities like home decorating provided a middle-class woman with the means to send an unmistakable signal to society that she was a "lady." 

The Chinese decorative objects also proved attractive to creative and curious women who felt that their mobility and free expression were stifled in the home. When Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat, toured the United States in the 1830s, he observed a well-defined separation of men and women. "In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes," he wrote. "I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position." In 1832, Frances Trollope, touring America from England, described the woman's sphere in more extreme terms. Were it not for church services, she wrote, "all the ladies . . . would be in danger of becoming perfect recluses." 

Though multiple factors contributed to the placement of American women within the "circle of domestic life," the changing economy certainly played a major part. As American families began to turn away from agriculture and toward industrial and commercial pursuits, the middle-class home, once the center of production, assumed a new function in society. Its emphasis necessarily shifted away from the production of goods (such as vegetables, wheat, eggs, and soap) and toward the production of good people: men who could resist sin and temptation while seizing opportunity in the commercial and political spheres, boys who could compete in the growing industrial economy while demonstrating proper Christian virtues, and daughters who were well trained for their future roles as wives and mothers. The home, in short, was to become an incubator of individualism, Christian morality, and a proper work ethic.

The burden of creating this wholesome domestic environment fell on the shoulders of women. By the 1830s, religious literature, magazines, and sentimental novels had begun instilling in middle-class women a belief that their proper sphere was the home. Instead of participating in the "masculine" spheres of commerce and politics, women
would transform their homes into wholesome sanctuaries, insulated from the sins and temptations of the outside world. In this “haven of stability,” they could raise their children and perform their wifely duties in a safe and moral environment. Barbara Welter famously referred to the middle-class American woman’s new mission as the “cult of true womanhood,” and she cited “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” as the “four cardinal virtues” that society expected women to embody.60

While Welter convincingly laid out a system of domesticity that, she claimed, defined many homes before the Civil War, other scholars have subsequently challenged some of her core assertions.61 Though Welter’s paradigm no longer remains entirely intact, the general consensus remains that middle-class women experienced an increased and intensified presence in the home. For those women who accepted their new role, but did not feel entirely comfortable with its restrictions, what better way was there to make the domestic space more palatable than infusing it with an international design motifs? Thinking in this way, Godley’s Lady’s Book taught women how to decorate plain household objects “in the Chinese style” three years before the arrival of Afong Moy.62 In other words, if societal mores prevented a mother or housewife from engaging the outside world to her satisfaction, the opportunity to adorn one’s home using Chinese objects meant that she could bring an exciting portion of that world into her home, alleviating, at least somewhat, the doldrums of domesticity.63

Concerning the former, female audience members were more likely than men to understand the role foot binding played in the domestic confinement of Chinese women. According to cultural historian Dorothy Ko, the custom of foot binding was “born of male fantasy” in that it satisfied a prevalent sexual fetish for small feet. However, it evolved over time to perform a crucial function within the larger framework of “the Confucian cult of domesticity.” Chinese culture during the Qing dynasty, she writes, “placed the highest moral value on domesticity, motherhood and handwork,” and the “binding of feet created a woman who fit these ideals.” In similar fashion, Wang Ping describes foot binding as a “secret . . . knowledge transmitted from mother to daughter” that “teaches the daughter about the mapping and discipline of the female body in a patriarchal environment, and that prepares her for her sexuality, marriage, reproduction, motherhood.”64 Thus, in the 1830s, American and Chinese cultures employed parallel systems of domesticity. Though the Chinese version was underpinned by Confucian principles and its American counterpart by economic forces and Protestant ideals, the two resembled one another in the most basic sense: both worked to intensify the woman’s experience in the home.

The women in Moy’s audience might also have recognized the strong similarity between foot binding and corsetry. Like the binding of feet, the corset allowed a woman to reconfigure her body’s natural dimensions, bringing them into closer alignment with society’s ideal of feminine beauty, which prized the narrow waist. Corsetry also reinforced existing power relationships between men and women by serving as an outer manifestation of the wife’s submissiveness or, in Helene Roberts’s words, her “willingness to conform.” Class also factored into the corset’s appeal in that the fashionable device, like its Chinese counterpart, provided a woman with the means to display a visible sign of her family’s social standing. The corset, according to Leigh Summers, “crafted the flesh into class-appropriate contours.”65

Given such similarities, it is not surprising that the two body-distorting practices were frequently linked in the public discourse. In 1833, the author of China in Miniature, after describing the deleterious effects of foot binding, indicated that corsets were substantially worse: “The Chinese only cripple their women, but the corset-users destroy the lives of theirs.” In similar fashion, a newspaper correspondent asked the following question after viewing Chinese shoes in a cabinet of curiosities: “Which of the two evinces the greatest degree of civilization and refinement, the Chinese lady, who lightly compresses her foot, or the American Belle, who as closely compresses her waist! Let the untimely death of many an American youth answer this inquiry.” Finally, Catherine Beecher railed against the injurious practice of tight corseting in her massively influential guide to household management, Treatise on Domestic Economy. “The folly of the Chinese belle,”

BOUND FEET AND
CONSTRICTED WAISTs

While Americans flocked to see the Chinese Lady for many reasons, tremendous interest swirled around her diminutive feet. Though we can assume foot binding intrigued female as well as male observers, descriptions of and reactions to Afong Moy’s feet flowed exclusively from the pens of male writers. This fact is especially unfortunate when we consider that the female reaction had the potential to offer more nuance than the male response. For when American men gazed upon Afong Moy and her small feet, they primarily saw difference. Seated before them was a young woman from a distant land who adhered to customs they deemed strange; because her life bore no relevance to their own, she presented them with little more than an exotic curiosity, an intriguing distraction from the mundane. American women, on the other hand, might have been more apt to discern subtle similarities between Afong Moy’s experiences and their own. After all, their lives, like those of upper-class Chinese women, increasingly revolved around the home and often included an artificial measure intended to alter the body’s natural form—the tight-fitting corset.
she wrote, “who totters on two useless deformities, is nothing, compared to that of the American belle, who impedes all the internal organs in the discharge of their functions, that she may have a slender waist.”

Though we cannot state for certain how American women reacted to Moy's feet, we can, for a couple of reasons, assume that ample amounts of disapproval lay embedded within the female silences. First, women were often the most energetic members of the reform societies that prospered in this period; when confronted with Moy's feet, these crusaders could be expected to condemn the cultural practice that produced her disfigurement. We also know that nineteenth-century female missionaries were appalled by the treatment of women in China. In fact, the very first American woman to proselytize in China, Henrietta Shuck, referred to Chinese women as “the degraded female sex.” Shuck, whose term in China (1835–44) coincided with Moy's stay in the United States, deplored foot binding most of all. Those who followed Shuck in China shared her strong views. Helen Barrett Montgomery, church leader and advocate for women's rights, excoriated foot binding in Western Women in Eastern Lands, her study of female American missionaries in Asia. “The binding of the feet,” Montgomery concluded after reading numerous missionary accounts, “is but an outward and visible sign of the crippled lives and energies of one-half of the Chinese people.”

THE MALE GAZE

With their own lives and bodies shaped, respectively, by domesticity and corsetry, American women could perhaps identify with Afong Moy. Not so American men, who clearly viewed Moy through an ethnographic lens: her performance provided them with a rare look at the racial and cultural “other.” And more than any other custom, foot binding seized their attention and compelled them to comment. At the risk of overgeneralizing, male responses to Afong Moy's feet tended to fall into three categories: moral censure, erotic attraction, and scientific interest.

While male observers did not witness Afong Moy's feet and immediately draw a parallel with corsets, they were not callously unmindful of the injustice done to Moy and countless other Chinese women. Many men did object—often vociferously—to the Chinese custom. The sight of Moy hobbling across the stage inspired one newspaper reporter to pen a diatribe against the “cruel process to which she has been subjected.” Chinese women lived in “vassalage to the lords of the other sex,” he wrote, who “tortured and deformed” their bodies and simultaneously kept their minds “in a state of ignorance.” The observer expressed his sincerest hopes that missionaries bringing the gospel into China could effect the emancipation of the country's female population. Similarly, another author claimed that there were “few persons in America” possessing an awareness of Chinese foot binding “who have not exclaimed against the folly and the cruelty of parents in thus disfiguring their own offspring . . . Such an impression . . . must have been strongly felt by all who examined the feet of Afong Moy.”

The didactic authors of children's literature dwelled on Moy's feet because these provided a useful negative or cautionary example necessary to communicate proper values to the next generation. The Youth's Companion, a periodical published in Boston, presented young readers with a fictional dialogue between a father and a daughter on the subject of China. The latter expresses her desire to visit China, but adds, “I shouldn't like to have my feet so small that I couldn't walk about. How do they make them so small?” In answering, the father explains the process through which the feet of a newborn girl are confined with tight bandages. The unfortunate infant “must suffer all this torture till its feet have ceased to grow.” After the daughter responds with the hoped-for exclamation (“Oh how cruel!”), the father invokes Afong Moy: “I see by the papers that Miss 'Afong Moy,' the Chinese Lady who has been traveling about to show her little feet, is now in the city, and I intend to take you . . . to see how deformed she looks.”

Similarly, Samuel Goodrich, the influential children's author, used Moy to warn his young readers about the dangers of confining any part of the human body or mind: “[I]f you wish to have your body, or limbs . . . or brain, become large and strong, you must not bandage or confine them, but use them.” Even Andrew Jackson voiced his objection. In the White House, the president echoed Goodrich's point regarding stunting natural human development. Before Moy departed, he “wished her . . . the power to persuade her countrywomen to abandon the custom of cramping their feet, so totally in opposition to Nature's wiser regulations.” Afong Moy, he hoped, would learn something from her American sojourn, and return to China ready to speak out against the oppressive custom.

We can comprehend much of the male protest by linking it to the spirit of reform pervading much of the nation in the 1830s. The byproducts of the religious resurgence known as the Second Great Awakening, reform movements attracted thousands of followers, most of whom held the powerfully optimistic belief that the collective efforts of the virtuous could eradicate sin from the earth. Though these movements attacked a wide variety of social problems, the largest followings coalesced around the causes of temperance, abolitionism, public education, and prison reform. In short, this was a period in which many Americans, sharing the conviction that the ills of the world could be cured, surveyed society for instances of injustice. It is not hard to imagine such people denouncing foot binding after witnessing Afong Moy's strained efforts to walk.

Indignant outrage stands as easily the most common male response to Moy's feet. However, a few men expressed their attraction to Moy and her pedal abnormality, though they
may have been troubled by their fixation on the latter. The comments of one observer emanated out of the divided mind of one who was simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by what he witnessed. She is “a very pleasing girl in appearance,” he wrote. “[H]er person is small, but well-proportioned . . . with skin slightly tinged with copper, but sufficiently transparent to exhibit that ‘roses are blooming beneath it.’” After describing Moy’s shapely female form and pleasing complexion, he then turned to her “little feet.” They “are by far the most novel and interesting feature of her appearance,” he observed, “although we confess there is something painful in the reminiscence of the torture she must have endured in infancy.” This author’s mind was conflicted: though his conscience required that he disapprove of the injurious custom, he could not suppress his attraction to the beautiful Moy and her small feet.75

Other visitors who appreciated Moy’s physical beauty did not even bother with a perfunctory condemnation of foot binding. One writer wrote that, “though very small and delicate in figure, she possesses all the charms of person and complexion that belong to the damsels of her brunette race.” Escewing the moral problem of foot binding, he saw only beauty in the anatomical peculiarity: “her feet are of exquisite beauty and diminutiveness, not exceeding three inches in length.” Given both her physical attributes and her “gay and sprightly disposition,” the Chinese Lady, he wrote with relish, had been aptly called “a perfect little vixen.”76 Similarly, another observer described her “ladyship” as a “lioness,” one “imported expressly . . . for exhibition.” The “feet of the Chinese fair,” he continued, “are points of beauty.” He proceeded to explain, as best he could, the process through which the “the toes of the foot . . . are forced underneath the sole,” leaving the foot “so compressed and bound as to prevent its growth.” “If the sweet creature is very beautiful,” he added, implying that Moy was exactly that, “she is left to twaddle about all her life.”77

Another writer was positively smitten by Moy’s elegant attire, appealing appearance, commanding presence, diminutive feet, and seductive charm:

At length her ladyship . . . presented herself in the rich costume of a Chinese lady—an outward mantle of blue silk, sumptuously embroidered, and yellow silk pantalons from beneath the ample folds of which peeped her tiny little feet, not over four inches in length. . . . Her head has a profusion of jet black hair, combed upward from her fine forehead and brunette temples, and filled on the top with bouquets of artificial flowers and large gold pins, which dress we suppose will be henceforward quite the ion . . . Her features are pleasing, her forehead high and protuberant, and her face round and full with langushing black eyes placed with the peculiar obliquity of the outer angle, which characterizes the Mongolian variety of the human race. . . . She then walked without seeming difficulty to her cushioned chair . . . and there sat in . . . quiet repose for us to gaze at.78

One would be hard pressed to find a mainstream newspaper in the 1830s offering this much graphic description of a young female form. Quite astoundingly, the author actually disassembles the Chinese Lady in language and then catalogues her body parts in a fashion that recalls Petrarchan love sonnets. Of course, he could justify his suspiciously thorough physical description by pointing out that the extreme rarity of a Chinese person in America—and a lady, no less—demanded that extreme attention be paid to detail. Despite his scientific-seeming insight that the “peculiar obliquity” of her eyes “characterizes the Mongolian variety of the human race,” his interest in the Chinese Lady was almost certainly erotic in nature. Yet by camouflaging his mildly pornographic description in the garb of ethnographic observation, he could elude moral censorship.

From the same author’s account, we receive a portrait of Afong Moy as confident and composed, presiding over a room packed with nervous and excited spectators. Her “quiet demeanor and imperturbable composure,” he wrote, “overpowered” all in attendance. And while Moy expended only minimal amounts of energy in performing, the men in the audience exerted themselves strenuously in their efforts to please her. “Miss Moy stood motionless . . . smiling graciously,” he wrote, “while we, with our multiple bows, and attitudes and gesticulations, seemed quite ludicrous in an attempt to be excessively polite.” Many male spectators, not unlike the protagonist of James Kirke Paulding’s story, tried hard to please the Chinese Lady.

This portrayal of Moy as being firmly in command of the exhibition space raises the question of performer control: how much influence did Afong Moy possess over her own presentation? Evidence suggests that her input mattered and that she was not at the mercy of her handlers. Recall that, in New York, a “professional gentleman” who made known his desire to view her feet uncovered was summarily rebuffed, an incident that underscores Moy’s ability to reject audience requests. In other cities, however, Moy relented when pressured to show her feet in the flesh. In Philadelphia, a group of physicians expressed interest in seeing the effects of foot binding on the human anatomy. Not completely satisfied by the model of a small foot presented by Obear, the physicians approached the latter asking that Moy’s feet be uncovered in the interest of science. Surprisingly, their request was granted, as a newspaper explained: “The foot of the Chinese Lady was this morning examined, divested of its covering, by several eminent physicians of this city, in company with some of their friends, by invitation of the conductors of the exhibition.” A transcription of the official medical document, signed by eight doctors and providing precise pedal measurements, appeared in the newspaper.79

One journalist watching events in Philadelphia unfold viewed the physicians’ obsession with Moy’s feet as absurd and therefore as ripe for a spoof. He penned an article for Atkinson’s Evening Post devoted entirely to Afong Moy’s feet.

“Our readers may perhaps be disposed to regard a lady’s foot as a very extraordinary subject for a paragraph,” he wrote,
“but we can assure them that. . . many paragraphs have already been written on Miss Afong Moy’s pretty understanding.” After dispensing with the obligatory pun, he proceeded to mock, in playful fashion, the physicians’ intense interest in her feet. “The public owe much to these ‘medical gentlemen,’” he stated facetiously, “for the pains they have taken to settle disputes in relation to Miss Afong’s foot, for until their certificate appeared many persons believed that the diminutive mem[ber] was full one-eighth of an inch longer.” He concluded by disingenuously recommending that the doctors both publish their finding in the transactions of the American Philosophical Society and preserve a copy for posterity by safely immuring it inside the cornerstone of the next building to go up.

Moy’s closed-door meeting with Philadelphia’s physicians was reported in the Southern Patriot, a prominent newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina. Not surprisingly, when Moy arrived in Charleston three months later, she was asked to expose her feet a second time. While this showing would also take place at the urging of doctors, attendance would not be limited to the medical community: anyone holding a ticket would be granted a viewing. According to the newspaper, Moy harbored strong reservations: “It is with considerable difficulty she has been persuaded to expose the naked foot, being in direct opposition to the delicate customs of her country.” In the end, Moy did perform an act that made her extremely uncomfortable; however, the more important point to stress here is that the decision appears to have been entirely hers. In fact, the newspaper went on to state that proceeds from this event were “to be exclusively appropriated to her Benefit.” Recognizing the intense desire of the general public to see her feet uncovered, Moy had made the highly calculated decision to trade personal privacy for personal profit. And, quite shrewdly, she doubled the price of admission for this special showing to one dollar.

CONCLUSION

In April 1835, less than one year after the Washington’s arrival in New York, B. T. Obear embarked for Canton on the Mary Ballard. Afong Moy was not onboard. A rumor held that she was “so well content with America” as to be “in no hurry to return to the celestial empire.” Regardless of the rumor’s validity, Afong Moy did remain in the United States, where she continued to attract attention for years. In 1836, a man named his racehorse Afong Moy, perhaps believing the famous Chinese Lady would bring his gray filly luck. The Boston Morning Post quipped in 1838 that one of the Siamese Twins had proposed to her. In 1839, John Kearsley Mitchell, a physician who had visited China, published a humorous poem of 145 lines, “To Afong Moy.”

Though many Americans associated Afong Moy with either good fortune or good humor, some evidence indicates that she fell on hard times. The Monmouth Enquirer reported that she was “residing in a very poor and obscure family” near Freehold, New Jersey, her state of misfortune casting “suspicion on the agent who had her in charge.” We do not know any more details or even if this report is accurate. However, if Afong Moy’s handlers did mistreat her, mismanage her tour, or abandon her altogether, this would explain why she was still displaying herself for money well over a decade after her initial appearance. We find her back in New York in 1847, when a British sea captain sailed the Chinese junk Keying into the harbor. According to one account, when several Chinese members of the Keying’s crew stumbled upon the Chinese Lady, they were utterly dumbfounded to discover a Chinese act that predated their junk. In 1848, Afong Moy shared an exhibition space in New York with Tom Thumb, then under contract with P. T. Barnum. Like so many popular acts in antebellum America, Moy had apparently drifted into the orbit of the Great Showman himself.

Though working under the savvy Barnum perhaps offered Moy certain advantages, it was not without risks, because Barnum cared far more about his own profits than about the well-being of any single performer. Moy appears to have learned this lesson in painful fashion. In 1850, Barnum arranged for Miss Pwan Yee Koo, whom he dubbed the “Chinese Belle,” to exhibit herself in Manhattan inside the Chinese Museum, which he had recently acquired. In promoting Pwan, Barnum elected to discredit Moy—even though the latter had been performing under his umbrella. According to Barnum’s logic, New Yorkers would not pay to see the Chinese Belle after so many years of the Chinese Lady unless the public could be convinced that the latter was a fraud. Since the Chinese Lady’s status as “Chinese” was of course beyond dispute, Barnum opted instead to assail her claim to be a “lady.” Barnum wrote that Pwan “is the first Chinese lady that has yet visited Christendom” since the “only other female ever known to have left” China was of “apocryphal reputation and position in her own country.” By attacking Afong Moy’s credibility, Barnum was sacrificing an older performer, one who had become expendable, to bestow novelty and vitality on his latest attraction. In this way, Afong Moy was discarded out of mere expedience, a casualty of the ruthlessly competitive world of popular amusements in antebellum New York. At this point, the once-celebrated Chinese Lady vanishes from newspapers forever.

NOTES

2. Other scholars have noted the Chinese Lady’s exhibition in America; however, these do not shed light on the circumstances behind her journey to the United States, describe what took place during a typical performance, or explain the sen-

3. New Hampshire Sentinel, July 30, 1835. Maelzel's exhibition offered a re-creation of the great fire that destroyed much of Moscow during the Napoleonic invasion of 1812.

2. Since Frances Trollope had recently published Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832), the widely read account of her travels in the United States, the reporter from Baltimore was surely playing with her title. His story was cited in Atkinson's Saturday Evening Post, March 28, 1835.


6. Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990), 121.


10. Shipping News, Salem Gazette, January 3, 1832.


18. Scholarly works describing anti-Chinese sentiment in the nineteenth-century American West are too numerous to cite here. However, for a general overview, see Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).


22. According to Orrville Roorbach, who compiled a record of every book published in the United States between 1820 and 1861, twelve editions of the Arabian Nights appeared over these four decades. Bibliotheca Americana: Catalogue of American Publications, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (New York: Peter Smith, 1939). Other editions were widely available before 1820, the first year covered by Roorbach. The Rare Books Division at the Free Library of Philadelphia owns five separate American editions of the book published before 1820, with the earliest dating back to 1794.

23. Tales from the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, as Related by a Mother for the Amusement of Her Children (New York: Edward Walker, 1848).

24. The tale of Aladdin begins with the following lines: “In the capital of one of the largest and richest provinces in the kingdom of China, there lived a tailor, whose name was Mustapha. . . . His son whom he called Aladdin, had been brought up in a very careless and idle manner.” Aladdin, or, the Wonderful Lamp (London: Hardy & Co., 1789). 1.

25. Edward Forster, trans., The Arabian Nights, vol. 1 (London: W. Savage, 1810), x. In the early nineteenth century, when the American publishing industry was in its infancy, the book-selling market was dominated by English publishers and distributors. Though this edition was published in England, it was also sold in the United States.


28. Ibid., 83–112.

29. Frederick Wells Williams, The Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams, LL.D. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889), 144–46; Samuel Wells Williams, The Middle Kingdom (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), xiii–xvi. In the 1840s, Osmond Tiffany, an American tourist who traveled to China, decried this same rampant mockery of Chinese people: “Their manners, their habits, language, dress, and sentiments, have all been made the butt of witless ridicule.” The Canton Chinese, 266.

30. Isaacs, Images of Asia, 71.

31. See advertisement for “FRESH TEAS” and “200 cases China silk goods” from the Washington in the New York Evening Post, October 17 and 23, 1834.

