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CHARLES TONG SING — ARCTIC EXPLORER

by DR. ABRAHAM HOFFMAN

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USS JEANNETTE (1879-1881)

Group picture of the officers of JEANNETTE Expedition, 1884.

Copied from Journal of Commander DeLong.

Released Naval History Photograph

Sitting: H. W. Leach, Henry Wilson, William Cole

Standing: Charles Tong Sing, Lt. John W. Danenhower, R. L. Newcomb

Heroism is a commodity often found at the source of hardship, tragedy, and endurance. Mettle is measured, and ordinary people take the test of courage. Such is the case with Charles Tong Sing, steward on the U.S.S. *Jeannette*, a Navy ship that came to grief in its exploration of the Arctic.

Little of a biographical nature is available on Tong Sing. According to one source he was a naturalized American, but his date and place of birth are unknown. The Navy has no extant files on him, and no pension records can be found. What we do know is that Tong Sing, an experienced sailor signed on as steward with the crew of the *Jeannette* in San Francisco in June 1879. There were two other Chinese members of the crew. The cabin boy proved unsuitable almost immediately and was dismissed from service; Ah Sam, the ship's cook, performed his duties capably and, as will be seen, with the last measure of devotion.

The *Jeannette* was fitted out with the intention of reaching the North Pole by means of passing through the Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean, breaking through the ice, and reaching the top of the world. This region was said to be located at the center of the Paleocrystic Sea — an allegedly temperate zone according to the fallacious belief of scientists at the time. As Leonard Guttridge, author of *Icebound: The Jeannette Expedition's Quest for the North Pole* notes, scientists of the 1870s knew more about the moon, which they could see through telescopes than they did of the Arctic, about which they could only theorize. In attempting to solve the "Arctic Question," several countries sent one expedition after another. These efforts usually met with failure or disaster.

The *Jeannette's* captain, Lieutenant George W. De Long, was determined to reach the North Pole. Unfortunately, his expedition encountered overwhelming obstacles almost immediately. Barely two months out, the *Jeannette* became caught in the pack ice. For two years the men of the *Jeannette* lived in the clutches of the ice, enduring the long dark winters, the cold, and the confinement of 33 men on a small ship.

Lt. De Long ran his ship with firm but fair discipline. Each man had a job to do, and did it. There were human failings: Lt. John Danenhower became seriously ill, the disease — syphilis — not revealed until many years later. But officers and men achieved a degree of camaraderie made necessary by their many months of close contact. In these circumstances, Charles Tong Sing and Ah Sam won the respect of officers and fellow crew members. True, their quarters were segregated; they lived in the cook-house, sleeping and taking their meals there. De Long recorded their acceptance of conditions in his diary on February 29, 1880. "Our Chinese cook and steward are as impassible and impenetrable in this cold weather as if we were enjoying a tropical spring," he wrote. "Seemingly emotionless, all weather, all circumstances, are alike to them. Living by themselves in the cook-house, they hold no communion with their fellow-men, but are nevertheless cheerful and

contented with each other's society, singing songs or playing cards in the evening, day after day, with no concern for the future and no care for the past."

To combat the anticipated monotony of long winter months, the *Jeanette's* supplies had included musical instruments, books, and playing cards. Other amusements included foot races and football games on the ice. Charles Tong Sing and Ah Sam made and flew kites and were so successful at it that De Long expressed admiration at their talent. "The cheerfulness and persistence with which our two Chinamen attend to flying their kites would lead me to suppose that they were on green, grassy fields at home," he observed. "They make them of all sizes and all shapes — like flies, like birds with wings, etc. — and as long as there is daylight they are out on the ice enjoying their sport. When work requires their presence in the galley or cabin, they tie the kite-string to a boat davit, and leave the kite flying until they can run out again to watch it. I verily believe they would cheerfully tear up all their clothes to make kite-tails of."

For Christmas and New Year's Eve of 1880 the crew organized an evening's entertainment. Various crewmen sang songs, performed in skits, and played musical instruments. The program also billed "The great 'Ah Sam' and 'Tong Sing' in their wonderful tragic performances." The New Year's Eve program offered "Chinese character sketches in costume, singing and acting by cook and steward."

On June 12, 1881, after almost two years of being moored in the ice, the ship surrendered to the crushing strength of the pack ice. There was enough time for the men to pull eight tons of supplies from the ship. In two cutters and a whaleboat, the 33 men hauled their supplies hundreds of miles over the ice, heading for the open sea. De Long intended to reach mainland Siberia, but once in the water tragedy struck. On September 12 a storm separated the three boats. Lt. Charles Chipp's cutter, with eight men, was lost with all hands. Chief Engineer George W. Melville and ten men, including Tong Sing, made it to the Lena Delta and eventually to a Siberian village. De Long's cutter, however, landed in an isolated part of the delta. Two crewmen were sent to make contact with Melville and did so. The other twelve men, including De Long, finally ran out of supplies and strength. By the end of October they were all dead. Ah Sam, in De Long's group, was among the last to perish.

