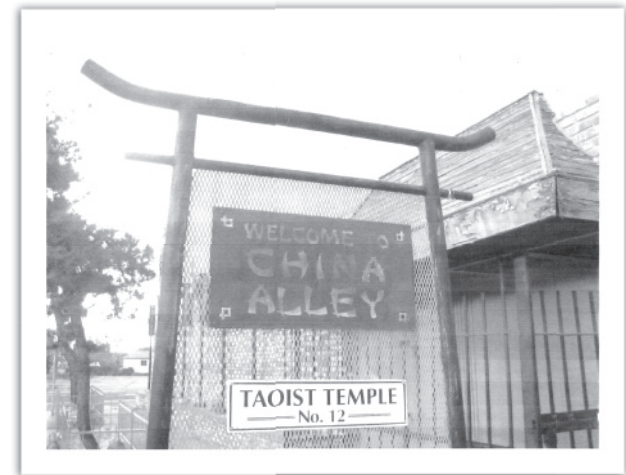


Gum Saan Journal

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Hanford China Alley Edition



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Preface

By JW Wong
President of CHSSC

As we begin our fourth decade as a historical society, we proudly present to you this special edition of *Gum Saan Journal* focused on Hanford, California. Equidistant between Los Angeles and San Francisco, today's Hanford in Kings County has a population of about 50,000, roughly three percent of whom are Asian. But in the 19th century, Hanford was home to many Chinese farm workers, railroad workers, and entrepreneurs.

In the latter half of the 20th century, three Chinese from Hanford came into national prominence: restaurateur Richard Wing, Hollywood agent Bessie Loo, and the first American judge of Chinese descent, Delbert Wong. Judge Wong was featured in the 2004 edition of *Gum Saan Journal*.

In the 21st century, Hanford's current mayor is Daniel Chin, born and raised in Hanford. Dan's grandfather was a laundryman in downtown Hanford. In 1975-76, Stan Ham served as Hanford's first Chinese American mayor. Born in Seattle, Stan was manager and partner of Hanford Title Company and served on City Council from 1970 to 1987.

For this issue, we'd like to extend special thanks to the *Hanford Sentinel* and especially to Camille Wing, longtime member of Hanford's Taoist Temple Preservation Society and a wonderful, giving, tireless local historian.

CHSSC celebrates the rich historical legacy of Hanford.

Taoist Temple Hanford, California

By Camille Wing

While working for the Kings County Planning Department, Dennis Triplet learned about the formation of the National Register of Historic Places. This list was to encourage recognition of old buildings and sites. He suggested to Richard Wing that the old Sam Yup Association building, in Hanford's Chinatown, be considered for the National Register. From this conversation, a committee of local businessmen was formed to study the condition of the building. This committee evolved into the Taoist Temple Preservation Society.

Dennis was instrumental in placing the structure on the National Register, and the Society had fundraisers to begin restoration of the building's foundation and the roof.

The Sam Yup building, today known as the Taoist Temple, was built in the early 1880s to house newly arrived Chinese immigrants. They were mostly single men and needed temporary lodging. On the first floor and in the basement were sleeping quarters, and the second floor provided an area for a meeting place as well as a miew [a place for worship].

With the building restored, the Society gives docent-led tours. The first floor sleeping quarters have been converted into a museum featuring artifacts found in the buildings of Chinatown, as well as donated memorabilia. A small gift shop helps to raise funds for building maintenance.

For 26 years, the Society has sponsored a Moon Festival in China Alley, held on the first Saturday in October. The celebration began as a one-time activity, but has grown into an annual event which the Hanford community looks forward to each year.

Having no paid staff, the entire Taoist Temple project is a labor of love, manned by volunteers bent on preserving this local cultural resource. The official address is 12 China Alley, Hanford, CA 93230.

Introduction

By Daniel Chin
Hanford's Mayor

Hanford is a great place to visit. But it is more a great place to live. Ever since I was a young age, I've had the fortune of being able to travel extensively. I've been through 200 cities in California and over 26 states. But Hanford is not only where I was born and raised; it is my chosen home.

There's something about Hanford. It has all the comforts of a larger community, but we've been able to maintain that "small town feel." It is a beautiful town and a great place to raise a family.