32. New York Daily Advertiser, October 20, 1834.
33. "New York Commercial Advertiser, October 18, 1834.
36. Both rumors were printed in the New York Commercial Advertiser, October 28, 1834. As for the gunfire, this pro-Whig newspaper reported on all the activities of the rival Democratic Party during the congressional elections of 1834.
37. See advertisements placed in the Daily Advertiser, Sun, Commercial Advertiser, and Evening Post starting on November 6 and running through the month. We cannot be certain of Moy's age because an undated broadside owned by the Library Company of Philadelphia lists her as seventeen years old, not nineteen.
38. "Visit to Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese Lady," New Hampshire Gazette, November 18, 1834. The article was first published in the New York Star.
41. New-York Mirror, December 6, 1834.
42. For example, the following seven newspapers carried the same article on Afong Moy, which first appeared in the New York Star: New Hampshire Gazette, November 18, 1834; Richmond Enquirer, November 18, 1834; Southern Patriot (Charleston), November 18, 1834; Eastern Argus (Portland, Me.), November 21, 1834; New-Bedford (Mass.) Mercury, November 21, 1834; Portsmouth (N.H.) Journal of Literature and Politics, November 22, 1834; Haverhill (Mass.) Gazette, November 29, 1834.
44. "Visit to Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese Lady," American Antiquarian Society.
46. Advertisement, "Visit to Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese Lady," American Domesticity in America 1834.
47. Kristin Hoganson, in discussing the Gilded Age, employs the term "cosmopolitan domesticity" to describe the craze for Oriental objects in home decoration. Hoganson argues that American women, by purchasing non-American things, were asserting the "appreciation of other peoples . . . artistic production and cultural attainments" and tacitly expressing their faith in the transnational ideal. Kristin Hoganson, "Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865–1920," American Historical Review (February 2002), 59–60, 75–77. One can view the interior-decorating motif inspired by Moy's saloon as a precursor to the later movement described by Hoganson.
49. Samuel Eliot Morison claimed that opium amounted to a " binaric" system of spheres "is simply too crude an instrument" and "too rigid and totalizing" to adequately comprehend the experience of American women. "Prelace: No More Separate Spheres?" American Literature 70 (September 1998), 445. Mary Kelley has explored the conflicts of women writers as they negotiated between the expectations of domesticity and the demands of the literary marketplace. Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). Lori Ginzbarg has highlighted the highly assertive roles of women who participated passionately in reform movements. Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th-Century United States (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Similarly, Julie Roy Jeffrey explains how the abolitionist cause attracted women and taught them how to gain access to the "manly" political sphere through grassroots activism. The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Finally, Nancy Cott has demonstrated that the popular perception that women were "passionless" beings, totally lacking in lust, accorded them a degree of power by allowing them to resist the sexual advances of their husbands, exert control over intercourse, and limit family size. Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," Signs 4 (Winter 1978).
51. Kristin Hoganson, in discussing the Gilded Age, employs the term "cosmopolitan domesticity" to describe the craze for Oriental objects in home decoration. Hoganson argues that American women, by purchasing non-American things, were showing their appreciation of other peoples . . . artistic production and cultural attainments" and tacitly expressing their faith in the transnational ideal. Kristin Hoganson, "Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865–1920," American Historical Review (February 2002), 59–60, 75–77. One can view the interior-decorating motif inspired by Moy's saloon as a precursor to the later movement described by Hoganson.
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70. “Small Feet,” *Farmer’s Cabinet* (October 21, 1836).


75. *New Hampshire Patriot*, November 24, 1834.

76. “Extraordinary Arrival: The Young Chinese Lady,” *Baltimore Patriot*, October 21, 1834. This article first appeared in the *New York Star*.


79. “We, the undersigned, having inspected the foot of the Chinese lady, Afong Moy, divested of its covering, find the dimensions to be as follows:— Length of foot from heel to end of great toe, 4 3–4 inches; from the heel to the end of the small toe, 2 1–3 inches; round the ankle, 6 6–10 inches, and also certify that the model exhibited to us by the proprietor is a good representation of the general appearance of the real foot.” “Novel Examinations,” *Southern Patriot*, Charleston, February 5, 1835. The inspection took place in Philadelphia.


81. *Southern Patriot*, May 1, 1835.


83. The article from the *Monmouth (N.J.) Enquirer* is cited in the *Hudson River Chronicle*, Sing-Sing, New York, April 3, 1838.

84. *New York Herald*, August 3, 1847. The meeting was somewhat fortuitous, for Moy departed for Boston a few weeks later. *New York Herald*, September 3, 1847.


On Monday evening, March 22, 1943, on a stage set up in Chicago Stadium, looking out at an audience of over fifteen thousand people, there sat a group of Chinese American children dressed in their finest traditional Chinese clothing and bearing traditional Chinese percussive instruments of their own manufacture. The children were members of the Chicago Public Schools’ Haines Elementary Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band under the direction of Miss Olga Huncke (1884–1974), a kindergarten teacher. The Haines Chinese American children sat before this large crowd to offer their musical support for Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s (Song Meiling’s) fundraising campaign on behalf of China war relief. This article uses contemporary newspaper accounts and Miss Huncke’s scrapbooks, held in the archives of the Chicago History Museum, to trace the evolution of the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band from its inception in the Haines kindergarten classroom of the late 1920s through its early life as a Chinese cultural exemplar in the Chicago area in the 1930s, and finally on to its role as one of the most sought-after acts in the Midwest on the wartime fundraising circuit.

From the example of the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band we see, contrary to what is often assumed, that early-twentieth-century American public schools could, in at least some cases, be sites of the active promotion of Chinese identity and transnational patriotism in Chinese American children.

It is almost unanimously attested, in the historiography on the subject, that the Chinese in America during World War II (and well before), including the children, were enthusiastic in their patriotic activity for China. As one scholar put it: “From the graying old man to the child who had only just learned to sense the external world, all joined in campaigns to contribute [toward saving China].” There is somewhat less unanimity regarding the causes of this patriotism, though much explanation coalesces around the idea that it arose from the hard work of Chinese American activists, operating through various Chinatown associations, to awaken their compatriots to the idea that a strong China would better defend the rights of Chinese Americans. In contrast, scholarship has also suggested that the American public schools “denigrated” Chinese culture, “de-ethnized” Chinese American students, destroyed the “mystique of Chineseness” in the children, and so worked counter to the Chinatown activists’ efforts to form a Chinese identity and subsequent China-directed patriotism in Chinese American children.

While in some situations American public education did destroy Chinese identity in children, that was not the whole story, as our case will show. To begin with, it must be understood that U.S.-based educationalists in the first half of the twentieth century never reached a consensus on what it meant to “Americanize” children in the first place, and many understood “Americanization” to somehow include respect for cultural difference in the classroom. Of importance to our particular case, the Chicago public schools administration, inspired by John Dewey’s “progressive education,” sought to find a middle ground between assimilation and celebration of cultural difference in its schools. Further complicating the picture, individual teachers in Chicago (and in fact in many school districts in America) were allowed great discretion over their own classroom environments, making any blanket assertion about public education dubious from the start. Indeed, the case of the Haines Elementary Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band, Olga Huncke, director, suggests we broaden our understanding of the quite varied means by which some Chinese Americans in the early twentieth century might have come to hold the “mystique of Chineseness” and a corresponding patriotism toward China—means that could even include the efforts of an American public school.
was located about two miles north, on Clark Street, so Haines School was not originally a “Chinatown school.” Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, however, a new Chinatown was established on Wentworth Avenue, just a block from Haines School. Ethnic Chinese students quickly became a significant percentage of the student body, though in the period under review here, they never became a majority. Olga Huncke, the daughter of German immigrants, began teaching kindergarten at Haines in 1907. Miss Huncke never married and, outside of class, busied herself with art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago and volunteer work with a Chinatown church and the Chinatown branch of the Girl Scouts. By far her greatest claim to fame, however, came to be her sustained promotion of the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band, which evolved slowly out of her kindergarten classroom, and which she created initially for musical education purposes first and foremost, not for cultural propagation. The band quickly grew far beyond Miss Huncke’s original purposes, however, in response to increasing demands from around Chicago, first and foremost, not for cultural propagation. The first mention of a distinct band emerging from Haines School can be found in a newspaper clipping of indeterminate origin in Miss Huncke’s scrapbook, dated April 20, 1927. That year, the National Association of Music Clubs held its annual meeting in Chicago. A number of local public schools put on a music program for the conference attendees; the performers included a group of Chinese students from Haines, dressed in traditional outfits. According to the article, the Association of Music Clubs had recently been quite critical of the current status of musical training in the American public schools, but “fifty Chinese youngsters . . . emphatically denied the charge . . . [proving instead that] American musical education is not being neglected.” It is not clear from the article what type of music this group performed, nor on what kind of instruments, but surely this effort was an early incarnation of the Rhythm Band, and probably such positive press encouraged Miss Huncke to continue experimenting with Chinese elements in her class.

It seems from articles in the scrapbooks that it was around 1930 that Miss Huncke made a decided shift toward emphasizing Chinese culture over others in her class. That year, her class’s annual spring program began to include distinctly Chinese elements, such as Chinese songs and poetry, and eliminated some of the standard fare of years previous, such as Hansel and Gretel. This shift attracted attention in Chinatown, and the scrapbook contains a picture of the spring program from the bilingual Chinatown newspaper, Gongshang ribao, dated April 15, 1930. The photo’s caption announces that the Chinese children, “in the costumes of their ancestors, presented a play.” The following year, Gongshang ribao advertised Miss Huncke’s spring program well in advance, inviting all of Chicago’s Chinese to attend the event. The program for the 1931 performance shows a culturally mixed event, including acts such as “Funny Clown” and “Teddy Bear,” but also “We Visit a Chinese Princess.” It was the Chinese section that drew people’s attention, even beyond Chicago’s Chinatown. The Chicago Daily Tribune, like Gongshang ribao before it, ran a photo just of the Chinese portion of the performance. The same performance received further attention in the form of a photo in a bilingual North American Overseas Chinese news pictorial. The pictorial, saved in Miss Huncke’s scrapbook, shows pictures from kindergarten spring programs at three schools: Haines, San Francisco’s Commodore Stockton, and San Francisco’s Chinese Baptist. The Haines photo is given preeminence, allotted the whole top half of the page, with a caption noting that the children wore “the costumes of their ancestors.” The other two programs, which seem, based on costume, to have been more of the Mother Goose variety, compete for the viewer’s attention on the bottom half of the page. The pictorial editors plainly preferred Miss Huncke’s program with its Chinese character.

After 1931, the Chicago newspapers, both Chinese and English, routinely covered the Haines kindergarten spring program. A typical account is found in China’s Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) Chicago paper, Sanmin chenbao. The program was the first item featured in the local news section on April 20, 1934, with the headline “Haines School’s Chinese and Western Children’s Performance.” The article first noted that the children’s classroom art was on display and that the Chinese children painted many Chinese-styled works of flowers and birds, mountains and rivers. The article then noted that the program itself began promptly at 10:30, under Miss Huncke’s direction, and that at the center of the stage, throughout the entire performance, there sat a colorful Chinese dragon boat made by the Chinese students. A photo of either the boat in question or a similar one appears in the scrapbook, showing the prow of the ship to be decorated with a Chinese transliteration of “Olga Huncke” (歐加杏記). The Sanmin story then related that the event was divided into five parts. The first three featured miscellaneous singing, dancing, and music; in the fourth, only the Chinese American children, dressed in traditional garb, sang, danced, and performed a skit; and the fifth consisted of storytelling by three children, one Chinese and two Western. At 11:30, the performance ended to “a loud round of applause,” according to the reporter.

The spring performances were not the band, but with all their emphasis on Chinese culture and art, they suggest a classroom environment that provided the necessary background for the band. Around the same time that newspapers were paying attention to the Chinese portions of the spring program, an English-language newspaper article, found as a clipping in the scrapbook, brought attention to another formative element of the band. The article, under the headline “Children Make Their Musical Instruments: Kindergarten Pupils Imitate Chinese Drums, Cymbals, Bells,” describes
Miss Huncke’s classroom environment as being “definitely Chinese,” although only 16 percent of its students were Chinese American. According to the article, no matter what their nationality, students in Miss Huncke’s class learned to make rhythm instruments fashioned in the shape of Chinese drums, and stringed instruments like the *pipa* and *erhu*. Miss Huncke then enrolled her alumni, the older Chinese American students at Haines, to add decidedly Chinese decoration to the instruments.

With the Chinese portion of the spring program attaining some level of fame in Chicago, and Miss Huncke’s class itself becoming more and more “Chinese,” demand soon began to build for Miss Huncke to project the Chineseness of her classroom outward to wider city functions. At first, such projection was not the sole property of the band. For instance, as a clipping shows, when the Chicago Woman’s Club held an International Bridal Show in May 1932, it requested and received a few of Miss Huncke’s Chinese children to accompany the “Chinese bridal procession.” However, increasingly it was the band in particular that was sought as the cultural exemplar. As far as I can tell from the scrapbook, the first event to which a group of Miss Huncke’s students were dispatched under the specific name “the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band” was the 1932 International Children’s Art Exhibit at the Michigan Square Building. The photo in the scrapbook shows kindergarten children of multiple nationalities, all playing their handcrafted Chinese instruments.

Around this same time, Miss Huncke’s class and the emerging Rhythm Band received more national attention in the form of an article in the April 15, 1933, edition of the *Christian Science Monitor*. The article explained that the classroom-based manufacturing process resulted in what it called “authentic Chinese rhythm instruments.” It further declared the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band to be the “best toy orchestra of its kind” in America. The photo accompanying the article showed only Chinese students, in costume, with their instruments. More national attention came to Huncke’s class and the band that summer as the band was selected to perform at the July 1933 annual convention of the National Education Association, held in Chicago. The performance was given as a part of an art session at the convention. The band and other (non-Chinese) children from Miss Huncke’s class performed in various musical ensembles for the assembled teachers.

The public image of the class continued to turn toward its Chineseness as trumping other expressions of nationality the following summer, further solidifying the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band as the class’s main export. The summer of 1934 saw Marshall Fields, the largest department store in Chicago, expand its second-floor “Oriental section” by adding a room called the “Pageant of Old Peking,” which contained both Chinese antiques on display and sundry chinoserie for sale. Marshall Fields called on the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band to help boost public interest in the expansion. The advertisement announcing the band’s performance reads that the “Chinese Spring Pageant . . . [will be] presented by Chinese kindergarten children of Haines school.” The performance was in the fourth-floor children’s theater, while the second floor displayed art produced by Chinese children from Haines.14 A newspaper article from just after the performance, also found in the scrapbook, notes that “the classroom is definitely Chinese,” but that an Italian boy, Vincent, insisted he be allowed to participate in the band’s Marshall Fields performance because he had learned a few Chinese words. A letter of congratulations after the program from Dudley Crafts Watson, a well-known artist associated with the Art Institute of Chicago, thanked Miss Huncke for “giving them a start in America . . . yet keeping their natural traditions alive in their hearts.”

In this formative period, then, in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s, the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band emerged as a significant part of the Chineseness of Miss Huncke’s class that could be deployed for various cultural, educational, or marketing purposes throughout Chicago. With the turn toward patriotic wartime efforts, the band would come ever more firmly into its own.

### The Band Supports China

According to evidence available in the scrapbooks, 1941 inaugurated the Rhythm Band’s busy years of overtly patriotic activity on behalf of the Republic of China, which had been fighting Japanese invasion since 1937. The band’s very first event in support of China that year was also probably its biggest event until the arrival of Madame Chiang. The association United China Relief organized a large fundraising event in South Bend, Indiana. The May 22 event included a dinner of Chinese food, catered by South Bend Chinese restaurants, followed by a long series of speeches by American business leaders, Christian ministers, Chinese scholars, and China’s Consul General of Chicago, Dr. Chen Chang-lok. The Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band opened the program with a performance. A photo of the event in the scrapbook shows it to have been well attended, filling a large gymnasium with well-dressed men and women. In a letter to Miss Huncke after the event, Mr. Hoffman, president of Studebaker Motors and then head of United China Relief, wrote, “The presence of those Chinese Children did more to bring home to our people the needs of the Chinese than all the speeches that were made.” Mr. Hoffman thus expressed what surely was the driving concern of many subsequent event organizers who invited the band to perform: it was vital to pull the heartstrings of potential donors—and who better to perform this function than a group of Chinese American kindergartners banging away on homemade instruments?15

After the South Bend event, the Rhythm Band kept busy on the fundraising circuit, usually, though not always, under
the auspices of United China Relief. A newspaper clipping in the scrapbook, dated June 18, 1941, declared that the children of Miss Huncke’s class were “ready to do their bit for suffering China.” The article announced that the band would play at a fundraising event sponsored by the University of Chicago’s Chinese Students Christian Association. It would be one part of a program that included a fashion show, a movie entitled The Rise of Chongqing (Chongqing was China’s wartime capital), and a dance afterward. According to the article, the band planned to play both traditional Chinese tunes and works by Chopin and Brahms, and was allotted a whole forty minutes of the program to do so. Some events that, before the war, might have invited the band to perform as a cultural exemplar now used it for fundraising purposes. So, for instance, it was invited to perform at a February 18, 1943, Valentine’s Day party in Hinsdale (a Chicago suburb). The party had the theme of “Give your heart to China,” with the proceeds going to war relief. The band quickly became a regular contributor to Chicago-area China war relief.

THE ARRIVAL OF MADAME CHIANG

Those who pay attention to Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s 1943 trip to the United States are almost unanimous on its momentous significance. Shih-shan Henry Tsai, for instance, notes that Madame Chiang’s tour was a key event in changing American opinions about the Chinese. Tsai writes that, in her, Americans saw a Chinese woman who was “modern, intelligent, proud, tolerant and Christian.” Others have drawn a connection between the arrival of Madame Chiang and the end of Chinese exclusion later that same year. The public reception of her was probably more complicated than is generally expressed, but the American and Chinese media, at least, made very sure that the fires of enthusiasm were well stoked for Madame Chiang’s tour.

Chicago was no exception. The Chicago Daily Tribune gave extensive attention to Madame Chiang’s trip as she crossed America, building up to an explosion of coverage upon her arrival in Chicago. Even the serialized novel running in the Tribune at the time, Man Snatcher by Nina Wilcox Pulman, was deployed to draw attention to Madame Chiang’s cause; the main character shopped at a Chinese grocery, and it was announced that all the proceeds were being sent to a relief fund administered by Madame Chiang. From her arrival on Friday, March 19, to her departure late Monday night, March 22, the Tribune spared no detail in reporting on Madame Chiang in Chicago. Of course, the major events were covered, from the reception at the ritzy downtown Drake Hotel (Miss Huncke was invited) to her Sunday afternoon trip to Chinatown. There, among other things, the paper reported she heard Chinese American children sing the song “Down with Japan,” to the tune of Frère Jacques, and told the gathered crowd of Chicago’s Chinese that they were the “spiritual force” of China’s resistance. Beyond these big public events, even the minutiae of her visit, such as her diet, became a worthy topic for Chicagoans hungry for news of Madame Chiang. First, readers learned that, unlike most Chinese in her entourage, Madame Chiang preferred fruit to ice cream for dessert. Yet, as if to reassure readers that she was not entirely un-American, the paper later noted that a hotel bellboy could confirm that Madame Chiang “enjoyed immensely” a Chicago steak. Finally, for the true Madame Chiang worshippers, on the day of the big event at Chicago Stadium, the paper printed a full-page image of her standing in front of a bamboo background.

It is not clear who invited the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band to perform at the stadium. By that time they were well known in the area, having performed for cultural purposes for over a decade and for explicitly wartime purposes for at least two years. Quite probably United China Relief had something to do with it, as the organization was a major sponsor of Madame Chiang’s tour. Whatever the case, the scrapbook testifies that Miss Huncke had, like many Chicagoans, developed an intense interest in Madame Chiang’s American tour. For quite a few pages of the scrapbook there are no pictures of her students at all, only newspaper clippings regarding Madame Chiang’s doings.

The scrapbook contains a number of mementos from the stadium event, including a map explaining the seating arrangement on stage; a ribbon and tag from the event, which perhaps served as Miss Huncke’s backstage pass; the program; many letters of thanks from after the event; and some postevent newspaper clippings. The event began at 8:30 p.m. From the map and a news photo, we can see that the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band, though only one of several performance groups, was seated the closest to Madame Chiang on stage. The band remained on stage for the whole program. As at the earlier South Bend event, it was thus convenient for spectators who grew tired of Madame Chiang’s speech (with its frequent references to events in ancient Greek and early American history, Confucius, and William James) to look instead at the cute children and thereby be reminded of the seriousness of the China front. The Rhythm Band was allotted ten minutes to perform its act, sandwiched between performances of “Anchors Aweigh” by the Great Lakes Naval Training Station Choir and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” by the African American Metropolitan Church Choir.

After the performance, the Rhythm Band and Miss Huncke were vaulted to new heights of fame. Surely all who followed the news around Chicago knew of them. The report in the Chicago Daily Tribune the day after Madame Chiang’s event is worth quoting in its entirety to provide a sense of how Chicagoans perceived the band’s participation:

Strung like a Christmas tree garland across the stage, nineteen Chinese children stole the show from all except Mme. Chiang at the rally in the Stadium. They were the Chinese children’s rhythm band of Haines elementary school, 231 West 23d place,
under the direction of Miss Olga Huncke. In the middle of the row sat a young man 4 years old looking as wise as Confucius in a black skull cap and long blue gown. His brother and sister students, ranging from 3 to 8 years old, wore formal Chinese dress and amazing headdresses of beads, flowers, feathers, and ribbons. They brought their own blue enameled kindergarten chairs and tables, pranced through a rhythm dance and banged out “The Storm” on blocks and xylophones.53

It is clear that the exotic element (“Confucius”) combined with the natural cuteness of young children was powerfully attractive to the reporter and, we may assume, to wider Chicago as well. A week later the children of the Rhythm Band were still on the minds of Tribune writers. The author of the Society column of March 28 mulled over the fact that seeing the band perform reminded her that there were two million Chinese orphans in war-torn China in need of financial aid.26 That the children “stole the show” from all but Madame Chiang quickly became a standard expression in letters addressed to Miss Huncke after the event. It would seem that, in inviting the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band to participate in the stadium event, the organizers had hit on a real boon in raising funds and awareness.

The stadium event also placed Miss Huncke and her class more squarely in the vision of Dr. Chen Chang-lok, the Chinese Consul General in Chicago. After the event, Miss Huncke was invited to all the major Chinese Nationalist Party celebrations. The scrapbook is full of ornate red and gold invitations from the consul general to consecutive official “10-10” celebrations (celebrating the 1911 Republican revolution) at various Chinatown restaurants. After the war, Dr. Chen invited Miss Huncke to the official victory celebration held at the On Leong Building in Chinatown. The On Leong Merchants Association, around this same time, also began inviting Miss Huncke to all of its Chinese New Year celebrations, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association began sending her invitations to its events, usually political talks. It would seem, then, that one outcome of the Rhythm Band’s performance for Madame Chiang was to solidify Miss Huncke in the orbit of the Chinese Nationalists of Chicago. Coming at it the other way, it would also be right to say that the Nationalists recognized that the promotion of Chinese culture, which Miss Huncke was already enabling in her classroom and through the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band, dovetailed nicely with their efforts to create patriotic Chinese children in Chicago.

THE POST–MADAME CHIANG AFTERGLOW AND MISS HUNCKE’S RETIREMENT

Immediately after the Chicago Stadium performance, the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band entered the busiest period in its existence. The scrapbook is full of letters of invitation for the band to come and play at various events. Some of the events were geared toward fundraising for China, while others were more cultural in orientation. Often, in these letters of request and in event programs, the band was known as “the Rhythm Band that performed for Madame Chiang.” For the remainder of the war years, Madame Chiang’s imprint remained on the band.

On April 16, 1943, less than a month after the stadium event, the band performed at a “United Nations party” to support all the countries opposing Fascism. The party featured performances representing all the major allied nations. The Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band was part of the group representing China, which also included renowned Chinese American ballerina Ruth Ann Koesun, herself a former student of Miss Huncke. At this event, the band performed a song by Miss Huncke entitled “A Chinese Children’s Tribute to Madame Chiang Kai-shek.” Other performances that year included shows at the Art Institute, an appearance at the Chicago Folk Festival at the Goodman Theatre, and a May 19 performance on a local television station’s “United Nations Show.” The next year, 1944, was also a busy one; the band raised funds for Chinese orphans through an event cosponsored by the Chinese Women’s Club of Chicago and the Illinois Federation of Music Clubs, and performed at a number of schools around northeastern Illinois that were looking to increase awareness about China and Chinese culture.

After the war, and as the memory of the Madame Chiang event subsided, demand for the band seems to have declined to its earlier levels. In 1947, the band began what would become a four-year run playing at the Chicago Oriental Council’s Far Eastern Review. According to the council’s directors in a letter to Miss Huncke, this event was meant to help “create international understanding and goodwill.” The band also performed for several years in the late 1940s at the Museum of Science and Industry’s Christmas program. In 1949, Miss Huncke and the Rhythm Band received more national attention, appearing briefly in the juvenile novel The Green Ginger Jar: A Chinatown Mystery.

Miss Huncke retired in 1949 after forty-two years in the Haines kindergarten. A scrapbook clipping from a Chinatown newspaper announced that the On Leong Merchants Association would host her retirement party on June 26, 1949, and that all Chinatown residents were invited, as she had been the kindergarten teacher for many Chinese in Chicago. A postevent account in an English-language paper suggests that the invitation was heeded, claiming that virtually all of Chinatown was in attendance. With the retirement of Miss Huncke, the era of the Rhythm Band was drawing to a close.