Clearly, in the face of such hardship, racial distinctions came to mean nothing. As Sam and Charles Tong Sing helped pull the boat sledges, shared in the dwindling supplies, and took their turns at the tasks necessary for survival. Melville recalled that Tong Sing was one of the two most effective bailers in his whaleboat. Once on land, he was the first to gather wood and to cook, the other men taking their turns in succession.

The sad news of the deaths of 20 of the *Jeannette's* 33 officers and crew resulted in a Naval Court of Inquiry. Danenhower and Melville, as the two surviving senior officers, gave their versions of what had happened on the expedition, and most of the crewmen were also called to testify. Prejudice towards Asians is apparent in the court record. Other crew members were simply "sworn according to law by the president of the court." Tong Sing, however, was first asked, "Do you understand the nature of an oath?" Tong Sing replied, "Yes, sir." He was then asked, "Did you ever take an oath?" Again, "Yes, sir."

The Judge-Advocate asked Tong Sing if he had any comments or criticisms concerning the *Jeannette*, the conduct of the officers or men, the provisions, or the survival efforts made. Tong Sing answered that he had no complaints, except that when De Long had discharged the cabin boy, he promised Tong Sing double wages for performing cabin boy as well as steward duties. With De Long's death, the promise became moot.

Meanwhile, another U.S. Arctic expedition had come to grief as relief ships failed to reach the station set up by Lt. Adolphus Greely on Ellesmere Island, above Greenland, for the International Polar Year. After needless delays and petty disputes over jurisdiction and expenses, Congress voted to send a relief expedition. Three ships, the *Bear*, *Thetis*, and *Alert*, went out in April 1884 to rescue the survivors of the Greely expedition. Among the crew of 26 men on the *Thetis*, under Captain Winfield S. Schley, were Chief Engineer Melville and, as steward, Charles Tong Sing.

Eventually Congress got around to voting compensation to each of the surviving *Jeannette* members and to widows and children since everything the men owned had been lost on the *Jeannette* or in the Siberian wilderness. Like the others, Tong Sing received \$600. He also received a medal from the Navy Department, inscribed with his name and the phrase "Fidelity, Zeal, Obedience." In 1890, by a special act of Congress, the *Jeannette* men received another medal "as an expression of the high esteem in which Congress holds their services in the said expedition; and that one of the said medals be presented to each of the survivors of said expedition, and one to the heirs of the deceased members."

Charles Tong Sing rounded out his U.S. Navy career by serving as a steward for several years on the U.S.S. *Tennessee*. He finally retired and took up residence in Los Angeles where he was living in 1902, before passing into history.

Ironically, while Charles Tong Sing was receiving a congressional medal, Congress was also passing other legislation affecting Chinese people. In one of the more shameful examples of racism in American history, Congress voted to exclude most Chinese from immigrating to the United States in 1882, and the ban was extended to 1892 to an effective exclusion that lasted until World War II. During this period the Chinese served as scape-

goats for various economic ills. They endured prejudice and exploitation, and were forced to become stereotypical laundrymen and cooks. Charles Tong Sing offers an example of what a Chinese American could contribute to his country during that time if given the chance.

GUIDELINES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDS

by TEENA STERN

The key to the care of historical manuscripts and photographs is preservation — specific measures taken to eliminate or minimize hazards to the records. To provide proper protection and maintenance to family documents, or any recorded information, is relatively easy to accomplish. It involves common sense and an understanding of the principles behind preventive preservation. The conservation of historical materials, however, seeks to repair damage and is best left to a trained professional.

Paper was invented in China around 105-200 A.D. Until the last few hundred years, paper underwent very little chemical and mechanical processing. Modern paper today contains a great deal of wood pulp fibers (especially in newsprint), acid, and lignin (a bonding agent) and was never meant to be of lasting quality. There are four major causes of paper deterioration — environmental (temperature, humidity, light and air pollution), chemical (involving the inherent reactive materials that make up paper, photos, and plastics), biological (insects, mold, and fungi) and, probably the most damaging cause, improper handling and inadequate care. While no historical record can be rendered totally immune from hazards, there are methods in which to protect, prevent, and stabilize the environment so as to reduce the rate of deterioration so that the lifetime of a document or photograph can be extended over many generations or, even, centuries.

Appropriate preservation supplies may be ordered from an archival supply company (obtain one of their free catalogs) and many are relatively inexpensive. The catalogs often contain instructions and preservation guidelines. Some good art supply or stationery stores have acid free storage materials available. To minimize costs, and since it is less expensive to buy in larger quantities, explore the possibility of forming a type of consortium wherein, say, a historical society or person designated by a group of families orders supplies for everyone's needs.

Following are some guidelines for the care and preservation of historic records and photographs for the home or workplace.

I. Basic Principles

- A. Prevention: It is much easier, and less expensive, to prevent a problem than to solve one.