My great-great-grandfather came to Hanford in 1889 with other Chinese immigrants. My great-grandfather came to Hanford in 1906. My grandfather also traveled back and forth from China. My father was born in China and immigrated in 1941. Our family has run businesses in downtown Hanford since the 1920s. My grandfather owned Nu-Way Laundry.

My mother went to work for my paternal grandfather in the laundry around 1949, and that's how she met my father. My mother and her family came to Hanford in 1947 from Kennett, Missouri. A lot of Midwesterners came to Hanford after the war from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. In 1951, my parents decided to get married and drove to Reno, Nevada for the ceremony. Unfortunately, interracial marriage was disallowed there and they had to return to California.

My father was an excellent bowler. He was rated the number one Chinese bowler in the 1950s and 1960s. He got in the trophy business in 1960. Buddy's Trophies is the second-oldest award and trophy business in the Valley. I was raised in the store and started working with my father on a daily basis in 1990.

I am the youngest of four children and was always active in community service organizations. I served on the Planning Commission for about 10 years. I was asked to run for the School Board and got elected. Then in December of 2000, I came to serve City Council and am currently in my second term.

We are not the only Chinese American family with multiple generations in the Hanford area. Chinese pioneers made a tremendous impact on the community, and

Hanford embraces this. Whatever your history, you must appreciate it and realize it. Hanford has done this. We have our Chinatown and our Chinese school. Until 1941, Chinese were buried separately in the community, and we recently restored the cemetery and made it a historic landmark. It is important for Hanford—like all other communities—to remember what the community was. Hanford residents have embraced its Chinese side and taken pride in the contributions of all its pioneers.

The Chinese Immigrants *Hanford Sentinel*, March 1983

Editor's note: In March 1983, the Hanford Sentinel featured a special section dedicated to the "story of the Chinese people's impact on Kings County." Reporter Karen Clark, with the help of Betsy Lewis, did extensive historical research through newspapers, census records, and official documents. They also interviewed many Chinese Americans with roots in the Central Valley.

Their work is excerpted here with the generous permission of the Hanford Sentinel newspaper. An avid local historian, Camille Wing of the Hanford Taoist Temple and Museum, added some updated and interesting footnotes.

Chinese Helped Build Kings County

By Karen Clark



◆ Sue Chung Kee Co. Photo courtesy of Hanford Taoist Temple & Museum.

Their story really is not different from those of the thousands of other Chinese who immigrated from their homeland to the West Coast of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Chinese who came to Kings County generally sought one of two things: jobs that would enable them to send much-needed money back to their families in China, or a fresh start in a new land that didn't have a vengeful government bent on punishing those who disagreed with official policies.

In some ways, their life was as full of persecution here as it had been on their Southern China homeland. But in other ways, this country gave them hope that a better life was possible—a dream they shared with the millions of immigrants who came from around the globe to start anew in the golden land of opportunity.

That golden dream, however, was tarnished for many of the early Chinese immigrants to Kings County. Either they were unable to save enough money to return to China as they had planned, or they suffered the humiliation of discrimination in a country that would allow them to live only in certain areas and patronize only certain shops.

But these Chinese men and women were strong, and those who stayed to build businesses and rear children passed on a quiet faith that justice would be done—if you wait long enough.

The first written information available indicates there were Chinese people in Kings County (part of Tulare County until 1893) in 1875. The *Weekly Delta* in Visalia reported in its May 20, 1875 edition that a Chinese cook gave testimony about a murder that occurred in the Mussel Slough area. Kings County pioneer Frank Howe wrote in his book, *Recollections*, that in 1875 the only inhabitants in the area that now is Hanford “were a Chinaman, a band of sheep, and his sheep dog.”

In late 1876, there are newspaper reports that a band of Chinese workers were employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad Company to help build a new line from Goshen to Huron. A few months later, on January 17, 1877, the railroad company sold 68 lots in an auction designed to populate the new town of Hanford. A similar lot auction was arranged for the fledgling town of Lemoore just a month later.

Those original 68 Hanford lots owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad Company sold for \$11,422. The railroad auctioned 74 lots in Lemoore for more than \$8,000.

According to newspaper reports, there were only three “Mongolian” children in Tulare County in 1877. The delinquent tax rolls for 1877 reveal that Chinese already owned land in what is today known as Hanford’s Chinatown.