CONCLUSION

One of the last public performances of the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band was for the Chinese Christian Union Church in June 1947. A reporter for the Chicago Daily Tribune was
in attendance, and the subsequent headline read: “Children Inject Bit of Rhythm in Chinese Melody: Group is Almost as Old as Chinatown.”28 The reporter lamented that “sightseers ‘doing’ Chinatown unfortunately miss an integral part,” since they almost invariably fail to see the Rhythm Band. A former band member and Chinatown resident, Mrs. Olga Moy, was quoted in support of that sentiment, claiming, “Miss Huncke’s band is practically an institution here.” The journalist noted with enthusiasm that the tunes and dances were all well executed and done in “a Chinese manner,” and that the program ended, in true patriotic fashion, with the band performing “‘a spirited rendition of the Chinese national anthem.” Miss Huncke was described as “a student of Chinese culture and a friend of just about every resident of the community.” The article concluded with an underwhelming, but somehow appropriately teacherly, comment from Miss Huncke that her kids show a “good bit of musical and rhythmical talent.”

In the end, it would be difficult, from the disparate evidence examined here, to quantify the exact effect of Miss Huncke’s public school classroom and its most famed product, the Chinese Children’s Rhythm Band, on the Chinese American children’s attitudes toward their own identity. There is one tantalizing clue, however, from Helen Djang’s 1938 survey of the education of Chinese in Chicago. Djang queried older Chinese children at Haines about which country they thought was theirs: 54 percent answered America, 12 percent China, and 8 percent both, while 26 percent were not certain.29 Surely, “Americanization” was working to a degree for these Chicago public school children, but not overwhelmingly, and we may reasonably conclude that Miss Huncke’s class and the band played no small part in creating an environment that made it acceptable to provide indefinite answers to such a question. Indeed, Haines in general and Miss Huncke’s class in particular are remembered today in Chinatown as having provided a space where cultural difference was accepted.30 The notion that early-twentieth-century American schools were fundamentally hostile to Chinese culture and “de-ethnized” Chinese American students, while perhaps true in specific instances, should not be assumed to have been true across the board.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Augusto Espiritu, Yoon K. Pak, Lane J. Harris, and the editorial committee of *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* for their comments.


7. Ibid., 93.

8. On the relocation of Chinatown, which was precipitated by some combination of White racism and Chinese merchant association power struggles, see Harry Ying Cheng Kung, *Chicago’s Chinatown* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: Institute of China Studies, 1992), 5, and Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 212.

9. In 1938, the ethnic composition of Haines was reported as follows: 51.8 percent White (most of whom were the children of Italian immigrants), 20 percent Chinese, 15.2 percent Mexican, and 13 percent African American. Helen (Hsianglan) Djang, “The Adjustment in American Culture of Chinese Children in Chinatown, Chicago, and Its Educational Implications” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1940), 49.


13. Chicago Daily Tribune, May 9, 1934, 11.


16. On Madame Chiang’s tour and the results of it, see Wong, *Americans First*, chapter 3.


22. Ibid.
23. This begins the second scrapbook, dated 1942–54.
24. The text of Madame Chiang’s speech is printed in its entirety in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 23, 1943, 4.
25. Ibid.


**INTRODUCTION: “I WAS LUCKY”**

“I was lucky,” Laura Lai said to me one afternoon as she drove me home after we had had lunch together. “When I was born, my father decided to report that he had a daughter born to him instead of a son.” What was so significant about this decision that would make Laura feel special her whole life?

By the time Laura was born, the United States had passed a number of laws that excluded Chinese from entering the country unless they were merchants, diplomats, teachers, students, travelers, or American citizens. These Chinese exclusion laws were aimed at preventing Chinese laborers and their families from entering the United States. The Chinese had been targeted by White workers and their labor organizations, such as the Knights of Labor, since the hard economic times that hit the country in the later part of the nineteenth century. Anti-Chinese sentiments were later taken up by politicians. These laws included denying the Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens. The only way a Chinese could be a citizen was to be born on U.S. soil. When the Chinese realized there was a loophole in the law that granted the children of U.S. citizens the right to citizenship—and therefore the right to emigrate to this country regardless of their country of birth—they found a means by which they could continue to enter this country. Chinese laborers just needed to claim they were the sons of American-born Chinese and therefore U.S. citizens. This is how Laura’s father was able to come to the United States.

After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed all written records, including immigration records, many more Chinese made the claim that they were native-born citizens. This allowed any children they claimed to have in China the right to come to America. Chinese men working in the United States would often report the birth of a son after returning from a trip to China, regardless of whether a boy or girl had been born. This practice of claiming to have sons born in China allowed for other family members to come to America or for the claims to be sold as “slots” for other people to use. This is how the term “paper sons” came to exist. Some people came over using the papers of people much younger than they were. This meant that later, when they reached retirement age, they could not retire for many more years because on paper they were younger. One estimate is that almost 25 percent of the Chinese living in the United States in 1950 had come as paper sons.

Apparently Laura’s father, Tong Jung, held onto the belief that one day he could bring not only his sons but his daughter to the United States as children of an American citizen. While listening to Laura describe this atypical beginning to her life, I thought this would be an interesting story to write. Her husband, historian Him Mark Lai, had intended to write about her life one day but didn’t have the chance to do it before his passing in May 2009.

I had known Laura and Him Mark Lai since I was a young child. My father was a member of the Mun Ching youth group that Laura and Him Mark belonged to in the 1950s. My brothers and I used to go with our father on his visits to their house to talk. I used to borrow books from their library. When Him Mark began to work on *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus*, he wrote everything out by hand. My father would bring home his handwritten drafts for my younger brother, Benton, and me to type. With this long history between us, I felt that I should help Him Mark finish something he didn’t have time to do: write Laura’s story. In October 2009, I visited Laura at her home one afternoon, and she told me the story of her life. She felt honored that I wanted to interview her.

**LAURA’S FATHER**

Laura’s father, Tong Jung, emigrated to the United States in the mid-1920s and worked as a laborer. He picked fruit, harvested vegetables, and worked as a cook in private homes. He told Laura that the worst job he ever had to do was harvesting asparagus because it required bending down
to the ground to cut off the asparagus. Around the time of World War II, he opened a restaurant in Tracy with relatives with the surname of Tong; it was called Tong’s Inn.

After working for about five years in the United States, Mr. Jung returned to China, where he got married and had his first son in 1929. He stayed in China for a year. Upon returning to California, he reported the birth of his first son and also reported that his wife was pregnant again to secure a slot for a paper son. He planned to visit his family every four to five years. However, after Laura was born on January 7, 1933, he would not see his family again for over a decade; the Depression and World War II made it too difficult.

**LIFE AS A YOUNG GIRL IN CHINA**

“I was told that I was very weak when I was born. Maybe I was premature,” said Laura. On the day she was born, her mother fell while carrying a knife and cutting board as she was going to prepare a special dinner for the New Year celebration. She fell two or three feet down to the concrete pavement in front of the house. Her father rushed to help her mother up. Laura was born that night.

Both Tong Jung’s mother and his wife wanted him to report that a son was born. They argued that since Laura was so weak and sickly, she might not even live to grow up, much less go to the United States. They argued that claiming a boy would save a slot for someone else to go as a paper son, or maybe even for a future son-in-law to go, and was more practical. Mr. Jung’s mother and wife could only see reporting the birth of a girl as wasting a slot. But Laura’s father was firm in his decision to report that he had a girl.

Because of the money Mr. Jung sent home, the economic situation of his family in China was secure. Laura recounted, “My mother never bought jewelry with the money. She only bought land, one piece at a time as she saved up money.” They rented out the land to be farmed, and the family was able to afford servants to help in the house. Her mother’s management of the household and finances kept the family well fed even when other people in the villages went hungry.

Laura’s mother also provided support to three other families. Laura recalled with pride, “She also helped my father’s older sister’s family and her own older sister and older brother’s families with food and money. She helped keep all three families from starving in the nearby villages where they lived. So my mother did a good job helping these close relatives.” Those were extremely difficult times in China. The 1930s had brought rampant inflation, food shortages, government corruption, the Japanese invasion of China, and war.²

When Laura was old enough, she was sent to school with her older brother. The village had no formal school, only a school that was set up in a temple. Laura did not enjoy going to school. Instead she would go off with the servants to dig for oysters or go up the mountains to pick fruit. Laura said her mother was not concerned that she did not always attend school: “She didn’t care because I was a girl. Whether I had education or not, eventually I would get married and be in somebody else’s family.”

Laura always felt this attitude was unfair. “My mother thought more of boys than girls, and her treatment towards me was almost the same as for the servants. My mother would sometimes scold or spank me, and I would cry. I would get out my frustrations by crying and talking with the servants, and they would also complain and cry, and we would cry together.”

Not being very healthy since birth, Laura was always very skinny and weak. One thing she remembered from her early childhood was her mother’s disapproval and lack of understanding during a short period when she had a problem with wetting the bed. Her mother accused her of doing it on purpose and even suggested that she was too lazy to get up to go urinate. This accusation really stung her. “Why would I do that? It was so uncomfortable being all wet, and then all the bedding would need to be changed. I would be sleeping, and when I woke up, the bed would already be wet.” Her poor health was responsible for the problem, but her mother’s angry words and attitude really hit a raw spot for her.

She felt that her mother often thought she was being disobedient. “I thought I was being treated unfairly. When I was much older—it was after I got married that I realized that it was not completely my mother’s fault for how she treated me and preferring boys more than girls. All of China was like that, and in the whole village, everyone was just like my mother, with maybe one or two exceptions, so I didn’t blame my mother as much after that.”³

Laura’s feelings of being treated unfairly for being a girl were very common in China at that time. This was why, after the Chinese Communists seized power in 1949, one of the most important developments was the women’s liberation struggle. Suddenly, the door was opened for them to speak out on their grievances or what they called their “bitterness.” Women in China organized to break free from the traditions that bound them and the roles they could have in both the family and society.⁴ As Laura herself came to realize as an adult, she could not blame her mother for her behavior because it was prevalent throughout Chinese society. It is part of the feudal Confucian thinking that females be subservient to males. Women’s roles were defined by their relationships to the men in their lives—as daughters to their fathers, as wives to their husbands, and as mothers to their sons—and it was their duty to serve these men. Chinese American women whose parents also have this traditional outlook have continued to experience unfair treatment in the United States.

**SCHOOL IN HONG KONG**

In 1940, Laura and her brother went to Hong Kong for schooling. Laura felt that it was actually very good of her
mother to send her to school, explaining, “She didn’t have to, since I was a girl.” However, a year later the Japanese occupied Hong Kong. Laura remembered seeing Japanese soldiers in the streets from the house where she lived. So the family went back to the village in China, where they had land and could support themselves. Laura’s father had no way of sending money to the family in Hong Kong during the war.

In 1945, after the war ended, Laura recounted, with laughter: “My brother and I went back to Hong Kong for school again. We both went back to the same elementary school, and I was still in the first grade. My older brother was in the sixth grade.” She was twelve years old that year.

Laura had to board at school. Since she had always had servants looking after her, this was the first time she was on her own. She spoke about how she cried very easily when young. One vivid memory was crying when she was not given any milk to drink. She did not like eating beef, so the staff assumed that she would not drink milk either and didn’t give her any. She also recalled a time she was sitting in the school ballpark crying. She told the teacher that she had a stomachache. The teacher gave her some food, and after that she felt much better. “So I was actually hungry and not having a stomachache. I didn’t know the difference between hungry and stomachache, probably because I had never experienced being hungry before. I thought I was sick. This was part of my childhood.”

Not long after she moved to Hong Kong, her father returned to visit. This was the first time she had met her father since she had been born. She said, “I remember that my father liked me very much. He didn’t care if you were a boy or girl, but treated both the same way. Because of this I grew closer to my father than to my mother.” One of her fondest memories was that during this visit her father taught her how to ride a bicycle. Laura stayed at this school for the next few years until she had to leave for the United States. The teacher and principal were kind enough to grant her a grammar school diploma before she left Hong Kong, even though she had only had four years of formal schooling. She always felt that her reading and writing of Chinese was not very good.

In September 1949, Laura got on a ship heading to the United States with her older brother, who now used Horatio as his English name. Going with them was a paper brother, a distant cousin who became the “second son” of the family, Ben Jung. They all needed to learn details about the family and village so they would be prepared once they arrived in the United States, where immigration officials would interrogate them.

The ship arrived in San Francisco in October 1949 after a voyage of eighteen days. Laura was seasick most of the trip, vomiting half of the time she was on board. Since the Angel Island Immigration Station had already been closed, they were detained at an immigration building on Sansome Street for a week. Left behind in Hong Kong were Laura’s mother and two younger brothers, William, born in 1947, and Albert, born in 1949. They did not come to the United States until 1952.

Families were frequently split apart like this before the 1960s. The main factor was the Chinese exclusion laws that were in effect from 1882 until 1943. The passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which put an end to the national-origin quota system of the earlier immigration acts, opened the door to immigration from Asia. This allowed many families to reunite with members previously left behind in China. There was also a new wave of immigrants as whole families came to make the United States their permanent home.

**SCHOOL YEARS IN THE UNITED STATES**

After receiving approval from immigration officials, Laura and Horatio were released, and they went to live in San Francisco Chinatown. Her father rented two rooms in a building on Sacramento Street near Stockton Street. It was a five-story brick building with no elevator, so they had to climb up and down the stairs daily. At sixteen years of age, Laura went to Washington Irving Elementary School and was put in a class with third-graders. Laura said she had learned the alphabet and some English words while living in Hong Kong and had chosen her own English name during that time.

With just a little English and no English-as-a-second-language classes, she had only limited communications with the teacher. Her teacher told her that she would be seventeen in January and that if she did not enter high school soon, she would not have a chance to go at all. She said with laughter, “It was suggested that I go to Galileo High School. So I went from the third grade to the ninth grade. At Galileo, they did have a special English class for me to attend, but all the other classes were regular classes.”

At the end of 1950, a schoolmate, Paul Lum, who was a member of Mun Ching (the Chinese American Democratic Youth League), invited Laura to attend a play. Mun Ching was a progressive youth organization that supported the new China—the People’s Republic of China. The organization put on performances twice a year. He bought the tickets for fifty cents and took her down to the Mun Ching clubhouse. Laura said, “That was my first encounter with Mun Ching people. Soon after that, I began to go to Mun Ching all the time. They had tutors for newcomers, and besides, in 1951, I was eighteen years old and interested in meeting boys. Of course Him Mark was there, but he was a shy guy.” It would be another year or so before Laura and Him Mark would become a couple. Mun Ching became a very important part of her life even after the loss of the clubhouse in 1959. She formed close friendships that would last for decades.

For the next few years, Laura was very busy. She attended high school and joined many of the activities organized by Mun Ching. She practiced performing in plays and singing in the chorus, went on field trips and picnics on weekends,
I had to sleep on the upper floor by myself. At night the foghorn would blow, and I would be so scared. Ever since I was a child, I had always been afraid of the dark, so with the foghorn, it was even worse for me. So on the second day, I called my family talking and crying on the phone about how scared I was of the foghorn and how I had to stay on one floor of the huge house all by myself.

The owner of the house was so nice. She heard me crying, so she told me to go home since I was so unhappy there. She gave me five dollars. The pay was thirty-five dollars for one month, but she gave me five dollars for being there for one or two days. After I got home, I told my father that I don't mind working, but I didn't want a job where I had to live with the family. I got another job in the Richmond district in San Francisco, working for a family where my father was the cook. I would go there after school to clean house. I set the table for dinner, swept, washed dishes, and after dinner I would go home with my father. No one told me I had to work, but I wanted to help lighten the load on my father.

It was still very common for Chinese living in America to be employed as houseboys or cooks in private homes in the 1950s. The anti-Chinese sentiments that arose in the 1870s, when jobs were scarce and there was a depression, had led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This was the first U.S. immigration law that targeted a specific ethnic race. Chinese were prevented from entering the country and the systematic discrimination against the Chinese, which continued until World War II, restricted them to living and working mainly in the shops and restaurants in Chinatowns across the country, with few exceptions, such as agricultural and domestic work.

**LOVE AND MARRIAGE**

I really enjoyed hearing Laura talk about how she got together with Him Mark. There was so much humor and fun in how she told the story of their relationship that I will quote her own words here.

At school, I had to pick a major in order to complete a high school program for graduation. My English was too limited for me to go into nursing or be a teacher, so I picked business. I had to take all these classes where you had to learn to use the typewriter, adding machines, and other office machines as well as bookkeeping. I was pretty good at typing, but I didn't like using the other machines. I was at Galileo High School from 1950 to 1953. Beginning in 1953, my homeroom teacher said that since I had just turned twenty years old, I should be ashamed of myself if I didn't graduate from high school soon. So he suggested that I finish up all my requirements in the next semester. He convinced me to take the last two bookkeeping classes at the same time. You can imagine how busy I was with so much homework, going to Mun Ching, and going steady with a boy. I went steady with Him Mark for one year. When I graduated from high school, the graduation ceremony was on a Thursday night. The next day, Friday, Him Mark and I went down to City Hall to get a license to be married. At the time I was twenty years old, and back in those days, you had to be twenty-one to be of legal age. So my father had to come down to City Hall with us to sign the wedding certificate for me to get married.

So how did I get to know Him Mark? To graduate, you had to pass American history, right? Of course you know Him Mark has always been interested in history, first world history, then American history, Chinese history, and later, Chinese American history. So he was the best person to ask to help me with it. Soon we began to go out together very often. One day we were up at Coit Tower late at night just sweet talking when he asked me, "I am twenty-seven years old already; don't you think I should get married?" I said, "Okay," and that was how we began to make plans to get married and for a wedding party at Mun Ching. But Him Mark's parents wanted a wedding banquet since he was the first son and they wanted to follow tradition. At that time it was only twenty-five dollars for a banquet table with real shark fin soup.

In the beginning, Him Mark didn't think I would fall for him, and I didn't think he would fall for me either. Our educational backgrounds were so different. He was very studious and was a graduate from UC Berkeley. He graduated before I even came to the U.S. He started Chinese school when he was five years old, and his Chinese was better than mine even though he was born here in the U.S. His English must have been a hundred times better than mine. So I didn't think someone with so much education would fall for a silly girl like me, just happy-go-lucky and going to Mun Ching to have nothing but fun. In fact, I had fallen in love with the first guy who was in the same play with me. He played the part of my boyfriend in the play and we became real boyfriend/girlfriend, but it didn't work out. A few other boys had their eyes on me, but none of them worked out. Finally I realized that Him Mark was such a nice guy, why didn't I see it before? Well educated, very honest, not a playboy type, didn't smoke or drink. Where else can I find such a nice person? When I first came to Mun Ching, I had two pigtails, and later on, he told me that he fell in love with my pigtails, not me. So we got married, and two years later I learned to drive, and I chauffeured him around after that. I love to drive.

After we got married, he sold what little stock he had in PG&E so he could have money for our honeymoon. He bought two Greyhound bus tickets and for two or three weeks, we went up and down the West Coast, visiting national parks and monuments from Seattle to Los Angeles. When we came back from the honeymoon, we had spent all the money we took with us, and I had to break into my piggy bank for a few dollars to pay the taxi driver. So we started our marriage with nothing.

**WORK CAREER**

Not long after the honeymoon, Laura met a schoolmate from Galileo who had just started working as a teller in a bank on
As a supervisor, she had worked with many other departments and department heads. While she was never told who had recommended her for the transfer, she had an idea who it was. She suspected that it was an older White man who was nice to everyone, held a much higher position in the company, and also had responsibilities with PGT. Although Laura didn’t really know whom to thank, she was very grateful and happy to leave for this new job. The new position offered higher pay and a better working environment. Laura took a vacation with him Mark to Hong Kong and Japan for a month and came back to work in the new company without ever having to say a word to her old supervisor.

PGT was just starting to set up its own computer and keypunch department. Laura was trained to be a computer operator and to help with keypunch. It was a very small department with three or four keypunch operators and one or two computer operators. After working there for about ten years, she was made supervisor. Laura explained, “I didn’t really want it, but they said if I didn’t take the position, they would have to look outside to hire someone else, so I had to do it.” Laura said she got promoted because she worked hard at her job, but she also thought that her personality and her ability to get along well with people were important factors.

She summed up her career as follows:

I worked thirteen years for PG&E and twenty-five years for PGT. I retired in 1995 at sixty-two. PGT was moving to Portland, Oregon, and I wasn’t going to move there for only three more years of work until I reached the retirement age of sixty-five. I took early retirement and they paid me one year extra, so it was like retiring at age sixty-three. I worked almost ten years longer than him Mark. Him Mark retired early in 1984, after working thirty-one years for Bechtel, so he could write his book. I was more than happy to support him and his work. Him Mark was also a supervisor where he worked, in 1962, in the mechanical engineering department at Bechtel. He didn’t want to be supervisor, not wanting that kind of responsibility, but sometimes you don’t have a choice when they offer it.

Both Him Mark and Laura entered the workforce at an opportune time for Chinese Americans. Just a decade or so earlier, there would have been little chance of American businesses hiring Chinese into white-collar or professional jobs. What gave rise to the new opportunities was that Congress repealed the Chinese exclusion acts during World War II. It did this for political and diplomatic reasons, the main one being the United States and China were allies in the war. This led to a more positive view of China and the Chinese people in the press and, in turn, to better treatment of the Chinese living in the United States. The American attitude toward “colored people” did not change, but the Chinese were viewed as friends and part of the war effort. By the end of the war, Chinese were able to find professional, technical, and clerical employment as racial barriers were relaxed and there was a labor shortage in the growing postwar economy. The Chinese gained greater rights and more equality as they were no longer prevented from entering the mainstream of American society.
The end of World War II also brought the Cold War and anti-Communist hysteria. In 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was established, the Chinese community came under suspicion as the U.S. government began its witch-hunt for Communist infiltrators and sympathizers. In 1953, Joseph McCarthy was selected as chair of the Senate permanent investigative subcommittee, and he went after anyone accused of being a Communist or leftist. This became known as the McCarthy era. Many lives were ruined as people throughout American society were targeted and blackballed as Communists, from members of labor unions to writers and actors in the Hollywood film industry.

In 1956 agents from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the FBI began raiding Chinatowns on the East and West Coasts to investigate and take into custody suspected “illegal” immigrants and Communist sympathizers. Fear was widespread throughout the Chinese community since thousands of Chinese had come to the United States as paper sons, with fraudulent papers that claimed they were sons of U.S. citizens. In an attempt to get more information, the government started the Chinese Confession Program. This program offered amnesty and legal status for anyone coming forward about his or her real family name and family connections. The majority of the Chinese refused to come forward. People had already seen how the INS and FBI had used information gathered from confessions and other investigations to deport or exclude Chinese who were progressive or suspected of having sympathy with the new socialist China.5

Most of the members of Mun Ching were immigrant youth from China. They viewed the establishment of socialism in China with hope for an end to the poverty, oppression, foreign domination, and political corruption that had existed in China for decades. During the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, membership in left-wing Chinese organizations declined sharply. Mun Ching, which still had forty to fifty members, decided to move away from progressive politics and do cultural activities instead. It promoted and performed the music, songs, folk dances, and plays coming out of mainland China. It also provided a tutorial program for immigrant high school students, offered use of a library, and encouraged the study of science and technical skills. Him Mark was one of the few American-born members and served as president from 1951 to 1959. The FBI questioned and harassed all the members of Mun Ching for many years, and eventually over half lost their citizenship. Four were indicted and tried in court.6 The Confession Program was the main avenue used by the FBI to go after the members.