- B. Reversability: Never do what you cannot undo.
 - 1. For example: Never laminate a historical document or photo. It is not only damaging, but irreversible.
 - 2. Also, never place photographs in direct sunlight. The image, especially if it is color, will fade.
- C. When in doubt, do nothing.
- D. Use trained professionals for advanced preservation/conservation work.

II. Environment

- A. Stabilize the environmental conditions. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity are extremely damaging to historical material.
- B. Maintain an even, constant temperature of 65-68 degrees.
- C. Maintain a relative humidity of 45%-50%.

Note: The preservation of archival records should not be undertaken on a rainy day, due to the high moisture content in the air. The moisture will cling to the item as it is inserted into protective storage enclosures.
- D. Light
 - 1. Avoid direct sunlight — it will cause fading, yellowing, and brittleness.
 - 2. Avoid constant exposure to fluorescent light. Use filters to block out damaging ultraviolet rays.
 - 3. Turn lights off when not required.

III. Storage

- A. Maintaining a clean storage area will minimize insect problems, as well as damaging dirt and dust.
- B. Follow strict temperature and humidity controls. Fluctuations in temperature or humidity is more damaging than a consistently high reading.
- C. Do not store records near heaters, windows, water heaters, bathrooms, kitchens or laundry rooms. As heat rises, do not store records on the top shelf of a closet. In the home, it is best that you choose a middle section of a closet for boxed material or on metal shelving. If possible, use metal filing cabinets (not wood) or boxed on metal shelving. Do not leave records lying loose on top of desks, tables, file cabinets or book shelves. Avoid storing boxes of family history in the garage, attic or basement.
- D. When preparing items for permanent storage, maintain a clean work space.

IV. Preservation

A. Supplies

1. Acid free archival boxes and records storage cartons.
2. Specialized acid free storage containers, such as boxes for glass plate negatives, magazines, or oversized photos and maps.
3. Acid free folders, paper, and tissue.
4. Polyester film encapsulation.
5. Polyester or polypropylene sleeves and envelopes.

B. Before placing historical records in acid free files and boxes remove:

1. All metal paper clips: they rust and stain the records. If it is absolutely necessary to fasten the papers use plastic clips available at any drug store. First, cut a small piece of acid free paper, fold it in half and then slip over the pages to be fastened. Then place the plastic clip over the small piece of paper.
2. All staples (remove from the back and gently pick out with fingers), straight pins, ACCO metal clips, or any other kind of metal fastener.
3. Loose dirt.
4. Unnecessary material, such as loose cardboard backings, envelopes, brown paper bags, etc.
5. Any plastic covers (unless polyester, brand name is Mylar; or polypropylene), especially if they have a "new car" smell. These covers contain plasticizers (volatile solvents) that will cause deterioration of the item.
6. Rubber bands.

C. Never, never, never:

1. Use any kind of pressure sensitive tape. Avoid, at all costs, the temptation to repair tears with Scotch tape. Remember the principle of reversability. Tape leaves a permanent stain and will flake off in a matter of months. Extensive tears require professional treatment.
2. Use glue or rubber cement.
3. Smoke, eat, or consume liquids while handling archival material.
4. Leave pieces of paper or book marks in books. They will stain the pages, and, if a number is used to mark important passages throughout the book, eventually break the binding.
5. Fold or roll historical records. Paper and photos will weaken and eventually break along the folded lines.
6. Use rubber bands.
7. Use any kind of metal fastener.

8. Place highly acidic paper, such as newspaper clippings or kraft paper, with any other kind of document or photo, unless it is wrapped in protective acid free interleaf paper. A permanent stain will result on the item directly in front or in back of the acidic document. It is best to isolate clippings and store them separately.
- D. Historical manuscripts should be permanently stored in proper archival, acid free files and containers.
1. Do not fill acid free folders more than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick.
 2. If the items are stored in acid free boxes, as opposed to file folders in metal file cabinets, be sure the boxes are full so as to avoid the files sliding down, which will result in a U-shaped file.
- E. Scrapbooks
1. Oversize acid free boxes are available.
 2. Place acid free interleaf between each page.
 3. If you are beginning a new scrapbook, don't use one from a regular retail store but one from an archival supply company, or make your own with archival supplies. Newspaper and magazine clippings should be mounted on alkaline paper.
- F. Photographs
1. Adhere to above mentioned archival procedures and environmental controls, especially in providing light free storage.
 2. Always have a duplicate or negative of any valuable photograph that is on display. The photo on display will eventually fade, especially if it is color. Take the photo or negative to a professional photo lab, not to a drive-in film developer or drug store.
 3. Avoid touching the image with your fingers or the oil and salt inherent in the human body will leave marks. Use white cotton gloves when working with photos. They are available at any good photo/camera supply store.
 4. Store photo albums in oversize archives boxes. Place acid free interleaf paper between each page.
 5. Store photos in acid free folders or, preferably, in polyester sleeves, in metal file cabinets.
 6. Place negatives in separate, individual archival envelopes. Do not store photos and negatives in the same envelope or sleeve.
 7. Identifying photos:
 - a). It is best to write on the file folder or place a label on the protective sleeve rather than writing on the back of the photo. Do not affix a label to the back of a photo.