Those early Chinese speculators (who often would buy the land one day and sell it for a tidy profit as early as a week later) included Young Chow, Ah Gan, Gee Lee and Company, Sam Sing, and On Ching and Company. Although records are available that show Chinese owned property in Hanford as far back as 1877, there are no documents that indicate when buildings began to take shape on those lots.

Sue Chung Kee¹—who became a prominent Chinese businessman and eventually owned enough property in Chinatown for the local newspapers to refer to the Alley as Sue Chung Kee Street² in the early part of this century—didn’t own lots in Chinatown until 1905. However, photos reveal that the sign above the doorway of his general merchandise store boasted that the business had been established in 1886.

Many of these early Chinese settlers bought the Chinatown property from Western Development Co. However, after 1880, most of the deeds recorded in Tulare County indicate the buying and selling of property in the area was taking place only among Chinese.

No deeds were recorded in either Tulare or Kings counties that indicate the Chinese bought property in any part of Hanford other than Chinatown and the surrounding area. In fact, local Chinese residents now say that they were not allowed to own property in any other part of Hanford until after World War II.

In addition, Young Chow owned a restaurant on Sixth Street in the rear of a building that housed a saloon. The restaurant, saloon, and approximately 38 other buildings were destroyed in a huge fire that ravaged Hanford on July 12, 1887.

Chinese field workers lived in “China Camps” on the ranches in the surrounding area, coming in to town on weekends for fun and supplies. The fun included gambling houses and opium dens, both of which primarily catered to the single field workers. Caucasians, however, were a frequent sight in Alley gambling houses as early as the 1920s. The opium dens—usually simply the basements of some of the businesses on the Alley—catered only to Chinese.

As is often the case, memories of the days when Hanford’s Chinatown was a thriving “city within a city” vary with each person.

There’s Bessie Sue Loo, who remembers an enterprising tofu salesman who would take his cart from business to business frying the soy bean curd in oil for weekend patrons of the Alley. Loo says “umbrella trees” lined the Alley, and when their purple blossoms would bloom, the fragrant smell would waft into the businesses that lined the unpaved street.

Her father, Sue Chung Kee, owned a general merchandise store and on the second floor of the building, the family made its home. Sue, says Loo, owned at least 50 canaries and once, when he was careless about cleaning the cages, the birds escaped and people up and down the Alley were trying to capture the excited birds.

Alice Dunn Chow remembers the old men who sat on the wooden benches that were in front of each business. They played mah-jongg, or simply sat in the sun talking to old friends.

Ed Young recalls the men and boys who used to congregate in L.T. Sue’s herb shop to talk politics, read Chinese papers, smoke their pipes, and play mah-jongg. The herb stores, he says, were a gathering place for both old and young who wanted to talk about everything from the old country to politics in their new country.

Caucasians say the Alley always was bustling with shoppers and workers, and even children jumping rope. Restaurant help would be hurrying to other businesses with hot food for workers who couldn’t break away for meals.

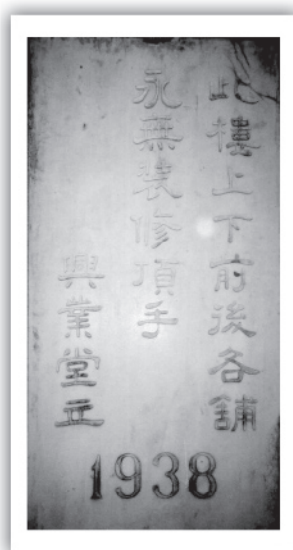
Whatever the memories, China Alley now is a thing of the past. Although efforts are being made to preserve its buildings and artifacts, the hustle and bustle that marked the heyday most likely never will be seen again. Their “town” is gone, but the Chinese of today still are leaving their imprint on Kings County.

Hanford's Chinatown Revolved Around Taoist Temple

By Karen Clark



✦ Taoist Temple 2006



✦ Chinese inscription on building in China Alley, 1938. The inscription reads "This building—up and down, front and back—will never need to be fixed".