When the FBI knocked on the door and demanded to speak to Laura, Him Mark told them they could not. He told them, “I speak for Laura,” and shielded her from their harassment. Laura’s family and friends did not want to take part in the Confession Program. Nor did Him Mark’s family; his father was a paper son. But because of the Confession Program, Laura did lose her citizenship, which left her with no legal status in the United States. She described what happened:

“I lost my citizenship for ten years. My father came over as a paper son, and I came over as his legal daughter. As long as he was safe, I was safe. My father had two paper brothers, one older and one younger; my father was in the middle. The older paper brother lived in Sacramento and was tricked by the immigration officer. The officer asked him, why was he protecting his brothers. He then tricked him by saying that his brothers had already confessed, so he should just tell the truth. So the brother told the officer everything, and afterwards he called my father, but by then it was too late. Everything was out.

This confession brought so much trouble for Laura’s father that he went back to Hong Kong in 1961. Her mother stayed in the United States because she was very sick with diabetes and her daughter-in-law, Jane, was taking care of her. But after one year of separation, she wanted to join her husband in Hong Kong. She was so sick that she had to be in a wheelchair. Laura still did not have her citizenship, and neither did any of her brothers. Him Mark was the only one with a passport who could take her to Hong Kong on the airplane.

Laura spoke about the final months of her parents’ lives:

“My father went back to Hong Kong in December 1962. The following month, at the end of January 1963, she passed away. After she passed away, a distant uncle and his daughter who lived in Macau introduced a schoolteacher to my father. My father married this teacher. It was not for love or romance, but for someone who could help him raise his two younger sons. My father came back to the United States around April 1963. He was very anxious to see his family, his sons, daughter, and three grandsons, to see all of us. He was very sick. His eyes were yellow and his appearance was very bad. So right away we took him to a doctor and he went into the hospital. He had liver cancer. So less than a hundred days after my mother died, my father died. He came back to the United States and never left the hospital. While my father was still in the hospital I would visit him every evening and keep him company.

So one night he told me about his new marriage and why he did it. My father said he hadn’t told my older brother [Horatio] because he was afraid my brother would not approve. After my father died, I told my older brother about the marriage. He said in disbelief: “How could this be? Why didn’t I know this? Why didn’t he tell me first? Why you, an outsider?” It was very upsetting for me to hear him say this to me, considering me as an outsider and not part of the family. For days he couldn’t believe it until he found the letters and pictures in my father’s suitcase.

The family sent for the stepmother to come to the United States, and she stayed with the oldest brother for some months. But the application for her to stay in the United States was rejected because the marriage had not lasted long enough for her to qualify. She had to go back to Hong Kong, where she lived in a condominium Laura’s father had bought. She lived in the condo until her death, when the property was returned to the family.

When Laura’s father passed away, he had to leave a will that left everything to the oldest son. “I told you I had a paper
brother. Because of this, my father’s will had everything given to my oldest brother. He couldn’t just give one dollar to Ben and divide everything else between his four children. Then immigration would suspect something was up and find out who was a paper son.” Laura’s father told her what he had to do while he was sick: “Everything would go to the oldest son and everyone else would get one dollar. Just make sure the two younger brothers are taken care of and provided with an education.” . . . My brother did do this, and mainly because I have a good sister-in-law [Jane]. She raised five sons, her own three and my two younger brothers. She did a good job. I am very grateful to her. Without her I would have had to worry about raising them.”

What Laura’s family went through in the 1950s and 1960s with the Chinese Confession Program was an example of what many Chinese families went through. Her paper uncle’s confession brought many difficulties for the family. Her father’s feeling that he had to leave the country hastened the death of both of her parents. The Confession Program represented a period of repression for many Chinese Americans. Some Chinese were deported, others given the choice of going to jail or voluntarily leaving the country. Others spent the rest of their lives with their status in limbo, their cases never resolved. However, some were able to gain back their citizenship by fighting for it in the courts.

A LUCKY GIRL

Laura felt she was a lucky girl all her life, from the very day she was born, with a father who valued her as much as his sons. When she came to the United States as a teen, she was popular with boys and made many women friends with her outgoing and friendly disposition. She had a chance to use her talents as an actress and singer during her youth with Mun Ching. Later, her abilities were recognized as she was promoted and made supervisor repeatedly in her career.

She had a good marriage with Him Mark, a man she loved and admired. She provided support for his work on Chinese American history. Him Mark didn’t drive, and Laura was more than happy to sit behind the wheel and take him around as he sought out people, journals, newspapers, and any other written material that recorded the experience of Chinese Americans. They traveled around the Bay Area and even across the country as he visited various Chinatowns. He collected a huge amount of material. Him Mark once estimated that he had ten thousand books and a hundred boxes filled with files of newspaper clippings and other materials. They also enjoyed going on vacation every year, often to favorite locations such as Yosemite and Hawai’i. Once Laura regained her passport, they also visited many places throughout Asia.

Early on in their marriage, Laura and Him Mark decided not to have children. Him Mark did not really care for children. Laura thought that for women to work and raise children was too much. She was not going to do both. She chose to have a career and participate in activities that would contribute more to society. Her mother had offered to help raise her children, but she felt that unless she was going to raise them herself, she would not have any. Of course, Him Mark’s mother wanted him to have children. Finally he had to tell her, “Having children or not is our business.” This was a conscious break from traditional family obligations and gender roles. In today’s society, this choice would not be unusual, but in the 1950s it was well ahead of its time. This decision allowed them the freedom to do the huge amount of research that has enriched the study of Chinese American history.

NOTES


2. There are many books about China in the 1920s to the 1940s. Here are two that come from two different angles: Sterling Seagrave, The Soong Dynasty (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); Edgar Snow, Red Star over China (New York: Random House, 1938, 1944, 1968).


5. For more on the McCarthy era and the Chinese Confession Program, see Iris Chang, “A Mass Inquisition,” chapter 14 in The Chinese in America (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003); Peter Kwong and Dusanka Misevic, “Cold War and the Chinese American Community,” chapter 15 in Chinese America (New York: New Press, 2005). Do your own research online and in libraries, and don’t forget to look up Him Mark Lai’s writings. Him Mark himself was under FBI surveillance, and in 1980 he was able to obtain a copy of his FBI file under the Freedom of Information/Privacy Act. His copy was heavily censored and was 2½ inches thick. To see how Mun Ching members were affected, see the documentary film by Amy Chen, Chinatown Files.

INTRODUCTION

The Portola Festival of 1909 was a citywide, city-sponsored celebration that filled San Francisco with revelry and spectacle for five days. During the day, buildings adorned with bright red and yellow banners and flags colored the streets; at night, myriad lights illuminated the skyline. All of San Francisco came together for these few days to marvel at the festivities, which included warship displays, nightly fireworks, and auto races. With the shiny new buildings and—for the time being—a jubilant and cohesive population, there was a great sense of hope during this time. The Portola Festival represented a new San Francisco that was ripe and ready for success and economic development after the devastation of the great earthquake and fire of 1906.

The centerpiece and culmination of this festival was the closing act on the last night—the Historic Pageant Parade. In this extravagant nighttime spectacle that chronicled significant events in San Francisco’s history, Chinatown was invited to participate with its own section. San Francisco’s Chinese community enthusiastically accepted this invitation and wasted neither time nor effort in preparing for the parade. And the community delivered; according to a 1909 article in the San Francisco Chronicle, “the Chinese more than sustained their reputation for superb pageants” with colorful lanterns, loud gongs, and dragon dances.

Given the decades of discrimination by San Francisco’s White populations and Chinatown’s deeply ingrained, sordid reputation as a ghetto filled with prostitution, gambling, and morally questionable bachelors, the San Francisco Chinese community saw this parade as a singular chance to reshape its image among neighbors and mainstream American society. This festival represented the beginning of the Chinese community’s movement to “clean up” Chinatown. Community leaders believed that improving the image of Chinatown would improve the image of Chinese Americans, ameliorate long-standing discrimination and resentment against the Chinese American community, and allow better assimilation of Chinese people into mainstream American society. With the citywide changes after the 1906 earthquake, the Chinese American population began to assert not only its rightful belonging to the greater San Francisco and American communities, but also its own distinct identity, which was both Chinese and American.

What does the Portola Festival have to do with Chingwah Lee, the subject of this paper? The parade was where eight-year-old, San Francisco–born Chingwah had his first taste of the limelight. Colorfully dressed as the sea king atop one of Chinatown’s floats, young Chingwah participated in the beginning of an era of reshaping Chinese American identities. The mentality embodied by this parade and festival—the hope and burning desire to improve the image of Chinese Americans in the mainstream American imagination through performance—mirrored the very ideals that motivated Chingwah Lee as he led his life through the twentieth century.

Throughout his lifetime, Chingwah was a well-known presence, both within Chinatown and elsewhere in San Francisco. In his many roles—founder and scoutmaster of San Francisco Chinatown’s Boy Scouts Troop 3; cofounder of the first English-language publication written by and for Chinese Americans, the Chinese Digest; the man who essentially developed tourism in San Francisco Chinatown; one of the few Chinese American actors who made it in Hollywood; and cofounder of the Chinese Historical Society of America—he left behind legacies that live to this day. The driving force behind Chingwah’s prolific activities was a desire to improve the image of the Chinese American community.

Despite his extraordinary energy and efforts, his extensive work for and dedication to the Chinese American community both inside and outside of Chinatown, there has only been one substantial piece of literature about Chingwah Lee him-
self: six pages dedicated to his accomplishments and contributions in Thomas W. Chinn’s survey of San Francisco Chinatown, *Bridging the Pacific*.

Why isn’t Chingwah, a popular and well-liked personality in his lifetime, a more prominent presence in the history of San Francisco Chinatown today? My research suggests two answers. First, Chingwah Lee, despite his great public presence, was an elusive character who kept his personal life extremely private. Second, the field of Asian American studies is relatively new, emerging only in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the literature about Asian American history has looked at its communities from the outside and on macroscopic, sociological levels; Asian American scholars have, until recently, largely overlooked the voices of individuals who defined, led, helped, and defended their communities. The academic rigor of these scholars, however, pioneered a new field of American study and provided the fundamental basis upon which we, today, can better and more deeply explore that field.

This essay is a twofold effort to add to the growing literature about Chinese American history. It is a microhistorical biography of one influential, yet historically forgotten, man. It also examines Chinese American identity as a whole through the uncommon lens of a man who actively participated in the continuous redefinition and reshaping of that identity throughout the twentieth century.

After conducting numerous interviews with his family members, friends, and acquaintances; poring over papers and books in hopes of finding even the slightest mention of his name; and digging through a box of old newspaper clippings, letters, and papers that was kept in a forgotten corner of a relative’s basement for decades, I share in this article my research and findings about the life of Chingwah Lee, the Chinese American community as he understood it, and the San Francisco he called home. Although this paper only scratches the surface of Chingwah’s life, I hope his family and friends find that the story I have pieced together at the very least gives Chingwah fair recognition for his inspiring accomplishments. Moreover, I hope this essay compels others to continue developing a deeper historical appreciation of Chingwah Lee and the other individuals who, together, shaped a collective Chinese American experience.

**SETTING THE STAGE (1901–19)**

In 1877, Kam Chuen Lee, Chingwah’s father, emigrated to San Francisco as a merchant, thus avoiding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He established himself as a reputable doctor of Chinese medicine in Chinatown and in 1887 returned to his hometown to marry Yoke Lum, a wealthy merchant’s daughter. They returned to San Francisco that same year to settle down and start their family. In 1898, Mrs. Lee gave birth to Changwah, their eldest son. Like the eight siblings that would follow, Changwah was born at home. On June 28, 1901, the Lee family welcomed their second child, Chingwah. The younger sons were Edwar, Kingwah, Horace, and Elmer. The three daughters were Agnes, Cora, and Marion.

In 1906, the great earthquake and fire destroyed the city, but from the destruction emerged the promise of refashioning San Francisco and its communities—Chinatown included. However, although the rebuilding and the Portola parade of 1909 offered the Chinese community hope that it could assert more rights for itself, subsequent events were more discouraging. The Chinese community tried its best to take advantage of the seeming shift in attitudes, but the situation more or less remained the same. In 1910, the establishment of the Angel Island Immigration Station institutionalized the stringent policies toward Chinese immigration, and the Chinese community remained basically constrained to the few blocks that made up Chinatown. The area still had a sordid reputation, and few opportunities existed for the youth, such as Chingwah and his brothers. If they ever left Chinatown, they faced taunting and the threat of violence. When asked in his later years what factors contributed to a “distinctive Chinese American culture,” Chingwah himself stated: “One factor which bound the Chinese together in the early days was a certain loneliness. They felt that the people here were not too interested in them, except as a curiosity.”

The reopening of the Chinese Primary School, which was destroyed during the 1906 earthquake, as the Oriental School represented the regression that accompanied apparent progression. Chingwah and all his siblings attended this segregated school for San Francisco’s Chinese, Japanese, and Korean children. This blatant segregation defined Chingwah’s childhood and would shape his lifelong passion for creating a positive image for Chinese Americans. Furthermore, in describing his youth, Chingwah especially criticized the poor quality of education available to the children of San Francisco Chinatown when he was growing up. According to Chingwah, schools in San Francisco were “absolutely segregated” and “so corrupt.” The teachers were “inadequate” and “not well-prepared to teach children.”

Despite the discrimination and segregation he faced, his unique background as a second-generation Chinese American and as a relatively privileged member of one of the wealthier and more respected families within the Chinatown community planted in young Chingwah a sense of responsibility to the community and an industrious attitude.

His father was a thriving herbalist and a major partner in a firm called Sun Gum Wah. Located at 736 Grant Avenue, the business, according to Chingwah, sold firecrackers and imported Chinese goods, and sales ran “into the tens of thousands of dollars as it approached the start of the new year.” The Lee parents, despite their financial success, did not forget their Chinese roots—they made sure to instill in their children an appreciation for Chinese culture and history.
Chingwah's father's “family for generations [had] been eminent art dealers, both in China and America,” and his true interest lay in art objects. He started “dealing with the importation and sale of antique things—porcelain, bronzes and paintings,” and, according to Chingwah, “some of it rubbed off” on him.\(^8\) Chingwah would follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a widely recognized Asian art authority in the Bay Area. In the words of Rose K. Gidley, who wrote an article about Chingwah Lee in 1946, “Even though the family was large, there were money and culture, and the Lee family [was] highly respected and liked in San Francisco.”\(^9\)

The Lee parents also developed in all of their children traditional values of family unity and a strong work ethic. With so many children, the elder sons felt especially compelled to work, support themselves, and ease the financial burden on their parents as soon as they were able. Indeed, Chingwah’s parents “were willing to help,” but “when you have five brothers and three sisters, you don’t want your parents to help.”\(^8\) Despite their relative wealth within the Chinese community, the Lee family still lived in a “crowded place.”\(^9\)

Chingwah began as early as sixth grade to hire himself out as a houseboy to Caucasian families outside of Chinatown, doing domestic work in the morning before he went to school and helping with dinner when he came back from school.\(^10\) Moreover, the elder sons, Changwah, Chingwah, Edwar, and Kingwah, took it upon themselves to take care of their younger siblings, especially after the death of their father in 1924 and their mother in 1931. The Lee children, partly as a result of their parents’ insistence that they always eat meals together, remained tight-knit throughout their lives; even when interviewed by Thomas Chinn in 1973, Chingwah stated: “We hate to leave each other so we all stay around the bay region.”\(^11\) This notion of taking care of others would stay with Chingwah for the rest of his life as he extended his sense of responsibility beyond his family to the greater Chinese American community.

The early decades of the twentieth century were turbulent for members of the overseas Chinese community, for they faced discrimination from their American neighbors as well as instability in China, where most of their family members still lived. In 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown, and the Nationalists took control of the Chinese government. As a relative of Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary Chinese Nationalist Party leader, Kam Chuen supported the Nationalist cause in China and played a large role in raising money and rallying local support for the cause. Dr. Lee's status as a community leader surely contributed to the leadership roles that his sons would assume later in their lives; Changwah would become the district army commander for the American Legion in a “certain district of . . . San Francisco that was mainly Caucasian,” and Edwar would play a major role in the Chinese American Christian community as a respected minister.\(^12\)

Chingwah had a restless and industrious way about him, a way of making even dull circumstances entertaining for himself and others. For example, the children of Chinatown saw Chinese school as a burden, and understandably so—in addition to regular English school, most Chinese parents required their children to attend Chinese school in the afternoons and evenings on the weekdays and on Saturdays. Edwar recalled how his qualms about going to these strict Chinese school sessions were somewhat quelled by his big brother Chingwah, who made them into a fun sort of game and social experiment. Chingwah would get other children at Chinese school to do him favors; in return, Chingwah would write them promissory notes, which could be used to redeem a favor from him later. This story, although seemingly insignificant, shows that Chingwah had, from an early age, an optimistic, sociable way about him, as well as the makings of a good businessman.

In 1914, World War I began, and in that same year, Chingwah founded Chinese Boy Scouts Troop 3 with his friends and brothers, who would later be referred to as the “original eight.” Chingwah was the leader of this group, which played in the local Methodist churchyard every day after school, and it seemed only natural to him to write to the Boy Scout headquarters in New York when the group stumbled accidentally upon a Scout guide. Chingwah Lee, even as a child, saw no boundaries to what he could do, despite the stereotypes and discrimination he grew up with. The Boy Scouts would define Chingwah's childhood and much of his adulthood. The troop took trips, participated in outdoor activities, and had regular meetings at the YMCA. Troop 3 would redefine the boyhood experience in San Francisco Chinatown, for it offered the first outlet for the Chinese American boys and created, for the first time, a sense of cohesion and a common experience in this community.

World War I allowed Chingwah and Troop 3 to become more involved in mainstream American society. In 1915, Chingwah and the rest of Troop 3 served as the guards of honor to President Taft when he visited San Francisco for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Throughout the war years, the troop enthusiastically sold Liberty Bonds, collected tinfoil, participated in parades, and “entertained” over one thousand American soldiers and sailors with sightseeing trips through San Francisco Chinatown. His leadership of Troop 3’s war efforts sowed the seeds to establish Chingwah as a spokesperson for San Francisco’s Chinese American community.

**BECOMING CHINATOWN'S SPEAKERSHIP (1919–29)**

World War I ended in 1919, and Chingwah graduated from the Polytechnic High School in December 1920. He became a staff volunteer at the YMCA and the assistant scoutmaster of Troop 3, both creating athletic and cultural opportunities and serving as a role model for the younger boys in the community. Moreover, he founded the Vacation Daily Bible School for Chinatown youth during the summertime and served as its principal.
Chingwah Lee also helped found the Chinese High School Students’ Club and cofounded the Tri-Termly Toots in 1921 with Thomas Chinn, who would remain a good friend throughout his life. The Tri-Termly Toots, although described by Chinn as only a modest “mimeographed affair,” was the official publication of the club and an important milestone in the vocalization of second-generation Chinese American identity. This effort would give Chingwah and Thomas a base off of which to work when they cofounded the Chinese Digest in 1935.

The Chinese High School Students’ Club promoted unity among Chinese high school students across San Francisco through social gatherings and meetings to discuss common issues. This club was one of the first organized movements to address the needs of a growing Chinese American community and voiced a uniquely second-generation identity. Chingwah described it as follows: “The aim was so that people going to different high schools would have a chance to get together and compare notes and point out common problems and things of that sort. And we also had a lot of fun having dances, dinners and other get-togethers.”

Through this club, Chingwah sought to bring the Chinese American community closer together, and he succeeded in doing so for the few years that he was involved.

In 1923, Chingwah became scoutmaster of Troop 3 and soon afterward enrolled at UC Berkeley. He dabbled in many different fields, including psychology, animal behaviorism, lumbering, agronomy, “Oriental” studies, and Russian, but eventually ended up choosing anthropology as his major: “I don’t know why but when your mind runs that way for a while . . . it runs that way.”

Chingwah’s college years were filled with myriad and diverse activities, including chairing the western department of the Chinese Christian Students’ Association; writing creative works, including a short story that was published in a local newspaper; acting in a student-written play called Rejuvenescence; and organizing luncheons and events for students to mingle and learn as a part of the International Club at UC Berkeley. Chingwah also remained a scoutmaster and continued in journalism by creating the Scout Wig-Wag, the official publication for Troop 3. Moreover, as the Chinese YMCA boys’ secretary, Chingwah told stories to and organized athletic and extracurricular events for Chinatown’s young boys. He also continued giving tours of Chinatown and trained his Boy Scouts to give high-quality and informative tours that gave visitors a positive impression of Chinatown and the Chinese American community. In college, Chingwah fed
his ever-curious mind and facilitated a sense of community wherever he went.

In 1924, Chingwah’s father passed away, leaving behind his substantial art collection. Although one cannot say for sure, this event could have been an important factor in encouraging Chingwah to begin taking art more seriously. During his college years, Chingwah attended summer sessions about Chinese art at Whittier, Harvard, and the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. In 1928, Chingwah graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in anthropology.

In 1929, Chingwah attended the fifty-sixth annual National Conference of Social Work, held June 26 through July 3 in San Francisco, and gave a talk called “The Second Generation of the Chinese.” This was an important event, for it solidified Chingwah’s role as a spokesperson for the Chinese American community in San Francisco. Chingwah addressed a predominantly White audience, and the speech characterized Chingwah’s approach to representing and defending the Chinese image in the minds of White Americans. He explicitly pointed out the unique position of the “second generation of Chinese Americans” as that of a “mighty conflict of cultures.”

Chingwah described the struggles that his American-born peers faced and articulated a second-generation identity that was, uniquely, both Chinese and American.

Chingwah emphasized that, despite the American-born Chinese population’s attachment to its Chinese cultural and “racial” heritage, second-generation Chinese Americans were just like “the Americans”: “They study Chinese and speak English, admire Confucius and adore Jesus, like Chinese literature, art and festivals, but dance to American music, and motor, hike, and attend theaters as do the Americans.”

Using the study of eugenics and the long history of Chinese art and culture as proof, Chingwah went on to explain that the Chinese population in America was “a decided asset” to American society because of its “racial mental prowess” and “great capacity for endurance.”

Chingwah was able to articulate his community’s sentiments to outsiders with a certain charisma and command of public performance. Indeed, Chingwah would find himself exercising those skills as he played the role of cultural mediator throughout the rest of his life.

“MR. CHINATOWN”
(1930–43)

In 1930, he left his position as boys’ secretary at the YMCA to establish the Chinese Better Trade and Travel Bureau. Frustrated by the “bunkum which certain guides peddled to the Chinatown tourists” and upset that the guides “missed the art, the life, the customs, the atmosphere,” Chingwah had dreamed about founding such a bureau since childhood.

He seized the chance when, impressed by the Boy Scouts’ free tours and unable to provide satisfactory tours of Chinatown without any locals on their staff, a number of sightseeing companies asked Chingwah if he could provide guides: “There was the Pacific Sightseeing Company, for example, that had a few sightseeing buses and that tour was so unsatisfactory that there was frequent demands for refunds. So finally the bus company themselves came to us and asked if we could furnish guides to them.”

By 1931, Gray Line Tours had made Chingwah its chief Chinatown tour director.

From the 1930s onward, Chingwah trained “many high school students to give a well-presented tour of Chinatown,” enabling them to present an accurate and positive image of Chinatown to its visitors. In an interview, Chingwah described how taxicab-drivers-turned-guides “would invent weird stories about Chinese doing impossible things—having a war every Saturday night—and so on.” Those tour guides perpetuated common, but untrue, stereotypes of “Chinatown as a corrupt place inhabited by Chinese criminals, gamblers, and opium addicts.” Chingwah made sure
to train his guides to fight those “weird stories” in a very specific way, and over the years, he polished and perfected the message. By the mid-1930s, Chingwah had established himself as “Mr. Chinatown.” Chingwah continued to give Chinatown tours himself until he passed away in 1980 and was responsible for making tourism a positive and valuable asset to the Chinatown community.

In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria, and Japan and China began their intermittent fighting until full-scale war was declared in 1937. Japanese aggression incensed Chingwah and became a main topic in the talks he began to give throughout the 1930s.