- b). If you must write on the back, use the margins and not the middle of the photo. The indentions of the writing will appear on the image side. Do not use a felt tip pen (it smears) or ball point pen. Use a soft #2 pencil or a soft drafting pencil. For slick surfaces use a film marking pen (available from an archival supply company for about \$1.00).
- c). When framing a photo always use a mat board (acid free) between the photo and the glass. Use acid free mount board in back of photo, not the cardboard that came with the frame. Do not dry mount the photo to the back support. If you are not framing the photo yourself but have taken it to a professional frame or art store, ask for acid free board (also called museum board) and mat.
- d). If you are going to make a photo album, obtain one from an archival supply company. Those from a regular retail store will not provide adequate protection and will actually damage the photos in a relatively short amount of time due to the acidic and volatile plastic and paper used in these albums.
- e). Don't hang photos over heaters or in bathrooms.
- f). Don't use glassine envelopes, non-archival plastic enclosures, non-acid free papers or kraft paper envelopes. Do use acid free folders or polyester (Mylar), polypropylene, triacetate or polyethylene enclosures.

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Partial List of Archival Supply Companies

The Paper Source
1506 West 12th Street
Los Angeles, CA 90015

Conservation Materials, Ltd.
240 Freeport Blvd.
Box 2884
Sparks, Nevada 89431

Conservation Resources International, Inc.
8000 Forbes Place H
Springfield, VA 22151-2204

Hollinger Corporation
3810 South Four Mile Run
P.O. Box 6185
Arlington, VA 22206

Light Impressions
439 Monroe Avenue
P.O. Box 940
Rochester, New York 14603-0940

University Products
P.O. Box 101
South Canal Street
Holyoke, MA 01041

Process Materials Corporation
301 Veterans Blvd.
Rutherford, New Jersey 07070

Pohlig Bros. Inc.
Century Division
P.O. Box 8069
2419 East Franklin Street
Richmond, VA 23223-0069

Demco
P.O. Box 7767
Fresno, CA 93747

Paper Technologies Inc.
25801 Obrero, Suite A
Mission Viejo, CA 92691

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CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
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RELIVING CHINA CITY

by RUBY LING LOUIE, Ph.D.

(Ruby Ling Louie's family operated the Chekiang Importers stores in China City. This article is based on her narration of a slide program for the Society's "Golden Celebration of the Los Angeles China City Experience" at its fall dinner meeting on November 5, 1988.)

One of our Society's goals is to collect and record what has thus far not been recorded, of the little known events of the Chinese experience in Southern California. China City, one of three "chinatowns" in Los Angeles during the late 1930's and 40's, is just such an experience. The following comes from a few written publications, but mostly from people who lived this experience. The record of China City is derived from reproductions of private photographs, souvenir postcards, publicity materials and numerous newspaper photos and articles — copies of which have been donated and are now a part of the Society's growing archives.

China City proper was a block-long, popular tourist attraction which stood between Olvera Street and New Chinatown. It lasted approximately a decade, before and during World War II. As a commercial enterprise, it was initiated by a small group of non-Chinese: Christine Sterling, Oscar Macy, Miss MacScotty, Tom Gubbins and others. Because of close connections with Harry Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times* as well as the movie industry, China City was rapidly built by set designers and made to look like an enlarged movie set of early China, with narrow, winding streets and open courts.

Mrs. Sterling in an opening public announcement, wrote:

"Since the days of Marco Polo . . . the world has heard of the wonders and beauty of Cathay, its old civilization and its contributions of culture to the Western world. With this background, the Chinese came into California in the gold rush of '49, and became a part of our Pacific Coast tradition. They helped to build the Central Pacific, our first railroad; and the merchants and mandarins brought from China, rare works of Chinese art and literature and so — because, all of this must not be lost or forgotten in the progress of modern times — China City was created."

Incidentally, Mrs. Sterling acknowledged that with the building

of the Union Station, "the land that has always belonged to the Chinese, is slowly being taken from them . . ." But more importantly for us today, she identified the influential support she had in order to build China City:

"Harry Chandler and a group of prominent business men subscribed the necessary funds; the city fathers smoothed out the difficulties; bamboo came from the Park Department; sandstone from the old Federal building; and, cobblestones from the city streets."

And that was the official origin of China City. But, what was China City to its participants? Fifty years later, the Society recently asked all the China City people it could find, for their best remembrances. More than eighty persons responded! In total, a large number remembered, "Saturday nights with the rickshaws" and "young girls and one old lady selling gardenia corsages." Then came the spectacular "Chinaburgers, so good and tasty." And the most frequent phrase of all was, "the good, old days!" As a young, local resident, Pauline Wong, remembered "children running and darting between and among tourists who were shopping in the dimly lit dungeons." Johnny Yee, a worker, recalled, "One could not forget the fragrant smell of temple incense, fortune tellers, and the soft Chinese music as you enter the gate." Mae Elaine Quan called it, "A unique place in a unique time." And overall, Gilbert Leong observed that China City provided opportunities for a lot of enterprising, outside Chinese to go into business. But most of all, the China City people fondly remembered and named their many neighbors and friends.