From modest beginning, Hanford's Chinese population increased rapidly until, in 1891, members of the Joey Sing Tong decided to build a Taoist Temple—not only to serve religious needs, but also to relieve the acute housing shortage by offering sleeping quarters for weary workers and travelers.³

On August 26, 1891, Ah Gan, an early Chinatown settler, sold the north half of his lot in China Alley to the Tong for \$200. It took two years for the temple to be built, and it wasn't until 1897 that the society officially dedicated the building.

The temple was a dazzling centerpiece in the bustling little Chinese community,

serving as "church," school, meeting hall, sleeping quarters, and kitchen at one time or another in its long history.

Today, this piece of Hanford's past—its name misspelled "Toaist" in the early-day sign over the door—has been included in the National Register of Historic Places after being restored by the Taoist Temple Preservation Society.

Walking into the temple today is much the same experience as it would have been 90 years ago when the Sam Yup Association first opened the building, although dust and cloth coverings in the main temple room upstairs and the lack of beds downstairs are reminders that the thriving culture is nearly dead in Hanford.

But let your mind wander for a moment and images spring to life:

Rows of wooden beds that took up most of the basement were offered to workers who either left China unmarried or were forced to make the journey without their wives. These men, who worked in the gambling houses, restaurants, and stores on the Alley—or were members of the Sam Yup Association just passing through town—put old newspapers on the wall to keep out the chill that gnawed at their bones during the cold winter months despite the old potbelly stove.

Occasionally, they sat around their packed room, talking about dreams of returning home as rich men—dreams that never came true for many of them who barely were surviving, and certainly not saving any money.

They might have heard footsteps above them as men who lived in the small rooms on the temple's ground floor came in from work or travel and made their ways to their beds.

These rooms, numbered much like those at the other hotels across town, were the size of a typical bathroom in a modern home, but provided enough room for more than one man to lay down on a straw mat placed on the floor, or on a wooden bed supported by sawhorses. The doorways into these rooms, although barely six feet high and two feet wide, still had room to spare for the early-day Chinese men, who generally were small in stature.

Like their fellow workers below, the men in these rooms also had to plaster newspapers on the wall. All that's left today are tattered pieces of this make-shift

insulation—scraps of San Francisco papers from the late 1800s and early 1900s. But there also must have been a few Chinese newspapers, discarded by merchants who kept up on news from home.

In back, the Sam Yup Association provided a kitchen where workers got their rice, fish, and vegetable meals, taking them back to their rooms to eat, or possibly sitting outside when the weather was good.

The Sam Yup Association was composed of Chinese from the Poon Yu, Shum Duck, Nam Hoi, and Far Yuen districts of southern China. The majority of Chinese who settled in Kings County came from this area.⁴

The temple and lodgings were supported by the Association and maintained by a caretaker who lived on the grounds and cleaned, as well as cooked and served the meals. Although no set fee was established for food and lodging, Association members generally left a donation at the end of their stay—or on a regular basis if their stay was prolonged—to help offset the cost. The Sam Yup Association also owned property behind the temple on Visalia Street, where other buildings housed other Chinese workers and travelers.

The actual temple room was upstairs, accessible by two flights of stairs—one in front, up a narrow passageway leading from an iron door next to the ground floor entrance to the building, and one in back, next to the kitchen.

Once upstairs, it's easy to imagine the hush that probably came over worshippers in reverence for the gods to whom the temple had been built, and who still lived there in the form of beautiful statues that had been carved with loving care in the old country.

Two skylights lit the room during the day, with lamps alternatively powered by candles, kerosene, and electricity through the years providing the necessary artificial lighting.

The small room next to the temple room served as a storage area and, for a short time, as a school room for the increasing number of Chinese youngsters born in the United States who needed lessons in the art of reading and writing Cantonese and Mandarin.

Hanford's temple is dedicated to Kuan Kung, the god of courage or war, who was a historical figure from the Three Kingdoms in the second century. He was canonized 800 years after his death.

The Society points out that the main altar tapestry shows the "Three Brothers of the Peach Orchards,"⁵ and the elaborate structure in front of the altar is Kuan Kung's soul tablet. The inscription on the tablet reads "Soul Tablet of the loyal and vanquisher of demons—Kuan Kung."

The two plaques flanking the altar read "His honored name will be handed down in writing for eternity," and "His righteous courage will strengthen the country for thousands of years."

The temple ritual includes the lighting of incense and the tossing of fortune blocks, called Yum Yeung Puey, to see whether the future looks good, bad, or indifferent.