In the early 1930s, Chingwah also began setting up art exhibits at small venues, such as Chinatown stores and restaurants, taking his pursuit of art history and appreciation much more seriously. In 1934, he realized his dream of having his own art studio when he bought a place in Cameron Alley, which he renamed Old Chinatown Lane, and started the Chingwah Lee Studio of orientalia.

As mentioned above, Chingwah and Thomas Chinn founded the Chinese Digest in 1935. This paper was historically significant because it was the first English-language paper written by Chinese Americans, for Chinese Americans. However, Chingwah and Chinn saw the Chinese Digest as much more than just an informative newsmagazine; they saw it as a vehicle with which second-generation Chinese Americans could reach an English-speaking audience. This was one of the major themes in Chingwah’s life—being a cultural broker between the Chinese and non-Chinese communities.

Starting with its passionate first issue in 1935, the Chinese Digest continued to “record the sociological, political and everyday events” of Chinese Americans until it folded in July 1940. The Digest voiced its generation’s sentiments and established a platform for discussion on a variety of topics, including “News, Sports, Social, Comment, Business, Philosophy, Literature, [and] Travel.”23 Until Chingwah made it the official organ of the China Cultural Society in 1940, almost every issue of the Digest included the following sections: News about China, which highlighted current events in China; Chinatownia, which covered the latest news in Chinatowns across the country; Editorial, in which the editor voiced his opinion on current issues, especially the Japanese invasion of China; Culture, in which Chingwah wrote about Chinese art, history, culture, and inventions; and Sports, which highlighted Chinese achievements and participation in athletics.24 During its five years of publication, the Chinese Digest reached readers across the country, including Seattle, Hawai‘i, New Mexico, and the East Coast.25

Chingwah contributed at least one article to the Culture section for every single issue, even in 1935 when he was living in Hollywood while filming The Good Earth. He made sure to point out the positive points of Chinese culture and how the Chinese community had in the past, and could in the future, positively contribute to American society. Throughout all of his articles, Chingwah emphasized pride in China and the longevity of its culture, illustrated deep knowledge of the topic, and demonstrated a strong command of written rhetoric. The section encompassed three main series: Ceramic Art, Remember When?, and Chinese Inventions and Discoveries. In Ceramic Art, Chingwah described aspects of ceramic art objects that would be of interest to collectors. He recommended reference books; wrote about historical and anthropological aspects of Chinese art, such as the “evolution of the hollow base and the foot rim”; and gave collectors detailed instructions on how to study “glaze on Chinese ceramics.”26

In Chinese Inventions and Discoveries, he closely examined Chinese achievements. Sample articles were “China Had a Board of Public Health 3,000 Years Ago,” “China Had the First Planetarium and Relief Map,” and “The Chinese Were the First to Play Football.”27 Remember When? recalled the early days of Chinatown, when men wore their hair in queues during the Qing dynasty, when “there used to be an altar in the back part of almost every shop in Chinatown,” or when “young men and women were never seen together on the streets of Chinatown.”28 Chingwah described Remember When? as a “series of 52 recordings of sociological and cultural changes taking place in Chinatown within a generation.”29 By contrasting the “old” Chinatown with the “new,” he creatively and directly illustrated, with examples, the shifting nature of the Chinese American population and its identity.

In January 1940, Chingwah took over as the editor of the newsmagazine for its last issue. He turned it into the official organ of the China Cultural Society, which he founded to increase awareness about and appreciation for Chinese culture. Unfortunately, the magazine still eventually folded.30 Chingwah remarked to Thomas Chinn that the chief reason it stopped publishing was that most of its staff had joined the army after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.31

Despite the short life of the Digest, Chinn “never regretted it,” and Chingwah called it “a great achievement,” for the newspaper “recorded [their] daily lives for that one period.”32 In addition to providing later generations with this historical record, the Digest effected real improvements in Chinatown. Chinn recalled a time when Chingwah’s editorial resulted in the establishment of a ladies’ hotel in Chinatown: “I particularly remembered a couple of times you wrote the editorials for things that had to do with the community. One of them was . . . the great need for a girls’ or ladies’ hotel . . . . The Gum Moon Residence for Ladies . . . . was a direct result of our editorial.”33 In addition, because the Digest articulated the concerns, frustrations, and achievements of the Chinese in America, the newsmagazine furthered Chingwah’s goals of uniting the Chinese American community and presenting a unified voice to the mainstream American public.

Alongside Chingwah’s journalistic endeavors was his acting career. It started in 1935 when Irving Thalberg, one of the biggest producers in Hollywood, asked for Chingwah's
help in recruiting Chinese actors for MGM’s *The Good Earth*. Apparently, finding Chinese actors turned out to be much more difficult than either had anticipated, so Paul Muni, the main character in *The Good Earth*, asked Chingwah to audition for a part. Chingwah ended up getting the supporting role of Ching. Chingwah spent most of 1935 and 1936 filming *The Good Earth*, which was released in 1937. The film went on to win two Oscars, and Chingwah’s Hollywood career blossomed. Chingwah was one of the few Chinese American actors of his time, along with Keye Luke and Anna May Wong. In the same year, Chingwah played Yuan in *The Rainbow Pass* and Quan Lin in *Daughter of Shanghai*. With acting, Chingwah harnessed his gift for performance to further his goal of “improving the Chinese image.”

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese army attacked Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered World War II. A few months later, Chingwah joined the army and served as an interpreter at the Sixth Army headquarters at the Old Presidio of Monterey. After Pearl Harbor, unfortunately, all the shops in Old Chinatown Lane folded because so many people left to join the war effort.

**SETTLING DOWN (1943–80)**

In 1943, Chingwah returned to San Francisco and resumed acting, managing Chinatown’s tourism, and maintaining his studio. After World War II ended in 1945, Chingwah became an appraiser for the U.S. Army Alien Property Custodian Bureau, appraising many valuable Chinese antiques. Chingwah also began to teach at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design in San Francisco. He taught Asian art history courses there for twelve years, until the 1960s.

After World War II, Chingwah married Florence, and they had one daughter, Sandra. The details of this relationship are vague, but Chingwah ended up divorcing Florence in the 1950s.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Chingwah devoted most of his efforts to establishing himself as an Asian art authority in San Francisco. He also starred in a number of television shows; traveled to Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand in 1952; and served as a technical set consultant to and acted in a variety of films, including *China Smith*, *Bloody Alley*, *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, and *Flower Drum Song*.

One can imagine that Chingwah had become quite disillusioned with the Chinese American movement by this time. The *Chinese Digest* had folded, democracy had fallen to Communism with the rise of the People’s Republic of China, and the Korean War had destroyed any hopes of normalization between the United States and China. Still, Chingwah tried his best to improve the image of the Chinese community in America.

In 1951, he starred in *Number Nine Chinatown Lane* with Marjorie Trumbull. In this TV series, Chingwah juxtaposed the stereotypes of the Chinese population with the richness and long heritage of Chinese culture. Chingwah intentionally played off the fears of dark, mysterious, and criminal Chinatown alleyways, contrasting those images with his gentlemanly, knowledgeable, “poised and extremely lucid” personality to dispel the misconceptions about his community.

Chingwah also continued giving tours of Chinatown, doing his best to affect the people he could reach directly. His art studio was always open to the public, and he gained a reputation of being one of the most open and receptive Asian art authorities in San Francisco. He was gentlemanly, kind, and willing to explain things. His studio was quite successful in achieving his aims; Thomas Chinn stated to Chingwah, “I believe that exposure by way of your studio and your own personal explanations and personality has a lot to do with exposing ‘Oriental’ art to the American public.”

Moreover, Chingwah lived his life in ways that defied what people expected of him, or approved. Although he was very proud of his Chinese culture and heritage, he was open-minded about other cultures and entered in the 1960s into
a long-term relationship with a Caucasian woman named Helen Colcord, who lived in San Mateo and taught classes in Asian decorative art. Although Helen was not generally liked by Chingwah’s friends, and although Chingwah would find himself paying off thousands of dollars of Helen’s debt in the 1970s, they still maintained a decade long relationship.

Because Chingwah was an extremely private man, I could not uncover more about his personal or romantic relationships. However, he was close with his family members. He was especially fond of his niece Lori, especially during the 1970s, when she began attending his Saturday symposiums on art.

These symposiums began in 1966. Chingwah had cofounded the Chinese Culture Center and the Chinese Historical Society of America with Thomas Chinn in 1965, and in 1966, a small group of society members asked if Chingwah would start teaching on Chinese art and culture. Chingwah, of course, agreed to share his knowledge. For over a year, Chingwah met with eight to twelve regulars at his studio every week, and they would then “troop to a local restaurant with him as [their] guest.” These symposiums continued throughout the 1970s, and they were open to whoever wanted to listen in. One regular participant was Hanni Forrester, who, along with her husband, was an avid Asian art collector. Hanni noted that most of the regulars were Caucasians whom the other Asian art specialists had snubbed. Chingwah, Hanni noted, was the only friendly face in this space. She said that he was a “strange man” and often smelled of alcohol, but was always kind and gentlemanly. She noted that although she and her husband knew him for about fifteen years, Chingwah never spoke about himself and was extremely private. Even after Chingwah’s death, the core attendees of the Saturday symposiums carried on as the Asian Art Study Group. For over two years, they met once a month, taking it in turns to host. The hosting couple would pick a subject, and the group would discuss it.

Given the incredible energy that Chingwah had spent trying to improve the image of the Chinese in the American imagination, it makes sense that he would have been disillusioned by seeing stereotypes persist and gangs and violence rise in Chinatown. One can certainly hear disillusionment in his comments on another aspect of his life, the film industry: “If they [give] a good image to the Chinese, it’s accidental. I don’t blame them. . . . [Producers’ and directors’] job is to sell and make money. . . . I haven’t been to a movie in the last two years.”36 He did not blame the actors, however: “Actors are nothing but puppets, dummies. . . . They just do what they’re supposed to do. . . . If you go beyond what the director wants, then you’re in trouble.”37 In the end, Chingwah did not eradicate negative depictions of Chinese people in popular media, but he made the best of his opportunities, audaciously stepping out of the roles expected of Chinese people by both Chinese and White Americans, to further his goal of reshaping the perceptions of the Chinese population in the American imagination.

Until 1978, Chingwah had never been able to travel to mainland China because of Cold War tensions. He traveled to China for the first and last time in 1978 as a result of improved U.S.–China relations, which were normalized in 1979. Through a contact of his sister Cora, Chingwah traveled with twenty-four other Americans across all of China. Lori, his niece, was also on this trip. She described how excited her uncle was throughout the whole trip and how he commanded respect with his extensive knowledge of Chinese...
art and culture. He spoke with everyone he could about art and enjoyed the trip thoroughly.

Only two years after this trip, Chingwah passed away in 1980 at the house of Elmer and his wife, Jean, with whom he had spent New Year's Day.

THE LEGACY (1980s–PRESENT)

Eulogies for Chingwah and statements of memory in several newspapers demonstrate his impact and presence in Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco. Chingwah’s “personality” was characterized as that of a charismatic yet generous, kind yet mysterious, scholar. In my interviews with those who knew Chingwah, none failed to point out his kindness and generosity—he was always accommodating to any visitors who walked into his studio, readily taking items out of the glass cases to show them. His collection was worth a large amount of money—when it was auctioned off at Sotheby’s in Los Angeles after his death, “it sold for over a million dollars!”38 Although Chingwah sold other people’s art objects and kept them on consignment, his own art objects were generally not for sale.

Chingwah’s legacy lives on. After his death, UC Berkeley set up the Chingwah Lee Scholarship for students studying Chinese culture and art, and Troop 3 formed a memorial fund to perpetuate the memory of Chingwah.

Even today, we can see direct evidence of Chingwah’s impact on Chinatown and American society. A number of English-language magazines and newspapers serve the second-generation Asian American population, and Chingwah’s involvement in the pioneering Chinese Digest set the stage for them. The Boy Scouts’ San Francisco Bay Area Council, which Chingwah helped initiate, today serves San Francisco and Alameda counties and supports more than three hundred local packs, troops, teams, and crews.39 The Asian Art Museum, whose founders were influenced by Chingwah’s work in promoting Chinese and Far Eastern culture and art, presently “is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art.”40 The museum offers many programs that “explore the art and cultures represented in the museum’s collection and special exhibitions” for the benefit of visitors and the Bay Area community.41 The Chinese Historical Society of America continues to support research in Chinese American history and to put on educational programs and exhibits for the Chinatown community and beyond. The Chinese Culture Center, a twenty-thousand-square-foot facility with an auditorium, gallery, bookstore, classroom, and offices located between Chinatown and the Financial District, continues today to “foster the understanding and appreciation of Chinese and Chinese American art, history, and culture in the United States.”42 A good deal of San Francisco Chinatown’s economy today relies on its tourist appeal—Chingwah, again, was instrumental in claiming Chinatown’s tourism for the benefit of its local community.

Through performance, teaching, writing, and general openness, Chingwah broke down barriers that hindered exchange and cooperation, whether between cultures or within communities. Although the face of Chinese America has changed since Chingwah’s time, his fight against discrimination, for a unified Chinese American community, and for an appreciation of cultural heritage, art, and history can continue to inspire and inform our actions today, when Americans continue to grapple with racial strife and minority groups still combat stereotypes in the press and popular media.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Over the course of writing my undergraduate honors thesis in history during my senior year at Stanford University from spring 2009 to spring 2010, I contacted a number of Chingwah’s family members, friends, and acquaintances in hopes of gleaning information about the man. Without them and their kindness toward me, a complete stranger, none of my research would have been possible. I am truly, deeply grateful to everyone—librarians, historians, both Chingwah’s and my own friends and family—who helped me along the way, whether with their recollections of Chingwah or with their help with finding more documents and sources.

Chingwah’s nephew, Chester Lee, and his friend, Carol Soo, in March 2010 not only gave me a hearty meal but also provided me with a box of primary sources that served as the main basis for my research. Chester is the son of Chingwah’s eldest brother, Changwah. The collection that Carol and Chester handed over to me is an extremely rich and historically valuable one that is now housed at the Green Library Archives at Stanford University. It contains some of Chingwah’s personal papers, a manual that he wrote for training his Chinatown tour guides, myriad newspaper clippings, and some personal correspondence. Without this collection, my story on Chingwah Lee would be far less complete. More importantly, the collection is now available to all students and scholars who would like to access it. Thank you so much for your generosity, Carol and Chester.

In addition, I owe special, special thanks to the following people, who are roughly listed in chronological order of when I met them:

• My advisor, Professor Gordon Chang, who encouraged me to pursue this topic and persist even when sources seemed thin
• My secondary advisor, Professor Allyson Hobbs, who pushed my thinking to the next level
• Sue Lee from the Chinese Historical Society of America for welcoming me and helping me get access to the society’s archives
• Phil Choy from the Chinese Historical Society of America for sharing with me his deep knowledge of Asian American history, which was necessary for contextualizing Chingwah’s actions and ideologies

• Professor Judy Yung from UC Santa Cruz, who introduced me to Curtiss Chan, Cora’s son, the first family member I interviewed about Chingwah back in May 2009

• Curtiss, who provided me with invaluable insight into how he perceived his Uncle Ching and helped introduce me to his sister Lori and his relative Jackie Sue

• Lori, who agreed to speak with me for multiple hours and even had me over to her house to learn more about her Uncle Ching and look at his old scrapbook from his youth. The scrapbook provided critical information about Chingwah’s activities and interests when he was younger. Moreover, Lori’s close relationship with her uncle and her willingness to share those cherished memories allowed me a glimpse into Chingwah’s life from a more personal perspective.

• Jackie Sue, who gave me various photographs of the Lee family, provided lively discussion and encouragement, and shared her knowledge of the family. Jackie was married to Chingwah’s late nephew, Frank Sue, and was the Lee family historian. Jackie also introduced me to Carol Soo and Chester Lee.

• Hanni Forester, who invited me to a delicious meal, showed me her beautiful art collection, and shared her memories of Chingwah, the Asian art connoisseur, with me

• Wylie Wong, who provided me with his insight on the Asian art community in San Francisco and Chingwah’s influential role in that community

NOTES


3. Interview by Phil Choy, July 30, 1970, tape recording, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

4. Interview by Nee and de Bary, pp.


8. Interview by Chinn, p.

9. Interview by Choy.

10. Interview by Chinn, p.

11. Interview by Chinn, p.


13. Interview by Chinn, p.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p.

18. Gidley, “This Is Chingwah Lee.”


20. Ibid.


22. See “Chinatown Tour Manual,” Chingwah Lee Papers, for a firsthand look at Chingwah’s philosophy about tourism and his requirements for Chinatown tour guides.

23. Chinese Digest 2, no. 1 (January 3, 1936), Daniel E. Koshland San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

24. Ibid.


28. Chinese Digest 2, no. 2 (January 10, 1936): 6; Chinese Digest 2, no. 3 (January 17, 1936): 8; Chinese Digest 2, no. 7 (February 14, 1936): 9.

29. Chinese Digest 2, no. 3 (January 17, 1936): 8.

30. Exact reasons for the closing of the Digest at this point remain unknown.

31. Interview by Chinn, p.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., p.


35. Interview by Chinn.

36. Interview by Choy.

37. Ibid.


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Edwar Lee Papers. Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.


Pardee Lowe Papers, 1915–96. Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California.


Author’s Note: In early 2004, Arcadia Publishing Company asked me to pull together a photo history book of Oakland, California, Chinatown, which happened to be where I was born and grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. The book is Images of America: Oakland’s Chinatown.

In the process, I learned about Emma Hoo Tom, one of two Oakland Chinese Americans who made history when she and Clara Lee became the first women of their race to register to vote in the United States. They did that in 1911 in Oakland. I then learned that Emma Hoo Tom’s oldest son, Arthur Tom, was still living in Oakland, a retired state worker in his early nineties.

Searching for photos to illustrate Oakland Chinatown’s 150-year-plus history triggered a deeper curiosity about some prominent figures such as Emma Hoo Tom. That’s when I decided to start an oral-history project (http://www.oaklandchinatownhistory.org) to interview Oakland Chinese Americans who are direct links to important pioneers who have already passed from the scene. Since it was impossible to hear directly the life stories of those pioneers, the next best thing was to interview their children. Arthur Tom was a natural subject for my new project.

On August 24, 2004, I interviewed Arthur Tom, who made history in California too, by being the first ethnic Chinese employee of the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). He passed away on March 2, 2006. This is a condensed excerpt of that interview. —WW

CHILDHOOD AND PARENTS

I was born in Oakland, California, on July 24, 1912, the first child of three. I lived in the building on Eighth and Harrison Streets, right in Chinatown.

The building is the CACA (Chinese American Citizens Alliance) building now. The CACA was formerly known as Native Sons of the Golden State. My father was one of the original members, along with Thomas C. Lew, Frank Yick, and Jue Yut, and Jew Geng. They were the ones who tried to get Chinese to vote, one of the first Chinese organizations for Chinese Americans.

My father was Tom Lung. We were of the Tom family. My mother was Emma Tom. My father was born in 1884, my mother in 1889, both in San Francisco. Their parents were from China. My father’s family is from Hoi Ping [Guangdong Province]. I don’t know where my mother’s family came from.

I had a sister, Margaret, and a brother, Edward. Ed passed away in 2002; my sister passed away in 2003. We were each two years apart.

My parents had a laundry and cleaning agency on Eighth Street, 311, 313. We lived in the back of the store. We did not do the laundry there. We were merely an agent picking up for a laundry. You leave laundry there and we send it out, and you come back and pick it up.

PIONEERING MOTHER

My mother passed away in 1928. She was always at the store. She was very helpful to people who came in. The store had a little room that people came to play mah-jongg. A lot of single men came in, and my mother cooked and sewed for them. She helped out in any way she could. She also taught Sunday school at a church on Fifth Street. She was a grand lady.

I have no idea why my mother decided to register to vote, other than the fact that my father was with the Native Sons of the Golden State. Dr. Charles Lee was also very active. All registered Chinese voters went to them to find out who to vote for. They were friends of a few judges at that time.

I wasn’t born yet when she registered to vote. I found out about it from news articles, after my parents had passed away. My parents never mentioned it. When Lester Lee’s mother [Clara Lee] turned 106, there was an article in the paper about her, and this incident was brought forth.

MEMORIES OF CHINATOWN

The people I grew up with were the Chan family, on Eighth Street. The father was the minister of the Chinese Methodist
Church and the boys were Freeman, Edwin, George, and Edward. They had quite a few sisters.

Harry Chin's family owned a store next door. The church was downstairs and the Chan family lived upstairs. The person across the street, on the corner, was Frank Yick, a contractor. The son was Robert Yick, who eventually moved to San Francisco and opened the company that made all the Chinese kitchens.

On Ninth Street was the Fung family. They were electricians and contractors. One of the fellows I went to school with was Paul Fung, who became a well-known doctor in San Francisco. He started the Buddhist Church in San Francisco.

There weren't too many businesses on Harrison Street. It was a quiet little street. We used to play mostly on Harrison Street because there was little or no traffic. The park at Seventh and Harrison was an open park. We didn't play much ball in Lincoln Square.

Other friends were all along Sixth and Seventh Streets. Further down on Eighth Street was the Wong family, Worley Wong, the well-known architect. We were very close friends. Worley, Jenny, and I went to school together. Jenny, the sister, eventually married Dr. Lester Lee. Their family was one of the most well-to-do families at the time.

We had a ball team, the Chinese C-9. That came before the Wa Sung baseball team. There was also the Young Chinese Athletic Club.¹ I belonged to the C-9 when it started. I never belonged to Wa Sung.

I played baseball and basketball. Young Chinese had a good basketball team. The biggest team we ever played was Lo Wah from Los Angeles, and we beat them. There were Chinese teams from elsewhere too.

The Chinese school was called Lai Hon Som, a private school on Harrison Street. You had to pay a monthly charge, three dollars or something like that. The other school was
Wah Kue Hok How, the most well-known one, on Eighth Street, where the Joy Luck restaurant is now. I went to both.

I went to American school, Lincoln, during the day. I got out at three o’clock, went home and had dinner, then went to Chinese school between five and eight. Most Chinese families had more or less the same routine.

Chinatown was almost exclusively Chinese because it was restricted at that time. No Chinese could live or buy property outside of that area because of the racial discrimination clauses in the property deeds. You couldn’t even rent a place.

The restaurant most well-known was New Home at Seventh and Webster. All the Chinese butchers and grocery men were there in the morning for coffee and biscuits. They served American food—ngow may (ox tails), roast pork, and roast beef.

There was also Say Hoy Lau, upstairs, the biggest restaurant in Chinatown. Now, it’s the Legendary Palace, which was also called Buck Ghing Low, Peking Low. On Webster Street was Sun Yuet Wah, where they used to make chow fun.

How I miss these people—Phillip Fong, the owner of Sang Cheong [a fish market on Eighth Street between Webster and Franklin Streets]. He’s the father of Heather Fong, the chief of police of San Francisco. I called him Ah Lok.

There was Hamburger Joe, Hamburger Gus, and Hamburger Pete. They were Greeks. Fifteen cents for a hamburger, and a nickel more for French fries.

We didn’t want to pass over Broadway. Just never had the urge or any reason to do that. We don’t even want to see what was beyond there.

EDUCATION

My first languages were both som yup and say yup. Mother spoke som yup, father spoke both. We were more or less som yup, but we understood and spoke say yup too. Chinese school was som yup.

I learned English at Lincoln School. The teachers were mostly White women. I started at Lincoln about 1917. The
students were mostly Chinese. Others were White. There weren't too many Black kids, and no Mexicans. There were some Japanese. We enjoyed the company of all the kids.

After Lincoln, I went to Oakland High directly. There were no junior highs at that time. Oakland High was on Twelfth Street and Jefferson. They called it the Old Brick Pile. We were the first or second class to graduate from that new school (on Park and MacArthur Boulevards) in 1929, I believe. More Whites than Chinese went to Oakland High, but there were many Chinese there.