Now it's time to actually see China City. Chronologically, a first study began fifteen years ago, when Tom McDannold, a cultural geographer, chose for his master's thesis, "The Development of the Los Angeles Chinatown." For China City, he began on North Spring Street in search of evidence. There he found the old Lotus Inn building with its later tenant, the Hung Far Chun restaurant. Scaling the side wall, he also found the dilapidated Golden Lantern shop with its distinct sign still intact. On the window were fragmented words that showed the Lum Sai Hor Tong Association had been a subsequent tenant.

Around on Ord Street, Tom identified Yee Mee Loo restaurant and the original pink building with the moon gate which had later been added. Turning past Flora's Bar into what is now Phillipe's building and parking lot, he discovered a set of old storefronts that had been nicely remodeled to use as storage. And that was the remains of China City in 1972.

Today, if you start from Olvera Street and look down Main Street at what was the China City block, you will find the whole corner enclosed with a purple construction fence. Turning clockwise on to North Spring Street, the old storefronts with living quarters above — and

where the Peter Soo Hoo family once lived — are still there. Just beyond, the same purple construction fence appears — the entire Lotus Inn building complex is gone. Further down the street, the original Yee Mee Loo Restaurant is still in operation on the corner. It probably has one of the fanciest chop suey signs in the entire city.

Down Ord Street is a decorative entrance which was added to a former upstairs residence of the Fon Lee family and later the Doo Lee and Iris Wong families. Following Tom's earlier route, one is astounded to see that Flora Fung is still serving drinks — but only on weekdays from five-thirty to eight and to very familiar, mostly Anglo customers! Flora and the bar are the oldest, continuously operating business of China City.

However, standing in the middle of Phillippe's parking lot once again, it becomes sadly obvious that, except for Flora's corner, ALL of China City proper — and more — has been demolished. It is to be replaced soon with a motel highrise and business complex. China City has indeed become history — in every sense of the word. That nostalgic place of yesteryear remains now, only in our collective photographs and personal memories. Using these, let us go back to the golden year of 1938 and recapture a part of the China City experience.

Our historic tour of China City begins with a souvenir map given away in shops and on the Yellow street car. Going north on Main Street, we see, from one of the many souvenir postcards photographed by Harry Quillen and found in the postcard collection of Daniel K. E. Ching, the main or stone gateway. Incidentally, we Chinese Americans owe much to this quiet, loyal man for his pictorial record of not only China City, but also Old and New Chinatown. There was a "portable store" at that entrance with baskets and curios on a table. These kind of stands and stalls were found all over China City.

Further down Main Street there was a second main gate, leading into Dragon and Quan Yin roads. At the opposite end of China City, on North Spring Street, is the bamboo or west gate. The city park department did indeed donate plenty of bamboo for the project. Finally, there is yet another entrance through the pink wall on Ord Street. With bold Chinese characters on both sides, the visitor is greeted, "As China's lion awakens, the City grandly opens." And here, our official postcard photographer, Quillen, records an overall rooftop view of China City and its surroundings at that time.

To see quickly the complex interior of China City is very difficult, somewhat like Disneyland. We begin inside the old stone gateway with the portable store. In the center of the Court of Four Seasons is Chung Dat Loo's restaurant, featuring specialties such as squab. Every business seems to offer specialties: rattan, Chinese marbles, silk flowers and porcelains.

To the left and surrounded by covered awnings is the Golden Phoenix Inn, followed by Harry King's gift shop, an Italian fortune teller, and the Yip store. In front of the dragon flagpole stands the one and only rickshaw station. For twenty-five cents, one takes a "roller-coaster" ride up and down and all around the many ramps and curved, cobbled streets of the City. For another quarter, one can take home a nicely covered souvenir photo of the experience.

Using the rickshaw route as guide into this early theme park, we turn right and the first landmark is the donated movie set of the Wang farmhouse used in the classic film, "The Good Earth." I understand it was complete with live chickens and ducks. It is a perfect backdrop to costumed photographs, and for children's play too. An eye-catching pagoda is directly to the right with its cluster of shops including the Aquarium shop.

Climbing the stone stairs, we enter the westside or Court of Lotus Pools. The first tourist stop on the left is the authentic Temple of Quan Yin. Here would sit a young Johnny Yee, especially waiting to give his next visitor a "free" incense for making a wish and hoping to receive a donation in return. The traditionally elaborate altar inside is worth a visit. The actress Mae West was so touched by the temple that she sent back an autographed photograph saying, "You must come and see my temple sometime!"

Moving on toward Spring Street, we see the Golden Lantern store, Chekiang Importers and the Lotus Inn in front of the bamboo gate. Directly opposite is Wong-a-Loo's, a second Chinese American restaurant, with full lunches for twenty-five cents and dinner for slightly more!

Returning down the stone stairs, one path leads to the Court of Confucius with the Mei Wing and Confucius Temple shops. The other path is behind the Good Earth exhibit, which leads through a small structure the promoters call "The Passage of 100 Surprises." Unfortunately, we have no photographs yet of this covered section that shop owners say was once a barn and then a blacksmith's garage. Thus we must settle for the rather romanticized drawings found in a publicity booklet written by Raymond Cannon.

As we step outside again, we enter the Harbor of Whang Po, which includes Fook Gay's Chinaburger stand, the second Main Street gate and the popular Junk Cafe. Turning left, however, we approach a most impressive gate that leads into the Dragon Road and Quan Yin Road complex. The gate's majestic beauty comes from the two larger-than-life size door guards which were hand painted by our talented Ming Kuen Fong.

Picture this new section as a large rectangle of specialty shops (including a neighborhood candy shop with roasted beetles). Within this rectangle is a square of smaller shops on one side and the original

Fong-Fung Cafe on the other. And in between stands the spiritual terra cotta statue of Quan Yin, sculpted by none other than our own Gilbert Leong.

Look behind and to the left of the statue for the entrance to Tom Gubbins' "Shanghai Street." It is like a grand warehouse with still more select shops. In the center is a large stage area where everything from carnival and magic stunts to classical Chinese opera attracted both the tourist and the local children. Here too, is the branch store of the famous Jin Hing and Company, whose main jewelry store was a hallmark of Old Chinatown and today continues in New Chinatown.

That in a nutshell is China City the place. How did it do? Quite well, in the beginning. It seems that there was a constant series of public invitations in major newspapers to special festivities to attract the tourists. NO Chinatown ever had so many public events with such detailed coverage as did China City in one year — ten at least! The first was a set of regular installments on the opening of this unique tourist attraction. Then came the announcement of the two-day gala opening in early August of 1938. The next event was an unfortunate Chinese New Year fire. In it many uninsured paintings of budding young artists like Tyrus Wong were being displayed and were lost. However, the fire ultimately helped China City in that a new north section replaced the flimsy original one. Also, the merchants formed their own association to provide organization for some community leadership.

After the sensational fire, the newspapers again rapidly followed up with public invitations to a series of exotic spirit and ground purifying ceremonies to enliven the "new" China City. Then came the civic women's organizations who graciously offered to plant new trees for the site — peach trees of course. Once again beautified, it was time for a grand "re-opening," followed quickly by a public thanksgiving celebration with free lichees from the shops and free chopsticks from the restaurants! There was even a two-week long photo contest and the ceremonious announcement for the first-ever Chinese drama theatre which, unfortunately, never came about. With such steady news reporting, China City was kept continuously in the public eye.

Now, what about the daily life of the China City people fifty years ago? Well, shopkeepers smiled as they waited for the tourist business. They continuously tidied up their places and even that of their nearby relatives. They too relaxed when there was time. They continuously hosted the many outside organizations and individual celebrities like Gene Tierney and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt.

Posing for publicity photos and for the many China City visitors was simply EVERYBODY'S job! Frequently, posing jobs were gratis. Other times, it was for the family record or just for fun. It also could be hard work if you were carrying a lion's head and dancing.

Young ones dreamed of the future, possibly in the movies or the opera. As teenagers, Camille Chan with Elaine and Helen Quan even tried opening up a curio business. They would walk to the Quon/Quon Company store on Los Angeles Street, select their merchandise carefully and bring it home in shopping bags on the streetcar.

Everyday though, there was the usual job of mothering, and joyous grandmothering along with the venerable grandfather. Sometimes there were special day-off outings with the neighbors, although rarely at night when there might be customers. For the children there was always school, of course — and hobbies in the afternoon such as model airplane building for the talented Fong boys, as well as club activities around the corner at the Methodist Church, led by Mary Lee, the Korean American social worker.

When China City opened, China was already at war with Japan and soon the world joined in the conflict. China City, along with the other two chinatowns, actively participated in the China War Relief efforts. Then the young women voluntarily entertained servicemen from both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Young men such as Chester Gan and Swanee Yee served during the war. For the China City people at home, there were new opportunities as extras and supporting actors for the many war movies that appeared. In the beginning, China City enjoyed the added business brought by servicemen and their friends. But soon, the shop owners found better opportunities in the defense industries and in opening new restaurants in outlying areas of Southern California. And thus, the tourist business which once belonged to China City was gradually left to the more established efforts of New Chinatown.

With this discussion, we have completed the FIRST step in the collecting and recording of the Los Angeles China City experience. It was a lingering, pet project of two of our former Society Presidents, George Yee and Munson Kwok, along with Paul Louie. They began in 1981, when the Historical Society invited a few China City people to meet and to recall what they knew about the place. Then a Sanborn real estate map was found from which an outline map was drawn and filled-in with more and more data, all resulting in the first draft. This past summer, the Society called a second study group together in order to verify the composite map and to collect the names of other China City participants.