After high school, Cal Berkeley would be the closest college we would be tempted to go to. I didn't think my family could afford it.

I went to Poly Tech, a business college in Oakland, and took some Cal extension courses—business administration, accounting—right after high school. I did that for two to three years. I didn't earn a degree. I went there to learn business skills.

**EARLY WORK LIFE**

I worked part-time in a buffet and bar in downtown Oakland, owned by Americans, from five or six o'clock till midnight, to earn money to go to business school.

Then I got the idea of taking the state civil service test. For Chinese at that time, the greatest job was working for the post office and civil service. That was quite a deal then. I didn't care for post office work.

The first civil service exam I took was for clerical work. While I was working at the restaurant, I got a call to work for the DMV. That is how I started at the DMV, in 1935. It was a temporary thing during the vehicle registration renewal period, which used to be January, when they did it all at once. February 4 was the last day for auto registration. I took a temporary job for those many weeks.

**WORKING FOR THE DMV**

It was just a job. I found out later I was the only Chinese working for the DMV. I worked in a tiny corner office, in a big garage on Fourteenth and Harrison. I did clerical work. That included learning how to register vehicles.

I mingled very little with White people before, but at the DMV, I did. There is one thing I have always said, that working for the state and DMV, I have felt no discrimination of any sort.

In every move I made in the DMV, everybody helped me, which was very nice. I got along very well. That was a good thing, particularly when you heard a lot of stories about discrimination against Chinese.

**Becoming Permanent**

After the registration period, they kept me on. There seemed to be a lot of other work, but there was a shortage of help. At that time, the ruling of civil service was that if you worked a temporary job, after six months, you became a permanent employee. That is what happened.

My education in the business school helped me, particularly in the accounting field, when you collect[ed] and kept track of money.

Eventually, we moved to a new location, 1107 Jackson Street, and then to the new office at 5300 Claremont Avenue. This was before the 1950s.

I started as a junior clerk at seventy dollars a month. A few months later, because of the state budget problems, my pay was cut to sixty dollars a month.

I continued to take promotional examinations and passed. The next step was an intermediate clerk. I earned maybe a hundred dollars a month. I had some benefits, like vacation and a pension. The next step was the senior clerk, with a little bump in pay, maybe thirty or forty dollars.

**Helping Chinese Applicants**

I was in the Division of Registration and then wandered over to the Division of Driver's Licenses because there were so many Chinese coming in who were unable to pass the test. I helped the Chinese in the driver's license part. Many had trouble reading and speaking English.

I gave oral examinations to the Chinese. I boosted myself up there by helping them out. They say, “Go and see Tom Lung's boy at DMV.” That's how I knew most of the Chinese in Chinatown, and most of them knew me.

I took the examination for driver's license examiner and passed. I got a little more money. I enjoyed doing that for about ten years. It's a challenge to take drivers out to test their driving skills. It's good to learn public relations too.

Next, I took the test for motor vehicle representative and passed. In this new job classification, you are supposed to shift from one job to another, from registering vehicles to driver's licenses, say, in a small office.

Eventually I became a motor vehicle representative in Oakland. It was a step up. I went to San Francisco for two years on a temporary basis. When I was over there, I was still living in Oakland. The commute was terrible, driving over the bridge. The manager over there liked me so much, he made me assistant manager for two years.

**Switching to Computers**

In 1948, they started the electronic computer stuff. Before that, everything was done by hand, like filing. They had to have an experimental office, to prepare all the documents for
IBM keypunching. I was the area office manager, converting to IBM.

All the applications that came in from, say, Hayward and San Francisco came into my office to be converted to IBM computerized files. Those were hectic days.

After my crew and I got all the bugs out, it became the ordinary thing. I went to Los Angeles and Sacramento to help them set up their IBM programs.

When DMV opened a new temporary office at 319 MacArthur Boulevard, in San Leandro, I became manager. This was about 1958. We built a new office building at 2000 Washington Avenue in San Leandro.

At some point, I went back to Oakland as manager of the Claremont office. Then I went back to San Leandro before I retired. I worked for the DMV for thirty-seven years, retiring in 1972.

It’s a funny feeling to be a manager. You have a lot of problems, and naturally anything the employees can’t solve falls into your lap. I think I was pretty good in doing that. I liked the responsibility. It was a challenge to me. When you have a disgruntled customer, you have to soothe his tail feathers. When you can do it, it feels good.

**Driver’s License Examiner School**

I ran the first driver’s license examiner’s school in the state. Before that happened, a new examiner was taught by the one who was formerly in his place. There were no criteria for driver’s licenses.

The school we started trained new examiners for six weeks. Each new examiner had to go through the same thing, like grading a driver’s test. My two instructors or I would take two or three examiners in a car, and we checked to make [sure] the driving test was uniform.

That’s why now there is a set course in each office, a set number and types of turns. They’re all graded. You start with 100 percent. You take off a percentage when they do something wrong.

Before, it was just the examiner’s opinion. He took you around the block or around six blocks, depending on what he wanted to do. Each office now has a standardized route. You cannot deviate from the route. If you do, you will be suspended. It is very strict.

Another pilot program I did was taking photos of drivers applying for a license.

The DMV was my only working life. As a Chinese, I feel that we have to work harder, twice as hard probably. We do try to work harder and do the best we can. Why? Because we have to overcome and offset what people think of us. You know, “Well, he’s only a Chinaman.”

**WORLD WAR II SERVICE**

In between the DMV work, I was drafted and joined the Army Air Corps for four years, but never went out of the country. This was in 1942.

I had very good jobs in the Army Air Corps. I was more or less a civilian employee, a personnel consultant assistant in the psychology unit, doing psychological testing and test interpretation and case history work. I became the sergeant major at the unit. Our unit stayed together pretty well throughout the four years.

I went from Monterey, California, to Atlantic City, New Jersey—from overlooking the Pacific to overlooking the Atlantic. The troops were there in Atlantic City.

I took my basic training there. One day I was called in for an interview to get a permanent assignment. Two captains, one a psychologist from New York, the other a professor from the University of Pittsburgh, asked me to join the personnel consultant unit and the classification unit where everyone is tested and put into different categories.

This was one of the best breaks I had in my life. This was my first time away from home. I was homesick. They asked me whether I wanted to be a permanent party there. I hesitated, saying I’d rather be transferred to a base closer to home.

Those two officers told me to think it over and let them know by Thursday. This was a Monday when we met. I went back to my hotel room and thought it over. Even if I got back to California, the closest base would be in Sacramento, so close to home, and yet I couldn’t get home.

I told them I would stay there. So I became a permanent party in Atlantic City, with eight other GIs. Most were big college graduates from Yale and places like that.
I stayed in the best hotels in Atlantic City, the Claridge, the newest hotel at the time. Our office was the sun deck of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, three rooms overlooking the boardwalk.

Our duties were to take care of “problem children” sent to us from classification. You had a lot of problem children coming in, people that could not adapt to the army.

What we did was test them. We used the psychological test or the Minnesota personality test. Then we wrote up a case history on each of them. They went before a psychiatric board and were either retained or discharged from the service.

I had on-the-job training to do this work. You wrote up a case history of a man, took him from his date of birth to the time he was in the service. When the psychiatrist read that, he knew exactly what the man was. I enjoyed doing that.

You can’t let the person know you’re testing him. This is just a normal conversation. You don’t make any notes when you are talking to the fellow. It’s all in here [points to his head]. After he leaves, you have to write up everything.

Take Fred Astaire, the choreographer. I got him out of the service. He was a very nice person.

MARRIED LIFE

I met my wife, Gladys Kwock, through friends. She was born in China. We met on these group dates. Our group of friends went out because we had cars. We would go to Lake Merritt and Neptune Beach in Alameda and different places out of town.

Her father had a restaurant out of town somewhere. She lived with her mother, sister, and brother in West Oakland. Her mother used to work at Pacific Coast Canning, started by Lew Hing. She’s actually a Lew, distantly related to Lew Hing.

Gladys and I got married in 1942. We didn’t have any children. She passed away in November of 2003.

When we first married, we lived with my family, at Eighth and Fallon. Then we moved off of Seminary Avenue. We built a place there. I bought a lot before the war. A builder friend heard about this lot. He looked at the deed, and the non-Caucasian restriction had expired. Usually the restriction is automatically renewed on a sale. I had him buy it in his name without renewing the restriction. Then he turned it over to me.

It was a very nice neighborhood. Then it changed. Most of the houses were owned by the people living there. Later on, it all became rentals. It was getting to be a lousy place to live. I got so damned disgusted, I got out. The good thing was, I had bought this lot here [Oakland hills], a whole acre.

Gladys and I were very busy with organizations and traveled a lot, mainly in the U.S. We had made so many friends when I was in the service, and we traveled to see them in different places like Missouri and Massachusetts. We were just like family to them. They’re not Chinese. They’re all Caucasians, in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. They’re practically all gone now.

Gladys and I also traveled a lot to China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and other places in the Far East. We went back to her village, where she was born, in Toisaan [Guangdong Province]. The Communists took over her home and made a bank out of it. We found her home, and some relatives were there.

We’ve been all over Europe too—London a couple of times, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Morocco, too.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Frank Lee and I opened a gas station at the two curb pumps outside the Heburn Building, that beautiful building at Eighth and Harrison Streets. We opened it because we knew all these lottery guys, tong yun sow bew [Chinese lottery ticket sellers], had cars that drove over for gasoline. We rented those two curb pumps and blocked off a place for a little office. This was in the early 1930s.

Right next door to the Heburn Building was Wing On Cheong [a grocery store]. There was an empty lot between the Heburn Building and Wing On Cheong. Harry Chin and I built a gas station there, Mandarin Service, financed by his mother. We were the first Chinese gas station. We built a garage and a building in the back, and there was a little coffee shop in the front.

Harry and I opened a gas station at 59 Columbus in San Francisco, where Clown Alley is now. That’s the first all-Chinese full-service gas station over there. We didn’t do so hot over there. We gave it up. Gas was not a good business to go into.

BECOMING A FREEMASON

I joined a Masonic Lodge in Oakland in 1953. Billy Chew, who ran the only Chinese garage in Oakland, on Alice Street, helped me get into the lodge. I became a Master Mason in 1964.

The main thing about the Masonic order is to make a good man a better man. Freemasonry is not a substitute for religion. You have to believe in God and so forth.

Freemasonry has three great principles. One is brotherly love. Every Freemason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding to his fellow creatures.

The next thing is relief. Freemasons are taught to practice charity and to care not only for their own but also for the community as a whole, both by charitable giving and voluntary effort in works as individuals.

The third thing is truth. Freemasonry strives for truth, requiring high moral standards and aiming to achieve them in their own lives.
There are lodges in practically every city, maybe twenty or thirty lodges in each city. Before it was hard for Chinese to get in locally. By the time I got in, there were a lot of Chinese Masons.

There are no Chinese lodges, but we have a Chinese Acacia Club within the Masons with members all over the world. When I was president of the Chinese Acacia Club, I took eighty people to visit the Taiwan lodges. They treated us royally.

Being a Mason has meant a lot to me. It has taught me to be a good man and neighbor, every day in life.

I don't go to Chinatown now because of the parking. I don't do much shopping now that my wife is gone. We used to go down there and do a little shopping, but that's about it, but still you don't meet people you know too often. People have moved out. People get old like me. How many people do I know who are still around?

Chinatown was not a big thoroughfare like it is now. When I was young, you played in the streets, and it was mostly deserted. [It was] completely different than what it is now. Now, it is just swarming with people.

REFLECTIONS ON CHINATOWN

I love Chinatown. As I said, with DMV, everybody knew me and I knew everybody. I lived in Chinatown for a long time.

I think about old Chinatown a lot, when you go on the streets and greet everybody and everybody greets you. There is no such thing like that now. You go out there now and you don't know a soul. They are all new people. I've outgrown all of them. Once in a while, I see an old friend, but not very often.

I don't go to Chinatown now because of the parking. I don't do much shopping now that my wife is gone. We used to go down there and do a little shopping, but that's about it, but still you don't meet people you know too often. People have moved out. People get old like me. How many people do I know who are still around?

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NOTES

1. Because of racial discrimination, Chinese American and other Asian American young people organized their own sports teams and clubs and competed against one another in the San Francisco Bay Area and throughout California.
2. Heather Fong, a San Francisco native, was the first woman to lead the San Francisco Police Department and one of the first Asian American heads of a major metropolitan police force. She was San Francisco police chief from 2004 to 2009.
3. Som yup is spoken Cantonese. Say yup is a Cantonese dialect spoken in certain villages of Guangdong Province.
Flexible Authenticity
Din Tai Fung as a Global Shanghai Dumpling House Made in Taiwan
Haiming Liu


CHANGES IN THE CHINESE AMERICAN RESTAURANT BUSINESS

On December 4, 2007, the Taiwan government sponsored Din Tai Fung, a steamed dumpling house in Taipei, to hold a gastronomic demonstration in Paris as a diplomatic event to promote its “soft power.”1 Though the cooking show was held by a pro-independence regime, the restaurant actually featured Shanghai cuisine rather than native Taiwanese food. With franchises in Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Australia, mainland China, and the United States, Din Tai Fung was probably the most famous Shanghai dumpling house in the world. Its international reputation exceeded that of many of its counterparts, such as Nanxiang Bun Shop in Shanghai.2 Media reports in Taiwan claimed that the New York Times rated it as one of the ten best restaurants in the world in 1993.3 Din Tai Fung’s success is an illuminating example of how the Chinese restaurant business became a global phenomenon following the growth of Overseas Chinese communities, especially in the United States.

The Chinese restaurant business has a long history in the United States. The first Chinese restaurant, Canton Restaurant, was established in San Francisco in 1849.4 From the mid-nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth, Chinese restaurants in America were mostly Cantonese in flavor, as early Chinese immigrants mainly came from the Pearl River Delta area in Guangdong Province. After years of adaptation, Cantonese restaurants were thoroughly Americanized, catering mostly to non-Chinese customers. Cantonese cuisine, though long regarded as one of the finest regional flavors in China, eventually became a cheap, popular ethnic food in America with a dozen famous fast-food-type dishes such as chop suey and egg foo young, which were hardly known in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. Chinese food in America reflected the racial status of Chinese Americans. The Chinese restaurant business, like the laundry business, was a visible menial-service occupation for Chinese immigrants and their descendants.

Ethnic food also reflects immigration history. After the 1965 immigration reform, new waves of Chinese immigrants arrived. Between 1965 and 1984, an estimated 419,373 Chinese entered the United States.5 Post-1965 Chinese immigrants were far more diverse in their class and cultural backgrounds than the earlier immigrants had been. Many were educated professionals, engineers, technicians, or exchange students. Their arrival fostered a new, booming Chinese restaurant business in America, especially in regions such as the San Gabriel Valley in Southern California and Queens in New York, where Chinese populations concentrated.

Accordingly, food in Chinese restaurants in America began to change. Unlike chop suey houses, most contemporary Chinese restaurants in America featured more self-defined “authentic” Chinese food. In areas with large Chinese populations, they served mainly Chinese customers. And they did not call themselves “Chop Suey House” or “Chow Mein Garden”; rather, they claimed culinary identities as Hunan, Sichuan, Mandarin, or Shanghai restaurants. There is actually no authentic Chinese national food, as Chinese cuisine is divided into a variety of different regional traditions. Each regional cuisine has its own unique flavors and famous dishes based on local cultural traditions and climatic and ecological conditions. Din Tai Fung in Southern California, for example, features Shanghai cuisine, with steamed dumplings as its specialty.

SHANGHAI DUMPLINGS

Shanghai cuisine includes a number of famous dishes, such as steamed meatballs, sweet-and-sour spareribs, Shanghai stir-fried noodles, crispy chicken, and da zha xie, a special crab found in the Changjiang (Yangtze) River. However, the most famous Shanghai delicacy is xiao long bao—little steamed dumplings. Steamed in bamboo baskets, the dumplings are buns filled with thoroughly ground pork or minced
crabmeat mixed with green onion, salt, and other ingredients, chicken soup being the most important one. They are served with vinegar with shredded ginger soaking in it. A customer is supposed to take a bite, suck the soup when it cools down a little bit, and then dip the dumpling in vinegar. Well-made steamed dumplings should be able to hold in the soup until they are bitten.

Elegant steamed dumplings have been a delicacy in Shanghai since the nineteenth century. As dumpling houses compete on quality and price, authenticity is a selling point. Many stores therefore claim to be descendants of the first dumpling houses in Shanghai and to represent the original flavor. The most famous dumpling house in Shanghai is Nanxiang Bun Shop, which has a history of over a hundred years in Yu Yuan Park and is a well-known name across the country. During lunch- or dinertime, local customers and tourists often line up for a seat or a table. In fact, it has become a comparison point for other dumpling houses in Shanghai and other areas. Historically, Shanghai cuisine, like any other big city's food, has been influenced by food traditions in its surrounding areas, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. Both are known for their fine cuisines and culinary traditions. Steamed dumplings, for example, have long existed in Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province and Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. They are still popular in these cities today.

However, when “authentic” Chinese food replaced Americanized Chinese food, few people realized that many regional-flavored Chinese restaurants in America were in fact started and run by immigrants from Taiwan, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The first waves of Chinese immigrants to America after passage of the 1965 Immigration Act came from Taiwan instead of mainland China, which did not have a diplomatic relationship with the United States until 1979. Even more significantly, there was no cultural or economic contact between Taiwan and mainland China from 1949 to the early 1980s. What enabled Taiwanese immigrants to bring various Chinese regional cuisines and dishes to America is more than a food history: it is also a sociopolitical history.

Many Taiwanese immigrants (or their parents) were originally from mainland China. Their journey to the United States was a remigration. Regional Chinese cuisines in Taiwan were actually made and developed according to the collective memory of mainland Chinese there. When Shanghai, Hunan, or Sichuan cuisines followed Taiwanese immigrants to America, they had already changed and evolved. Food transmission from Taiwan to America was also a remigration process. The authenticity of Chinese cuisines has become defined flexibly by the Chinese diaspora. That is, this authenticity is assessed based on the varying experiences of the Chinese populations consuming each cuisine. The presence of numerous Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants in America reflects a complex but interesting transnational migration experience of Taiwanese immigrants.

THE RISE OF REGIONAL CHINESE CUISINES IN TAIPEI

In 1949, about two million mainland Chinese followed the Nationalist government to Taiwan after its defeat by the Communist government. Their arrival greatly changed the social landscape of Taiwan, including the food and restaurant market. Many mainlanders and their families settled in Taipei, which became the new capital of the Nationalist government. The city quickly grew into a metropolitan area that housed all major government institutions, several universities, museums, theaters, and luxury hotels. In the following decades, numerous restaurants popped up featuring a variety of Chinese regional cuisines. The Nationalist government named many streets after Chinese cities, made Mandarin the standard dialect spoken in schools and public institutions, and followed a political agenda to create another China in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the mainland Chinese themselves had to readjust and start a new life. To make a living, many mainlanders entered the restaurant business, in which places of origin could be used as cultural capital.

In the 1960s, Taipei became known as a capital of Chinese cuisine. Numerous regional-flavored restaurants and food stores selling all kinds of dry fruits, cookies, snacks, and other food items quickly spread in the city. In Chinese food history, it was not unusual for a big city to have a cluster of restaurants representing different regional cuisines. In cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, the restaurant market often included a variety of different regional cuisines and was usually translocal. However, the translocal restaurant business in Taipei reached an unprecedented level in Chinese food history. No other Chinese city had ever had so many regional-flavored restaurants and food stores as Taipei did after the Nationalist government retreated there in 1949.

Shanghai cuisine was one of those that became popular in Taiwan. Among the Nationalist followers were some wealthy merchants, officials, and their families from Shanghai. Hengyang Road in Taipei became a “little Shanghai” in the 1950s when mainlanders from Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu Provinces settled and started restaurants and food and other retail businesses there. Many changes have taken place since then, but tourists today can still find a pharmacy/general store called Wu Zhong Hang, established as early as 1950. It has carried Shanghai-flavored snacks and other commodities for more than sixty years. There are also a couple of long-time Shanghai-cuisine restaurants on the same street. By the 1970s, there were many Shanghai-cuisine restaurants in Taipei.

The best-known Shanghai-cuisine restaurants were located to the east of Zhonghua Road in the Xi-Mei-Ting (西門町) area. This is one of the most famous shopping plazas in Taipei and has had numerous restaurants and stores since the 1950s. Some Shanghai-cuisine restaurants, such as Three-Six-Nine, originated in Shanghai and were particu-
larily attractive to the wealthy merchants, government officials, and wives from the Shanghai area, reminding them of the old days in the most prosperous and westernized city in China. As anthropologist E. N. Anderson pointed out, Three-Six-Nine in Shanghai and other famous restaurants, such as the Winter Garden, in the 1930s catered to warlords and international bankers, serving banquetts that could cost five to six figures in modern currency.8 “The Forever Yi Xueyan,” a short story by California-based Taiwanese novelist Bai Xianyong, vividly described how those Shanghai refugees spent their nights playing mah-jongg, window shopping in the Xi-Men-Ting area, watching Shaoxing (Zhejiang) regional operas, eating sweet rice ball soup at Three-Six-Nine, and recollecting their old life in Shanghai.9

THE MAKING OF DIN TAI FUNG IN TAIPEI

Though there was no social contact between Taiwan and mainland China for half a century, Shanghai and other regional Chinese restaurants still prospered in Taiwan. The collective memory of mainland Chinese and public imagination of what original Shanghai or other regional cuisines should be like allowed these cuisines to develop and thrive in Taiwan. Legends of their geographical origin, Taiwan consumers’ recognition and endorsement of various regional cuisines, and translocal tradition in Chinese restaurant markets all played a role in this cultural transmission. Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants could be run by either mainland Chinese or local Taiwanese. Many proprietors ran restaurants featuring cuisines that were not necessarily from their own regional cultural backgrounds.

Din Tai Fung’s founding owners, Yang Pin Ying and his wife, Li Pam Mae, for example, were not Shanghai natives. Yang was born in 1927 in Shanxi Province in north China. Li was a Hakka Chinese born in Taiwan. In the 1940s, Yang Pin Ying first enlisted in a local warlord army, where his uncle on his mother’s side served as a company commander. Soon he tired of his military life and wanted to go to Taiwan, where he had another uncle on his mother’s side. When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, it returned Taiwan to China after fifty years of its colonial rule. Yang wanted to explore better economic opportunities in Taiwan, as the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists did not extend there yet. So he left Shanxi and traveled to a number of cities until yet another uncle, in Qingdao, helped him get a ship ticket from Shanghai to Taiwan in the summer of 1948. The Nationalist retreat from the mainland in 1949 and its continuous confrontation with the Communist government made his stay in Taiwan permanent.

With the help of his aunt-in-law in Taiwan, Yang became a delivery boy for the Wang family’s food oil business in Taipei. The Wang family came from Shanghai, as did Yang’s aunt-in-law.10 Through diligence and hard work, Yang was soon promoted to store manager and got to know the oil business network as well as Shanghai culture. Many merchants in the business came from Shanghai. Yang got to know his wife, Li Pam Mae, when she also worked for the Wang family’s oil business. Unfortunately, the store went bankrupt in a few years. Yang started his own oil business in 1958 and named its store Din Tai Fung, which differed by only one word from the former Wang family business’s name. Whereas most Chinese restaurants were called “garden” (yuan) or “house” (lou), Din Tai Fung sounded more like a general merchandise store. The business did not do well, so in 1972, Yang wanted to try the regional-cuisine restaurant market, which was thriving in Taipei. Advised by a Shanghai restaurant friend, Yang found a Shanghai chef as a partner and began to sell steamed dumplings.

Competition was intense. The Shanghai chef soon left, and the restaurant had to hire a local Taiwanese chef who also knew how to make steamed dumplings and other Shanghai snacks.11 When the dumpling business became stable, the Yang family permanently closed the oil business and focused on the restaurant with the same name.