The result is the refined 1988 map with an initial list of over 250 China City people. In the process, several valuable artifacts, as well as documents have been discovered and added to our archives. With all our continuous help — ONE DAY — we will have an historical record of the complete story of our Los Angeles China City.

December 24, 1988

THE LEGEND OF ANNA MAY WONG

by GARLAND RICHARD KYLE]

(Garland Richard Kyle is a Los Angeles-based writer. He is the author of the poetry collection *Chorus Boy At Morning's End*.)

She was a woman of great dignity, known to her public as the porcelain-faced "China Doll," the movies' "Oriental Siren" and only "Chinese Flapper" who enchanted audiences throughout the world. She was the art deco figurine who slinked her way across the screen in the Douglas Fairbanks silent classic *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) as the treacherous "Mongol slave girl" and the mysterious cigarette smoking heroine playing opposite Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932). She was a woman of delicate beauty and intelligence who sought to resist Hollywood's racial masquerade of the 1920s and 1930s that relegated her career to the far corners of film history.

Hollywood's history has all too often obscured many of its most unrelenting images, talents who fought for roles that demonstrated their abilities as actors and not exotic creatures from faraway lands. Despite their efforts, inherent racial and sexual stereotyping forced many of them to accept unsavory roles which proved unflattering for even the most seasoned of actors.

The early years of Hollywood's silver screen was not the most opportune time for a young Los Angeles born actress named Anna May Wong (Wong Liu Tsong) to ascend the narrow ranks of Hollywood stardom. It was an era of political turmoil in Asia: China was torn apart by civil war, Japan invaded Manchuria in order to prove its military might, and the "Yellow Peril" was in the forefront of American consciousness.

Despite the unusual popularity Wong achieved in a variety of primarily "B" melodramas and mysteries, she was never to achieve the critical acclaim that was called for in her many memorable performances. Wong was typically typecast either as a woman of dubious character, a helpless victim of criminal elements or an "Oriental villainess." In an era when Hollywood used Caucasian actresses such as Myrna Loy, Sylvia Sydney, Luise Rainer and Dorothy Lamour in Asian roles, Wong was an anathema to studio producers' Oriental fantasies. Hollywood's caste system refused to legitimize flesh-and-blood portrayals of Asians by Asians.

Studio bosses allotted a handful of "decent" roles to Asian actresses such as Soo Yong's portrayal of the noble *Yu-Lan* in MGM's *China Seas* (1935) and Wong's *Hui Fei* in Paramount's *Shanghai Express* (1932). However, neither actress was afforded a starring role and each of their characters were racially maligned. Caucasian stars

such as Jean Harlow and Rosalind Russell in *China Seas* and Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* received most of the lines and billing. Despite the shortcomings of these parts, both actresses provided great dignity to these sophisticated and independent-minded Chinese women, thus providing audiences with rare performances. The irony of both of these films is that they represent Hollywood at its worst in depicting marauding bands of sadistic Malays and Chinese who prey on innocent white tourists.

Wong was born in Los Angeles' Chinatown on January 3, 1905. Her parents operated a laundry business. She later attended Los Angeles High School. Emma Gee in her biography of Wong in *Notable American Women* (Harvard University Press, 1980) gives a telling portrait of the young, ambitious Wong:

"Wong exhibited a keen interest in film in early life. As a youngster she often played truant and frequented the local nickelodeon. This precocious interest brought her into conflict with her father, who considered the world of film disreputable, unfit for a proper Chinese-American daughter. Strong-willed and fiercely independent, she decided upon an acting career in her early teens and, defying her father, began to make the rounds of the casting offices."

Despite her parents wishes, Wong started her film career as an extra in a slew of silent films, the first being *The Red Lantern* (1919) at the age of 14. Her first leading role was as the tragic Lotus Flower in the film *Toll of the Sea* (1922) which critics and audiences heralded at its New York premiere. Although it was considered a minor film when released, it has not been seen for some 60 years. On January 16, 1986 the University of California at Los Angeles Film, Television and Radio Archives presented a restored version of this first successful two-color Technicolor feature starring the 17-year-old Wong. In the Spring of 1987, UCLA also presented a retrospect of Wong's film career.

In *Toll of the Sea* Wong mesmerized audiences with her innocence and striking beauty. Frances Marion's original screenplay based the film heavily on *Madame Butterfly* with a Chinese backdrop and its heroine committing suicide after her White lover marries a woman of his own race. Wong's performance is moving despite these intransigent sexual and racial mores. Interestingly enough, in 1928, *Look* magazine reported that British censors removed a scene in one of her movies where she kissed an Englishman. In 1930, Budapest officials banned Wong's film *Haitang* which depicted "a Russian grand duke courting a Chinese girl." "The authorities held such a performance could not have occurred in real life," wrote the International News Service.

Recurring images of Wong's "Orientalness" in both her films and the publicity that followed her around the globe illustrated much



Photographs from the collection of Garland Richard Kyle.



Anna May Wong in a publicity shot from the 30s

of Hollywood's condescending relationship with this aspiring young actress.

"From crown to sole, Anna May Wong is Chinese. Her black hair is of the texture that adorns the heads of maidens who live beside the Yang-tse-Kiang. Her deep brown eyes, while the slant is not pronounced, are typically Oriental. These come from her Mongol father. But her Manchu mother has given her a height and a poise that Chinese maids seldom have," wrote *Photoplay* in 1924.

The press, in manufacturing the public Wong, described her as "a slant-eyed little girl" while praising the all-American Wong. "Clever this Chinese! Who'd ever know Anna May Wong doesn't really come from the land of paper windows and cherry blossoms — but from little old Los Angeles?" wrote *Motion Picture* in October 1930.

The international cast of the brilliantly stylized *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) proved to be problematic for Fairbanks who, in an interview with the *New York Times*, confided that he had to write a letter to Wong's parents "before she would agree to put on the Mongol slave costume, which as you will see, is not much of a job, seeing that Mongol slaves are merely attired for comfort." The film, however, gained Wong international attention. Although only a supporting role, Wong's pure elegance and choreographed movements as the scantily clad "slave girl" intrigued moviegoers.

In 1928 after appearing in more than a dozen primarily low-budget mysteries, Wong became discouraged by her treatment in Hollywood

and left America for Europe. Europe fell in love with her and made her an internationally respected star of both film and stage. She was cast in leading roles in a variety of European productions including the German film *Song* (1928) and the English *Picadilly* (1930) both of which received reviews that praised her performances. While in Europe, Wong learned to speak German and French and starred opposite Laurence Olivier in the London stage production of *Circle of Chalk* (1929).

In an October 1931 feature spread, *Motion Picture* magazine celebrated Wong's return to Hollywood along with that of actor Sessue Hayakawa (who had been living in Japan and Europe) after several years' absence from the American screen. In attempting to repatriate two of the film industry's most venerable and prominent Asian celebrities, Hollywood reacted with an uncharacteristic optimism for their respective careers:

"Both captivated Europe on the screen and on the stage. Both conquered race prejudice and have been well received as unofficial goodwill ambassadors — Anna May of China and Sessue of Japan. Both were singled out for honors by the British royal family and received attention that London society likes to bestow on theatrical figures. They have learned languages. They have displayed great versatility and earned a great deal of money."

Wong's performance in the Sternberg classic *Shanghai Express* (1932) was the pinnacle of her career in Hollywood. Cast as the heroine in this 1930s drama set in the midst of China's civil war, Wong's cool and nonchalant Hui Fei upstaged even Dietrich's compelling performance as the notorious Shanghai Lily. Although her dialogue was sparse, Wong's personification of the detached and complex Hui Fei along with her remarkable beauty, remains an indelible image in film history to this day.

Rejecting a supporting role in the MGM production of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1935) after Rainer received the nod for the lead role of O-lan (in which she received an Oscar for this masquerade), Wong traveled to China in 1936. In a rare interview with Wong in the *Hollywood Citizen News*, journalist Zuma Palmer spoke with Wong after her trip.

"I took what money I had and said I would stay as long as it lasted. Warner Oland came over and was well received. He was frequently called Charlie Chan. Because I had been the villainess so often in pictures, it was thought I had not been true to my people. It took four hours one afternoon to convince the government this was not so."

With one or two exceptions, Wong's remaining roles in the late 1930s and early 1940s did little to challenge her abilities as an actress. Cast in an array of second-rate films, the legend of Wong was rapidly

declining into obscurity. She spent most of the war years raising money for various Chinese relief efforts. For the remaining two decades of her life, Wong became a virtual recluse in her Santa Monica home where she appeared only occasionally in guest appearances on television series such as *The Big Valley* and *Wyatt Earp*. She returned to the screen in the early 1960s in minor roles such as *Portrait in Black* (1960) with Lana Turner and *Savage Innocents* (1960) – her last film – with Anthony Quinn. Wong died of a heart attack in her home on February 3, 1961.

In recent years, many of Hollywood's earliest and oftentimes forgotten screen legends have found their places in history. This nostalgic legacy for the silver screen and the 100th anniversary of Hollywood have unearthed talents that long remained dormant, held captive by an era of studio bosses and contract players. While even today conformity remains an industry norm and much of the larger international political scenery often replicates itself unnaturally on the screen, many of Hollywood's earliest survivors resisted the hegemony the film industry attempted to achieve by its moral codes and racial prejudices. Wong's pioneering career, and the modest success she was able to attain despite the odds against her, still remain an enigma to much of Hollywood's sordid history.

(A version of this article appeared in AsiAm Magazine in 1987.)



Anna May Wong with Philip Ahn in "Daughter of Shanghai."

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