Most restaurants in Taipei were small businesses in which family members pooled their time and energy. Though Li Pam Mae was a Hakka from Taiwan and not from Shanghai, she played an important role in running the restaurant. Hardworking and talented, she was also multilingual, speaking the Taiwanese (or Southern Fujianese) dialect, the Shanghai dialect, and Japanese.12 Her friendly and warm personality helped the restaurant retain a stable team of chefs and employees. A recent fictional TV series about Din Tai Fung, produced in Taiwan, featured Li as a prominent character in the family business.13

Din Tai Fung’s success in the competitive translocal food market shows how different Chinese regional food traditions became rooted in Taiwan. Though neither Yang nor Li was a Shanghai native, they learned the trade through a lot of hands-on learning, consultation, and experimenting. Kneading flour to get the right texture for the dough, for example, was a long and tedious job. They gradually developed the use of semirisen flour, which was different from the nonrisen flour used in Shanghai. They also learned to use ground pork that came from freshly slaughtered pigs, a special brand of chicken broth, and other local ingredients. The ingredients were repeatedly tried and modified. The flavor of the dumplings continuously improved to meet the taste of Taiwanese consumers. The key ingredients were precisely controlled by Luo Lunbing, a pioneer assistant of the Yang family. Only Luo and Yang Chi-hua, the elder son of Yang, knew the recipe.14

Like the dumplings of Nanxiang in Shanghai, the Din Tai Fung dumplings held the nicely flavored soup inside until they were bitten; they tasted delicious. But their flavor could be subtly or considerably different from that of Nanxiang’s dumplings. Din Tai Fung served Taiwan rather than Shanghai...
Dollars, about US$21.63 million. In addition to the flag-and in 2007 reported revenue of 700 million new Taiwan restaurant rolls out fifteen million steamed dumplings annually. They would look like those of Chef Chu. According to one resource, the restaurant in Zhonghe City, streamlined supply sources, hired a professional management team that master-planned a central kitchen in Zhonghe City, and another branch at Xinyi Road in Taipei. More importantly, the business went global. As mentioned before, after several decades of hard work and continuous improvement, Din Tai Fung established franchise stores in Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, and Australia. In the near future the store may expand to New York, London, Paris, or Dubai, as all those metropolitan cities have a number of internationally recognized authentic Chinese restaurants.

Din Tai Fung's authenticity was sometimes challenged. After all, it was a Shanghai dumpling house that was established and prospered in, and expanded from, Taiwan. During a gastronomic demonstration in Japan in 1986, a local chef from China was hired to help Yang Chi-hua. The chef came from Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, where steamed dumpling has long been a native delicacy. The chef made the dumplings a little bit bigger than required. Yang immediately noticed the difference and asked him to do the work again. The chef insisted that his own way was right, but Yang threw all the dumplings away. The chef finally did what he was told. Yang noticed and cared about every detail of his product, and whether the flavor or size of Din Tai Fung's dumplings truly matched those of their Shanghai or Yangzhou counterparts was almost irrelevant. Their authenticity was based in Taipei.

Few people in Taiwan had actually tasted the original flavor of steamed dumplings in Nanxiang or other famous dumpling restaurants in Shanghai. In fact, most customers in Taiwan had no idea if Yang and Li were Shanghai natives or not. They probably did not care as long as their dumplings tasted good. It was Taiwanese taste and judgment rather than Shanghai customers' that shaped the flavor of Din Tai Fung's dumplings and endorsed the food's authenticity. That was also probably true for other famous Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants in Taiwan. Cultural preservation and reproduction became simultaneously cultural reinvention. In other words, the flavor of Din Tai Fung's Shanghai dumplings was being localized. Taiwanese consumers' collective memory about Shanghai steamed dumplings, circulated as legend among them, allowed Din Tai Fung to maintain certain core elements in its cookery. But the dumplings' authenticity as a Shanghai cuisine was essentially developed in Taiwan.

Din Tai Fung opened a franchise store in Arcadia, Southern California, in 2000. In contrast to its franchise stores in other metropolitan regions, which are usually run by hired managers, the Southern California store is owned and managed by Frank (Guohua) Yang, the second son of Yang Pin Ying and Li Pam Mae. The Yang family story and restaurant business provide an informative example not only of how different Chinese regional food traditions spread to the United States and other parts of the world, but also of how they had been transplanted and developed first in Taiwan. Shanghai and other regional restaurants were first translocal eateries in Taiwan and then became transnational in America, since Taiwan both received immigrants from mainland China and sent emigrants abroad.

Frank Yang opened a Din Tai Fung store in Arcadia with careful consideration. He had promised his father not to enter the restaurant business when he migrated to the United States.
States. His father had advised him that the hours were too long and too hard. In fact, Frank worked for thirteen years as a garment inspector before opening his store. But he noticed that at least two restaurants had used Din Tai Fung’s name for their businesses since his arrival in America. Some immigrant restaurant operators were tempted to take advantage of Din Tai Fung’s reputation as an authentic Shanghai restaurant in Taipei. Frank realized that he had to open a store himself so that others would not use its name again. As mentioned above, Din Tai Fung in Taipei was incorporated in that year and established many chain stores across the world. The business had already gone global, and it should not miss the market in California, where many Chinese Americans worked and lived.

Yang’s store became an immediate success. The restaurant quickly attracted many local Taiwanese customers. Located in Arcadia, a city where many middle-class or wealthy Taiwanese immigrant families lived, the store obviously had Taiwanese customers in mind when it opened. Since its opening, however, it has become popular with many local residents, Chinese and non-Chinese, as the most authentic Shanghai dumpling house in Southern California. In its opening year, though it served two thousand dumplings a day, the waiting line was always long. During the weekend, it took at least thirty to forty-five minutes to get a table. Sixty years earlier, Richard and Maurice McDonald had opened the first McDonald’s Restaurant in Arcadia, moving it to San Bernardino three years later. Today, Arcadia’s population is over 37 percent Chinese; many of these came from Taiwan and have heard of and been to Din Tai Fung in Taipei. A customer recollected how years ago she saw a waiter carry a disabled customer to the third-floor dining room in the old Taipei store because there was no elevator. She also insisted that the dumplings in the Taipei store tasted better than those in the Arcadia store. Nevertheless, the Arcadia store was still important, as it reminded Taiwanese customers about their life in Taiwan.

Authentic flavor was also important to Frank Yang. He did not want to ruin the reputation of his family business and disappoint his fellow Taiwanese immigrant customers. In fact, his elder brother was concerned about the quality issue when Frank Yang decided to open the store. Competition in the Chinese restaurant business in Southern California was intense. Many restaurants were operated by struggling immigrants who could not find decent jobs and became self-made cooks. Food quality and hygiene conditions were often issues. Failure could affect Din Tai Fung’s reputation in Taiwan because the contemporary Chinese American community was transnational. Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California had frequent cultural and social contact with their friends and relatives in Taiwan. Frank worked very hard to maintain the original flavor and quality of the dumplings. Din Tai Fung milled a special combination of medium- and low-gluten flour to get the right texture for the dough. The secret of its dumplings is actually the appropriate mix of flours so that the wrapper is transparently thin yet resilient. Frank Yang continued that cooking tradition. He also ordered custom-made stainless steel steamers built in Taiwan to match exactly the shape and size of the bamboo steamers used in Taipei. (To his regret, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services forbade using bamboo steamers.) In spite of his efforts, Yang still felt that the flavor of his products was only 80 percent like that of the Taipei dumplings.

Yang’s diligent effort to maintain the Taipei standard was more than the spirit of entrepreneurship. Authenticity was an emotional issue for Yang and his Taiwanese customers. Food was not only an expression of ethnic resilience but also a cultural comfort for immigrants when they settled down in their adopted country. Din Tai Fung and other brand-name Taiwan restaurants made Taiwan immigrants in Southern California feel at home and gave them a sense of community. However, the original flavor that Frank Yang tried to retain and the authenticity that the Taiwanese customers were concerned with was based not on dumplings in Shanghai but on the products of its Taipei flagship store. In 2000, there were several dozen Shanghai restaurants in the San Gabriel Valley. Some were operated by Taiwanese and others by immigrants from mainland China. But none of them could offer the same kind of steamed dumplings that Din Tai Fung served or had the same international reputation.

As the Chinese population grew rapidly in the San Gabriel Valley, some local American residents observed that “the newcomers have simply transplanted their culture and way of life to the suburbs of Los Angeles”; that “the newly arrived immigrants no longer feel compelled to join the larger community. Instead, they are content to retreat into their own insular world.” This observation was only partially right. Din Tai Fung was an example of how Chinese food culture was transplanted to America piece by piece following the Chinese immigrant boom. Both historically and today, few immigrant groups completely assimilate into mainstream America, especially in food culture. Many would like to maintain their traditional diet. With restaurants like Din Tai Fung, immigrants from Taiwan did not feel culturally deprived. However, immigrants and their families frequently went beyond ethnic boundaries in dining out and tried other American restaurants. There is no doubt that Chinese American customers in general, especially suburban middle-class professional immigrants and American-born Chinese, patronized American fast-food or sit-down restaurants more often than Din Tai Fung or other Chinese restaurants.

Meanwhile Din Tai Fung attracted non-Chinese clients as well. Shortly after Frank Yang opened his store, it became one of the most famous Chinese restaurants in Southern California. Mainstream newspapers, journals, and TV channels featured the restaurant in their food coverage. The number of non-Chinese customers has grown steadily for Din Tai Fung’s variety of juicy, handmade steamed dumplings.
During the weekend lunch or dinner hours, the restaurant typically has seven to eight tables of non-Chinese guests out of thirty to forty tables. The customers often include Chinese American college students or young professionals eating with their non-Chinese friends. To serve the increasing number of customers, the restaurant recently opened a new store in the neighboring plaza just behind the old store. The restaurant functions as a bridge for anyone who is interested in Chinese culinary culture and getting to know more regional flavors of Chinese food.

Like some of the trendy restaurants in America, the old store has an open kitchen. Through the glass, customers can watch chefs or kitchen helpers standing around a big chopping block, working as a team. Some are swiftly tugging off dough into numerous small, rounded pieces of similar size. Others are skillfully rolling dough out into thin, round wrappings, using finger-thick wood rollers. Still others are filling the wrappings with thoroughly ground pork or crab ingredients. Finally, someone else molds them into elegant dumplings ready to be steamed. Among the kitchen staff, waiters, and waitresses are immigrants from Taiwan, mainland China, Mexico, and South America. Many immigrants join the local menial-service job market when they first arrive in America. The open kitchen and the immigrant workers reflect the way that many restaurants—Chinese and non-Chinese—operate in the United States.

As a country of immigrants, America has continuously had its culture enriched through waves of new arrivals. Ethnic food has existed in America since it was founded. Immigrants kept bringing in new flavors and new cuisines, giving restaurant clients endless options. In fact, there is probably no such thing as American national food, unless we count McDonald’s. As food historian Donna R. Gabaccia has pointed out, what unites American eaters culturally is not what they eat but how they eat. “As eaters, all Americans mingle the culinary traditions of many regions and cultures within ourselves. We are multi-ethnic eaters. What makes the United States multicultural is not so much as many separate cultural traditions as it is Americans’ desire to eat a multi-ethnic mix of foods, and to make this mix part of themselves.”27 Consumers’ preference for multiethnic food is an important expression of their identities as Americans. Meanwhile, culinary culture is not static. It is bound to be influenced and changed by the tastes and preferences of the local customers. For example, Din Tai Fung’s Arcadia store offers “pork fried rice” and “pork fried noodle,” which are very similar to chow mein or other food items familiar to American customers. As immigrant customers eat and debate if the food is authentic enough, they feel less isolated in America and realize that they are part of a social network connected through food and grocery stores; Chinese banks, real estate, and other financial services; newspapers, radio, and TV. Their American experience is not straight-line assimilation. While adapting themselves to mainstream American culture at work, they can live their own cultural life elsewhere. The multicultural American society they are living in is not a totally strange world because it includes their culture as a component.

**Din Tai Fung in China**

As mentioned above, Din Tai Fung reached a turning point in 2000: it stopped being a family-owned business and became an incorporated company with 50 percent of its stock owned by outsiders. During this year Din Tai Fung also established stores in China. Surprisingly, it chose to open its first mainland chain store in Shanghai, the birthplace of steamed dumplings.28 This choice was both challenging and logical. Though the city had many dumpling restaurants, it also had a booming Taiwanese community. When the relationship improved between Taiwan and mainland China in the late 1980s, thousands of travelers, businessmen, professionals, and students from Taiwan, as well as Taiwan immigrants from North America and other parts of the world, rushed there to build factories, open business offices, establish joint ventures, invest in the local economy, or attend school. “Two-way trade between Taiwan and China in the year 2000 came to US$32 billion, accounting for 11 percent of Taiwan’s total export. Estimates of Taiwan investment in the mainland range from $40–$100 billion as of mid-2001, making Taiwan the fourth largest investor in China. Taiwan’s investment is especially heavy now in the Shanghai area. . . . Every day, some 10,000 Taiwanese business people enter the PRC.”29

For these returning or remigrating Taiwanese immigrants, the United States was not necessarily their final destination or the only location of their cultural, social, and economic activities. Din Tai Fung’s opening in Shanghai could be seen as part of this “reverse migration” by Taiwanese immigrants. By 2000, over three hundred thousand Taiwanese were working and living in Shanghai and forming their own networks,
community organizations, and even school system. Many of them were probably the Nationalist expatriates driven away from mainland China in 1949, or their descendants. In a reverse and circular migration pattern, they were back to their cultural roots and began new chapters of their careers or businesses. When Din Tai Fung opened in Shanghai, it not only “returned” to its symbolic home but also became part of the booming Taiwanese community in Shanghai. As a brand-name Taiwan restaurant, it joined the Taiwanese remigration movement to mainland China.

Opening a store in Shanghai would be a challenge for Din Tai Fung because the city was the very birthplace of steamed dumplings. The famous Nanxiang Bun Shop has a history of over a hundred years in the local restaurant market. In 2003, it was reported to serve an average of three thousand customers per day. Many other local dumpling houses are competitive in price and quality. To prepare for the competition, Din Tai Fung’s master chef Shao Guanglong allegedly tasted dumplings from all famous Shanghai restaurants. He was still confident in establishing a store in Shanghai.

Located in a high-end mall and charging much more than most of the local steamed dumpling restaurants, Din Tai Fung’s store in Shanghai is trendy and upscale in decoration. Unlike chop suey, which also returned to China in the 1940s but failed miserably, as it only fit the taste of American patrons, Din Tai Fung’s dumplings are not foreign food to the Chinese. Meanwhile, it has an international fame that other local Shanghai dumpling restaurants do not. Its authenticity is clear and simple: the restaurant offers brand-name Taiwan-made Shanghai dumplings. Its global reputation, especially among Overseas Chinese communities, has enabled Din Tai Fung to survive as a high-profile and upscale restaurant in Shanghai. According to a report in 2003, some 30 percent of Din Tai Fung’s customers were local people. By 2009, it had opened three stores in Shanghai.

Din Tai Fung has also successfully opened stores in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia, where Chinese food is popular and Chinese populations are large. As early as 1996, with a franchise agreement with Takashimaya, a Japanese department store, Din Tai Fung opened five chain stores in Japan. Shortly thereafter, Shanghai steamed dumplings became trendy in Japan. Din Tai Fung attracted many enthusiastic Japanese patrons. As a global enterprise, it has developed a modern operation standard in a Chinese restaurant. In addition to its flavor, tastefulness, and good service, Din Tai Fung has established a standardized hygiene, food preparation, and cookery procedure that many other Chinese restaurants fail to develop. Chefs at each new location in Japan need to complete a rigorous three-month training in the Taipei kitchen to create the original recipes. Din Tai Fung’s stores in Shanghai have Japanese tourists due to its reputation in Japan. Din Tai Fung has also opened stores in Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Hong Kong. All its chain stores in mainland China are high-end sit-down restaurants well known among local, tourist, or Western customers, especially Chinese American professionals and students working and studying in China. Many young Chinese white-collar, middle-class patrons come to the restaurant on the recommendation of their Overseas Chinese or international friends. With its competitive edge and international reputation, Din Tai Fung has begun to impact the Chinese steamed dumpling business. Many steamed dumpling restaurants in China, for example, have imitated Din Tai Fung in having open kitchens. Din Tai Fung’s success in China has further boosted its reputation as authentic Shanghai cuisine.

Din Tai Fung is of course not the only Chinese restaurant transplanted from Taiwan to America. Immigrants from Taiwan have opened and operated many regional-flavored Chinese restaurants in the United States. Like Din Tai Fung, A & J Restaurant (Banmu Yuan, or Half-acre Farm), Yonghe Doujiang (Forever Harmony Bean-curd Milk), San-Liu-Jiu (Three-Six-Nine), Lu Yuan (Green Garden), Jiazhou Niu Rou Mian (California Beef Noodle), and a number of other Chinese American food enterprises have established chain stores in China.

Banmu Yuan was established in 1971 in Taipei during the restaurant boom in Taiwan and soon established chain stores in several counties and cities there. In 1984, it opened branch stores in Los Angeles and San Jose. In Taiwan, Banmu Yuan was known for its authentic northern Chinese food, such as steamed buns or breads, noodles, and baked pancakes. A few years after it expanded in California, Zhang Taike, the owner, met Zhao Bingsheng, another immigrant from Taiwan, on a business trip and asked Zhao if he would be interested in joining the business and opening a chain store in mainland China. Zhao was interested because his father was a northern-erner from Shandong Province. Though he had never been to China, he had always been interested in going and wanted to explore his opportunities there. In 1994, the first branch store of Banmu Yuan opened in Shuangyu Shu, Haidian District, in western Beijing. This was a university area where many middle-class and professional Chinese lived. As one of the earliest Taiwan restaurants established in Beijing, Banmu Yuan attracted the attention of many local media, and its guests included Chinese movie celebrities like Zhang Yimou and Gong Li. By 2007, Banmu Yuan had opened twenty-seven stores in Beijing and Shanghai. It has also opened a store in Maryland and another one in Virginia. Similarly, Yonghe Doujiang and Jiazhou Niu Rou Mian each have hundreds of chain stores in China. Those immigrants from Taiwan never expected that their modest American restaurant businesses could develop into such huge chains in mainland China.

Zhao Bingsheng met his wife in Beijing. She also came from Taiwan and worked for a Taiwan company there. She had originally planned to stay for three months, but the mar-
riage made her settle down in Beijing. Zhao also invited his aging father to join him in Beijing from Taiwan. It seems that he established a home away from home in Beijing. The global economy and rapid economic growth in China made many Chinese Americans transnational citizens. Their life and work often involved more than one location and culture—America and Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. The immigrant boom has marked the beginning of the globalization of Chinese communities and food culture.

When Din Tai Fung, Bannmu Yuan, and Yonghe Doujiang opened stores in Shanghai, Beijing, and other metropolitan cities in mainland China, authenticity in Chinese food became an even more complex issue in cultural representation. Returning to the birthplace of steamed dumplings, can Din Tai Fung claim its dumplings as authentic Shanghai cuisine? Who represents the best Shanghai dumplings: an internationally famous brand name or a native store a hundred years old? As transnational businesses in China, Din Tai Fung, Bannmu Yuan, and Yonghe Doujiang have a cultural identity different from their business identity and status in the United States. In China, they are not struggling ethnic food businesses depending or surviving on cheap prices, ethnic customers, or immigrant or underpaid family labor. Instead, they are brand-name, high-end chain restaurants with international reputations and higher hygiene standards. Many middle-class or professional customers in mainland China prefer them to other local restaurants because of their California and Taiwan background. Their transnational Chineseness did not make their culinary identity marginal in China.

CONCLUSION

Through its fame, Din Tai Fung has established new definitions of what Chinese food is. Though featuring a Shanghai cuisine, it transplanted its dumplings, its flavor, and even its service style from Taiwan. For half a century, Taiwan had no cultural contact with mainland China. Din Tai Fung's Shanghai dumplings and other Chinese regional cuisines in Taiwan were essentially developed according to the collective memory and expectation of what they should be like. Din Tai Fung's authenticity as a Shanghai dumpling house was recognized and defined by customers in Taiwan rather than those in Shanghai. As a result, the food it serves could have gone through subtle or unsubtle changes from its counterparts in China. Such authenticity, though, did not prevent Din Tai Fung from going global as a famous Shanghai-cuisine restaurant. In Din Tai Fung, we see both continuity and discontinuity in Chinese food culture.

Chinese cuisine is now a global food, and Chinese restaurants can be found in almost every city in the United States. New York City and Southern California probably have more options in regional flavors of Chinese cuisine than midsized cities in China. In any metropolitan city or area in the world, there could be a few Chinese restaurants that local customers assume to be more authentic and established than others.²⁶ Authentic Chinese food, however, consists of a variety of regional cuisines, and the Chinese restaurant market in China is usually translocal. Din Tai Fung and other famous Overseas Chinese restaurants have made a significant contribution to Chinese food history in successfully evolving from translocal to transnational businesses.

As the Chinese restaurant business goes increasingly global, the culinary identity of restaurants like Din Tai Fung, Bannmu Yuan, or Yonghe Doujiang has multiple dimensions. It is simultaneously local and national, Taiwanese and Chinese, translocal and transnational. Without being a Shanghai delicacy, steamed dumplings would not have supported a prosperous business in Taiwan, and Din Tai Fung's food would not have attained international fame. Through Din Tai Fung's history, we can see how Chinese diaspora communities have continuously enriched the meaning of Chineseness, making it increasingly difficult to define and interesting to explore. In this historical context, we may conclude that authenticity in Chinese food culture is a flexible validity and a fluid concept.

NOTES

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2. Nanxiang is actually a suburb to the northwest of Shanghai city. In the late nineteenth century, a small restaurant owner, Huang Mingxian, in Nanxiang became famous for his delicious steamed buns and dumplings. Other restaurants in Nanxiang imitated his products, which gradually made the whole town famous for making steamed dumplings. Huang was later invited to open restaurants in Shanghai, and his dumplings became popular throughout the city. Nanxiang Bun Shop in Yu Yuan Park is still a major attraction to both local and tourist customers today.
3. I have not found such a report in the New York Times from 1993.
4. The first mention of Canton Restaurant was in Daily Alta California, December 10, 1849.
11. Ibid., 42.
12. Ibid., 34.
13. Ibid., 42.
15. Ibid., 93.
16. Ibid., 8–10.
19. Wang, Din Tai Fung Legend, 179.
23. Ibid.
24. Wang, Din Tai Fung Legend, 161.
31. Ibid.
32. Tong, “An Honorable House.”
Chasing China
Adoption Tourism, Images of China, and the Negotiation of Asian American Identity

Jillian Powers

INTRODUCTION

At dinner one evening at a McDonald’s in China, Karl, an adoptive parent of a Chinese daughter, told me about his parents’ concerns about his choice to adopt internationally. We were traveling together with his wife, Carole, and their daughter, Anna, on a heritage/adoption homeland tour with two other families. Over hamburgers and fries Karl explained how his parents worried that once Anna was old enough, she would choose to return to China and forsake her American parents and life. To the chagrin of her father, Anna responded: “If I marry a Chinese man, he can come to New York and open a nail salon here.”

I highlight this exchange to demonstrate how parents and adopted Chinese children employ Western orientalist perspectives on China to separate the adopted child from China and affirm her position within the (White) American family. Chinese adoption constitutes the largest transnational movement of adopted children. Between 1971 and 2001, U.S. citizens adopted 265,677 children from other countries, and more than one-quarter of the children adopted internationally to the United States are Chinese. Parents of adopted foreign-born children are generally White, in their late thirties to early forties, college educated, with high income. With an increase in international adoption, especially from China, a new generation of Chinese Americans and their adoptive families navigate cultural meanings around identity, ethnicity, race, and family, as seen in the exchange above between Anna and her father. In this piece I examine how White parents engage with their children’s Chinese heritage, and present analysis based on participant observation and interviews with families traveling back to China on a homeland/adoption tour.

While previous generations of international adoptees were not socialized into their birth cultures, adoptive parents today believe in offering opportunities for Chinese socialization. Marketed as ways for children to gain self-knowledge through experiences with native lands and native peoples, homeland tours are discussed as important for “reconnecting these children with their past.” Therefore, homeland tourism to China is an especially effective vehicle for examining the role of heritage for transnational adoptees and their American families.

I argue that families first legitimize their composition and then determine the significance of China. While contemporary definitions of familial membership have moved past seeing a family as solely a group of genetically similar individuals, genetics still remain central in popular understandings of family. The assumptions of kinship and family are especially problematic for families with adopted children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. In this article I present quotes from parents and explanations of homeland tour moments showing how families understand Chinese identity and how China is used to create the transnational adoptive family. Families expand themselves to include original Chinese caregivers, yet distance themselves from most of China. Stereotypical understandings of contemporary Asian identities, as seen in Anna’s quote, represent one of the frames they use. Narratives of rural simplicity are another frame families use while in China to distance their adopted daughters from their natal homeland. I show how parents recognize and incorporate their children’s difference but discuss this difference in cosmopolitan pan-Asian and global citizenship frames. In these well-intentioned attempts, families overlook the history of racialized constructions of difference and exclusion, and ultimately reinforce White upper/middle-class American standpoints and America’s perceived position of global power.

CREATING THE BONDS OF FAMILY:
UNDERSTANDING CHINESE DIFFERENCE

Families with adopted children try to find connections based upon other traits and characteristics, using common hair
color, similar senses of humor, and even tanning ability to create family connections that biology seems to produce naturally. Carole, Karl’s wife and Anna’s mother, focuses on the similarities that her adopted daughter has with other family members to create familial bonds. “My mother, for example, is surprisingly swarthy for an Ashkenazi Jew . . . [A]t the end of every summer, she loves to compare her tanned arm to Anna’s and say, ‘At last, I have a member of my family who tans like me!’” Similarly, when Farah, another adopted daughter, was younger she would claim common ancestry by pointing out how both she and her grandmother had black hair.

Families first and foremost must legitimize their very being, and then determine how their children’s difference will be incorporated. A quote from Farah’s older brother, Chris, demonstrates this: “I used to think about that a lot [being singled out or noticed/Farah not belonging], but now, I’m used to Farah. I don’t think twice about her being Chinese, because she’s my sister, and she’s always been that way.” As Chris states, Farah is both Chinese and his sister. Yet in our contemporary moment, the foundational characteristics of identity that mark Farah as Chinese are thought to be based upon “blood” and primordial connectedness that is ineffable, a priori, and affective. For the transnational Chinese adoptee, her connection to the “original” culture is tenuous at best, and yet her appearance clearly marks her as other. Therefore, due to blood-based rights to land, the adopted Chinese daughter should have a natural connection to China, problematizing her place within the White American family.

Cheri Register, an author and mother of adopted Chinese daughters, writes, “We are an internationally adoptive family. This is the heritage that we truly have ‘given’ our children. Filling it out and giving it meaning is a shared family endeavor, which we must undertake with deliberate care and sensitivity.” Chinese adopted children therefore access their natal heritage through parental mediation whereby parents literally give their children the symbols for understanding Chinese heritage and the language to describe a Chinese identity. Parents connect their children and their families to accessible forms of Chinese culture, or “culture bites,” that come to represent what it means to be Chinese.

Chinese heritage is seen through the eyes of the adoptive family and community as something symbolic. Parents participate in Chinese heritage camp, attend activities sponsored by Families with Children from China (FCC), eat at Chinese restaurants, watch films and television shows about China, and celebrate Chinese New Year, with return homeland tours a natural extension of this engagement with what it means to be Chinese.

The three families I traveled with had varying levels of Chinese socialization. Farah once attended a Chinese adoptee summer camp, yet did not find the experience too appealing. She did not enjoy being separated from her family at such a young age. Another family on this tour enrolled their daughters in a Chinese after-school program, then dropped it for other activities, such as horseback-riding lessons. However, all families discussed participating in adoption-specific networks and groups either formally, as by attending FCC events, or informally, by remaining close with the original group of Americans they traveled with to adopt their daughters.

Families and adoption specialists encourage homeland tours and returns because of an “assumed psychological need for the adopted child to return to where he or she ‘really’ belongs.” In Barbara Yngvesson’s work with homeland returns to Chile, she finds that these journeys “reveal the impossibility of ever being fully integrated” into American families and become a “constant reminder of what the adoptee had left behind, of what he or she lacks.” Yet I argue that the internationally adopted Chinese daughter and her family do not return to heal primordial separation; my experiences on a homeland tour suggest parents narrate integration in different ways. In this article I show how parents connect with and distance themselves from China, using romantic rural narratives to distance and expanded kinship narratives to connect. Therefore homeland tourism to China reveals shifting meanings in the realm of kinship and possibly new expressions of Chinese American identity.

### THE HOMELAND TOUR

My analysis is based on participant observation and interviews conducted with three families traveling to China with their adopted daughters (Table 1). During the summer of 2008, I traveled for two weeks on a moderately priced homeland tour organized by Panda Tours. Panda Tours assists adoptive families with travel arrangements to China and Southeast Asia, providing avenues for adopted children to “appreciate their rich cultural heritage.”

The United States has approximately four major providers of adoption-specific homeland tours to China and other Asian destinations. Unfortunately, no data exist on the number of adoptive families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Adopted Chinese Children</th>
<th>Additional Children</th>
<th>Area of Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karl, Carole</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td></td>
<td>Large urban area in Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa, Evan</td>
<td>Ellie, Carly, and Karissa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Large urban area in central Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>Chris and Molly</td>
<td>Midwestern suburb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ber of families that have taken them. Homeland tours to
China highlight mythic Chinese dynasties, adoption-specific
landmarks, and symbolic Chinese culture. Tours last between
seven and fourteen days. They are taken when adopted chil-
dren are roughly six to fourteen, an age range when the girls
still enjoy family vacations and have not yet succumbed to
the passions and concerns of adolescence.

The children on this trip ranged in age from eight to
twelve, with two fifteen-year-old biological twins accompa-
nying their mother and adopted younger sister. Only one
family was interested in visiting the orphanage/welfare center
where their daughter spent her first few months, and I was
able to accompany this family when they returned to Farah’s
home city and orphanage. I came to know the families quite
well as they drew me into their lives. Since I was younger
than the parents but older than the children, I existed as both
an older kid and a younger adult, privy to “adult” conversa-
tions and kid time equally.14

As adoptive parent and anthropologist Toby Alice Volk-
man details, an adoption community has developed “through
the formation of play groups, dance troupes, culture celebra-
tions and camps, reunions, Web sites, electronic mailing lists,
and publications intended for the adoptive community.”15
Therefore, to supplement my small sample size, I analyzed
news articles with user comments, adoption blogs, and
listervs.

Homeland tours are the most tangible way parents can
give their children knowledge of China—a sort of ethnic and
racial understanding through osmosis. As a parent states on
an adoption blog: “I want to take them back . . . so it is in
their memory, not just the memory of the pictures we took
[on our adoption trip].”16 Tours typically begin and end in
popular tourist cities: Beijing, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and
Shanghai. Accompanied by English-speaking guides, families
visit touristic sites like the Great Wall, the Summer Palace,
and the terra-cotta soldiers, as well as scenic pastoral cities
like Guilin. Homeland tours also schedule specific activities
and performances presenting Chinese heritage in age-approp-
rate forms for children. Activities like kite flying, walking
the Great Wall, visits to panda reserves, and tours of adop-
tion agencies represent China’s history and family histories of
transnational adoption.17

These firsthand moments are thought to be very impor-
tant for understanding the culture and heritage that lie dor-
mant in the adopted child. Other forms of cultural educa-
tion set up the child as a passive vessel, absorbing heritage
and culture through adults and educators. Homeland jour-
neys give adopted children direct and tactile experiences
with being from/in China. Tour agencies encourage con-
necting your child’s current Chinese interests with activities
possible in China. One tour agency states: “For instance, if
your child really enjoys Chinese food, make this a point of
emphasis . . . If your child likes Chinese dresses, a dress or
two bought from places of meaning, such as a specific region,
[can] facilitate positive associations.”18 As child psychologist
Angela Krueger comments, “A trip to one’s place of birth can
be valuable to any adoptee.”19

RESTRICTURING KINSHIP: DISTANCING
FROM AND CONNECTING TO CHINA

When approaching Chinese heritage, adoptive parents refer-
ence and align themselves with aspects they are comfortable
with while distancing themselves from the strange and dif-
f erent. But what we see happening on homeland tours is that
the “strange” and “different” really become the “poor,” or the
exaggerated Asian stereotype.

For example, in Yangshou we toured a traditional Chinese
village and home under the care of our local guide. The fam-
ily we visited was encouraged to continue to live in a tradi-
tional fashion for the sake of visiting tourists. An older Chi-
nese woman welcomed us and gave us a tour of her home
and property as well as a glimpse into her everyday activities.

In the front of her home was a large stone mortar and pes-
tle used to make soy milk (fig. 1). She showed us how to pull
and push the lever to grind the beans down into a liquid. The
children were then encouraged to try for themselves, with
parents posing and laughing while the children struggled.
Parents witnessed and documented this moment, mention-
ning and comparing visible differences between rural China
and the lives their adopted children now led.

Contrasting rural household labor with middle-class
American childhood allows families to see differences
between Chinese citizens and their own (Chinese) children.
Karen, Farah’s mother, described this life as simple, the coun-
ter to Farah’s known American life. Because Farah is unfa-
miliar with the hardship of a rural lifestyle, she could never

Fig. 1: Chinese woman demonstrating one of her daily practices dur-
ing a visit to a rural home in Guilin. Photograph by Jillian Powers.
belong to China: “I couldn’t help but think about the stark contrast between this kind of life and the life Farah is living with us in the U.S. Not that one is better than the other—I’m sure there’s peace and simplicity to that rural lifestyle—but that she just didn’t look like she belonged. Even though she’s Chinese, she’s so American.”

Farah has become part of her American family, where familial membership is defined based upon lived experience and shared activities, placing only slight significance on heritage and ancestry. Romantic narratives of the simplicity of rural Chinese lifestyles, seen in Karen’s quote, separate and call attention to the different economic positions of these particular Chinese citizens and middle-class American families. Therefore, Farah fits into her American family because she has been socialized as a “typical” (White and upper/middle-class) American child.

Caregivers and adoption specialists, on the other hand, can be easily included because they have engaged in one of the activities defining family: care of children. They can be incorporated especially easily if they are able to provide even the slightest bit of information or history. When we returned to Farah’s orphanage, Karen brought with her a picture of Farah and the nanny who had originally cared for her twelve years ago. Through our interpreter, Farah’s nanny shared stories about Farah’s first year of life. She remembered bringing her home to play with her family and how Farah interacted with her son. Karen said, “The best part for me was meeting Farah’s nanny. I didn’t expect her to remember Farah, yet it turned out that she remembered quite a bit about her and was able to answer some of the questions we’ve always had about those first several months of her life. It helped us make sense of her story. It was also wonderful to see that there is someone in China who really cares about her—someone who is emotionally attached to her.” Linguistic and cultural barriers were overcome because both Karen and Farah’s nanny value and cared for her.

Molly, Karen’s biological daughter and Chris’s twin sister, uses caretaking and family to describe how she extends the imagined boundaries of family. As a White American teenager, she found most of China foreign, and the assumptions of primordial belonging do not apply to her. Though she found China hard to relate to or understand, she was able to understand Farah’s nanny, making some aspects of China approachable: “I have never had a personal connection to someone in China before. It seemed like everyone there was like strangers to me, and that we didn’t have very much in common. However, meeting the nanny and her family showed me that I did have a connection with China, that a family there actually shared a sister with me, at least for a short while.”

Molly expands the definition of family selectively, excluding most of China but including Chinese caregivers. Shared responsibility for the well-being of Farah turns into communal understanding of the importance of family and community. Farah’s nanny might also be “strange,” or a stranger, because she’s Chinese, but she can be understood through the duties and obligations associated with kin and family.

At the orphanage, the director and two assistants discussed Farah’s past. The director slid a large sketchbook toward her that was full of pictures and comments from the other girls from her orphanage who had returned (fig. 2). Farah flipped through the pages, reading selected passages from other children, seeing what they wrote and drew. Finally she signed the book, mentioning the grade she was entering, the activities she enjoyed, and how she loved her family (fig. 3). By adding her name and a description of her American life and family to the book of returnees, I argue, Farah and her family became connected to the other adopted children and Western families represented in that sketchbook.

These new family memories fill in the empty spaces, and while they do not provide knowledge concerning heritage, they commemorate the creation of family through participation in new rituals. As this quote from one returnee featured in a New York Times article explains:

“We showed each other our papers and our baby pictures from the orphanage. Then we went on a tour of the building and saw the rooms with paperwork on past and current matches. There was one room with big bulletin boards all around it. Each board had tons of pictures of orphans who had been adopted. All the children were so adorable and we felt happy that they had families now. None of us had known about the match room so seeing that part of our family story was really special.”

Families interact not just with the orphanage employees but also with the traces of other unknown adoptive families, thereby legitimizing the constructed nature of the adoptive family. As Farah stated: “It helped me learn about my heritage. I also think that it helped bring our family closer together.”

Narratives of rural China’s simplicity distance families and their adopted Chinese children from the inhabitants of the homeland, but Farah’s family made an exception; original caregivers and orphanage employees can be included in these extended family units because they engaged in one of the defining characteristics of family membership, child care. Farah’s family confirmed and celebrated a Chinese connection shaped by transnational adoption while simultaneously discouraging a strong connection between the adopted child and her homeland based upon contemporary and stereotypical understandings of China and the Chinese. These moments in China when adoption guest books are signed and nannies are introduced suggest that children and their families connect to the larger adoption community, not necessarily to China.

Even in China these girls navigated a middle space between belonging to China and belonging to their White middle-class American families. One night in Beijing, Farah mentioned over dinner how she felt “weird” in China. For
Farah, feeling weird meant she felt like a stranger and an insider simultaneously. The girls all described moments when they felt their Mandarin thank-yous were more believable than those uttered by their parents and moments where they felt “weird.” They worried they were too visible, standing out as Chinese children with American adults. As we walked through the mall heading back to our hotel one evening, Farah discussed her racial appearance and how it led clerks to believe she was a native Chinese; however, she also commented on how her demeanor and behavior marked her as distinctly American.

Farah’s experiences suggest a different sort of connection to China and a different creation of a Chinese identity specific to adoptees. In the Summer Palace the adopted girls walked ahead, saying hello to passing women, then giggling when they were answered in Mandarin. They whispered to each other, asking if they thought they were believable as native Chinese girls.

Yet at the Forbidden City, the girls were marked definitively as Americans. Our tour guide attempted to purchase tickets for the girls in our group at the Chinese children’s price. The ticket person took one look at their Western-style dress and the puzzled faces of the hovering parents and denied them the lower admission fee. While they looked Chinese, he stated that they were American and were required to pay full price. Farah mentioned afterward that she had never felt so White as when she was quickly scanned for her Chinese authenticity. In conflating White with American, Farah separates herself from other Chinese American populations and Chinese diaspora communities, articulating a Chinese identity specific to the circumstances of migration and family construction that define the adoption community.

Homeland tour moments where Chinese adoptees were classified as American (and, for Farah, White) confirmed their rightful place in the American family and the transnational adoption community. When they tried to pass as Chinese, the attempts themselves brought them together in a way that Chinese culture camp or after-school programs could not. While they were engaging with the homeland and the people in the land of their birth, they were not of them, but they were of each other.

**The Significance of China: Multiculturalism and Globalization**

What I witnessed in homeland tourism was an ironic disjuncture: people wanted to find kin and discover heritage due to the contemporary belief in the pull of primordial belonging, but did not want to get so close as to lose the power that comes with their American existence. This disjuncture created a middle space, a new Chinese American identity shaped mainly by the adoptive community and expressed interchangeably as a pan-Asian or global identity. China is important for adoptive transnational families due to contemporary approaches to difference and expanded global connectivity. In my discussions with parents and my analysis of comments on adoption listservs and blogs, Chinese heritage is synonymous with a pan-Asian identity and a demonstration of global citizenship, an approach to difference consistent with American multiculturalism.

Since the 1960s ethnicity has been celebrated. Populations with the ability to describe themselves simply as “American” now claim many ethnic identities. Diversity is believed to be central to the fabric of America, where we respect and incorporate (albeit not universally) the essential characteristics that separate people. In a conversation with Karen’s son, Chris, I asked him why his family went to China. Chris stated: “We have been thinking of this trip ever since
we got Farah. We always knew that we would go back. It was important for her to see where she came from, and important for us to respect that.”

For Chris, homeland journeys are important because of this contemporary understanding of respect and tolerance for difference. In commenting on how we need to “respect” Farah’s heritage, Chris approaches Chinese difference through popular multicultural and pluralistic understandings of American diversity. He has to “respect” and understand that within the depths of Farah’s being lies dormant a naturally Chinese person. He believes that primordial identities are inherent and natural and require him, as an outsider, to respect and therefore facilitate her journey in true pluralistic American fashion. Chris’s perception of the importance of discovering Farah’s natual identity is not specific to him; comments on adoption blogs mirror Chris’s sentiments. One parent stated: “Personally I feel like we owe them these experiences and opportunities.” The American multicultural project is not without its own challenges and controversies,22 but these comments expose the saliency of these popular approaches to diversity and difference in the United States today.

However, White parents mostly approach difference as if a Chinese identity and appearance were optional, symbolic, and voluntary. As one adoptive mother detailed in a blog comment: “China is not going to be some mysterious place in their minds. It won’t be the place of misty daydreams. They’ll know how to navigate the airports, fill out the paperwork on the plane just before it lands, order food in a restaurant and know which dishes are eaten from and which are used for discards. Squat toilets will not be a shock to them.”23 The reasons discussed above for traveling back to China involve understanding the symbolic markers of what this adoptive parent believes to be representative of a Chinese identity. Expert knowledge of being Chinese for her involves knowing how not to stand out in a Chinese restaurant, and passing as Chinese in certain settings. Therefore, food, rituals, and competency even in things like international travel are equated with understanding one’s difference.

Adopted children like Farah emulate this approach and try to adopt a pan-Asian identity. She mimics images and presentations she sees in popular media and culture when defining and creating her Chinese self. Karen, her mother, stated, “Lately Farah has started to take pride in her Asian heritage, as several of her friends are Asian. She hasn’t talked about wanting to learn more about her Asian heritage or learning Chinese, but she imitates the Asian model poses and makes up Asian screen names for AIM, etc.” Farah’s Asian friends whom Karen referred to here are mostly Korean. Karen’s comment demonstrates how Farah signals her membership in an American pan-Asian community shaped mainly by popular culture and symbolic gestures. While Farah has not demonstrated an interest in Chinese culture or the Chinese language, she is interested in exploring the symbolic markers of Asian identity. A Chinese identity is seen as being congruous with if not substitutable for a pan-Asian identity. Homeland travel in this instance, I argue, provides Farah with a sense of authority when she adopts this Asian presentation of self.

Homeland tourism therefore becomes a strategy of action,24 where one can learn and apply the habits, skills, and styles that define someone not necessarily as Chinese, but as Asian. Below, I suggest that this Asian identity is also seen as a global identity. As Karen explained: “I think we all got a good sense of how well China is developing and how much like us the Chinese people are. They are more interested in international travel now.” Karen’s comment demonstrates how important the contemporary age of globalization is for American explorations of diasporic and transnational identity. China’s rapid development and presence on the world stage shape her family’s interest in homeland returns. Homeland journeys, then, are not important just for facilitating and re-creating kinship, but as actions representative of experience with international travel and mechanisms that create a global consciousness.

Yet movement itself is a new frame shaping identities and community.25 Homeland tourism then becomes a way to participate in these transnational flows that come to define American immigrant communities. For example, Farah watches her other Asian friends travel back and forth between the United States and Korea. Therefore, for Farah, being Chinese means having experiences of travel similar to those of the first- and second-generation Asian Americans in her school. In our conversations, Karen highlighted the movement specific to immigrant communities that Farah associates with an Asian identity. In one statement, she began with the specific identities bound up in nations, yet conflated national Asian identities with a pan-Asian consciousness: “I think she was curious about China and Chinese people. Many of her friends are Korean and one is Chinese. They all seem to travel back and forth to Asia often, and I think she wanted to do that.”

Karen saw her homeland tour as important because it provided Farah with an experience of the return she so frequently observes as a marker of Asian identity. Homelands are therefore discussed as important because they demonstrate membership in this new global environment shaped by transnational movement, migration, and linkages. The significance of China is discussed, then, as pan-Asian, transnational, and globally cosmopolitan simultaneously, where all constructions are interconnected and interchangeable.

**Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this article suggests that families approach a Chinese identity as a possible option or choice among many, where Chinese difference is equivalent to a
pan-Asian identity or a global cosmopolitanism. Identities are no longer autonomous from global flows of power, and even while adoptive families claim their place within a global family and demonstrate their global citizenship, what happens on homeland tours suggests that they adopt a Western gaze when interacting with the foreign “others” they also claim as kin. Families with adopted Chinese children distance themselves from Chinese rural labor by interpreting it as primitive, yet incorporate Chinese caregivers. Narratives of rural simplicity create two distinct populations: native Chinese lacking in global power, and American families capable of international travel and exploration. The discursive strategies of adoptive families, even when claiming a shared space in the global community and a shared heritage with the people visited, sound similar to narratives of cultural essentialism common to Western engagements with the other. ²⁶

Homeland tourism to China cannot reconcile traditional understandings of family based upon blood and genetics or affirm the economic realities that brought the Chinese child to America in the first place. It does, however, validate these new family constructs and reaffirm American identities. As these girls grow into young adults, more work is necessary that is both critical and sympathetic to understand the contemporary discourses of transnational adoption and the intimate space where belonging, race, culture, and subjectivity are actively shaped. I present this article to expand the field of inquiry and add a new layer of understanding to contemporary forms of Chinese American identity and developing geographies of kinship.

NOTES

1. The names of the individuals and tour agencies in this article are fictitious in order to preserve their anonymity. Sites, locations, memorials, and publicly available information have not been changed.
2. Since 1985, there have been 67,842 adoptions from China to the United States. http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/international.html#3 (accessed November 27, 2011).
3. Register, “Are Those Kids Yours?”
4. This work is part of a larger comparative project examining the significance of homeland tourism and issues of belonging and difference. For this larger project, I have been following American Jews and the Israel tour experience known as Birthing, African Americans and slavery tourism to Ghana, and families with adoptive Chinese children.
5. Dorow, Transnational Adoption; Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture”; Tessler, Gamache, and Liu, West Meets East, Louise, “Pandas, Lions, and Dragons.” Parents look toward other internationally adopted populations, usually comparing the experiences of Chinese adoptees with those of Korean adoptees. For more information on Korean adoptees, see Bergquist et al., International Korean Adoption.
7. See, e.g., Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako, “Is There a Family?”
11. Ibid., 36.
13. Because of the small number of participants in this study, the analysis presented in this article is preliminary.
14. During this two-week tour, I undertook field notes and experienced the activities and tour sites with my fellow travelers. Additionally, I conducted in-depth and semistructured interviews with seven of the participants traveling to China (both children and adults). I also examined homeland tour brochures and printed material provided by tour agencies.
17. While the work on homeland tours to China is limited, other forms of heritage tourism for Chinese Americans focus on the generational separation of Chinese immigrants in the United States (Louie, “Creating Histories”). These programs work from the underlying assumption that visitors of Chinese descent feel pride in China’s recent economic growth and a responsibility to help further grow their “home” regions (ibid., 354). Similar assumptions exist for adoptees; they are presented with the country of their origin and encouraged to feel pride in its bucolic pastures and larger-than-life cities.
22. Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth; Steinberg, Race Relations; Hartmann and Gertes, “Dealing with Diversity”
25. Urry, Mobilities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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