Included in the ritual is a bamboo container filled with "sticks of fate" that are numbered to correspond with a prophecy in the Tung Sing book, which is revised each year.

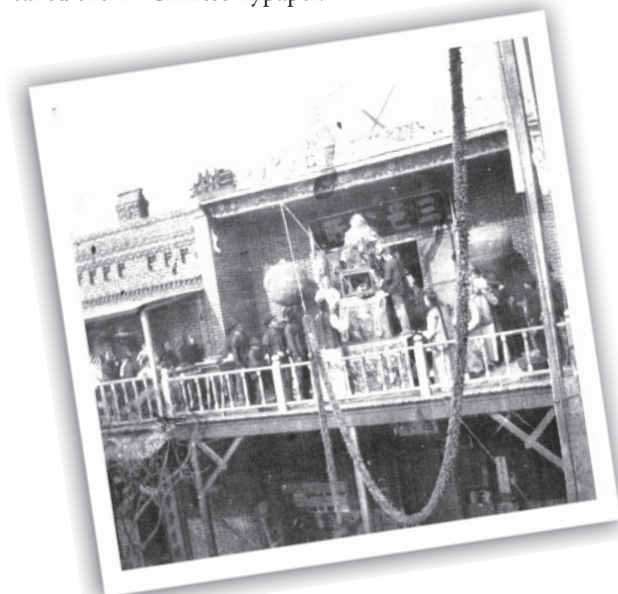
An incinerator and an altar to the Door God for incense offerings still can be found in the temple, in addition to a row of hand-carved chairs called "Fouo-shou-I" or "chairs of good luck and immortality." The teakwood chairs are inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The incinerator was used for the burning of ceremonial papers to bring good luck or to discourage bad luck. It also played a part in the funeral rites.

Along the balustrade are eight staves with symbols representing the eight immortals, which were used in parades or for other ceremonial purposes. The temple also has a set of these immortals carved from teakwood. They are legendary figures of Taoism who became immortal by following the Tao—"The Way."

[Roy] Chow [a Grangeville resident] points out that the matching wooden plaques filled with Chinese characters that line two walls in the temple were gifts from one or more families as thanks for prayers answered. They contain wise sayings or quotes designed for inspiration.

Above the two doors leading to the back room on the second floor of the temple are pieces of paper filled with holes. Camille Wing, chairwoman of the Taoist Temple

Preservation Society, says the Chinese temple goers thought the evil spirits would try to get through the holes, but would be caught in their rough edges. That would drive them back and not allow them in the temple. Wing says a Chinese historian jokingly called them “Chinese flypaper.”



◆ Taoist Temple, circa 1897. Photo courtesy of Hanford Taoist Temple & Museum.

Some of the Chinese ceremonies occasionally were conducted on the temple balcony, which overlooked China Alley. The two-story structure was built with hand-molded bricks and the walls are 12 inches thick. The walls were finished inside with quarter-inch-thick, smooth red plaster on which the brick mortar pattern was repeated in white paint. The roof was made of corrugated metal.⁶

The temple fell into disuse in the 1940s and it was up to the Wing family to keep it in reasonably good condition.⁷ In the early 1970s, the Preservation Society was formed by Richard Wing, Dennis Triplett, Bill Dunn, William Ying, George Takeda, Van Lowe, and Charles Young. Renovation work cost nearly \$30,000, of which \$20,000 came from the city of Hanford and the rest came from donations. The committee still owes \$2,500. Developer Walt Miller headed the construction effort.

Chinese Doctors Introduced New Form of Healing

By Karen Clark



◆ The L.T. Sue Herb Company was the first and longest surviving herb company in Hanford. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.

About 75 years ago, a vast knowledge of herbal medicine was brought to Kings County residents when L. T. Sue set up shop at No. 15 China Alley under the sponsorship of merchant Sue Chung Kee. As the story goes, Sue Chung Kee—who ran a general merchandise store across the way at No. 10 China Alley with his son, Y. T. Sue—brought L. T. Sue (no relation) to Hanford to cure his ailing grandson, Laurence Sue.

Word of his success with young Laurence spread, and L. T. Sue’s business flourished. In the beginning, the doctor served only the [Chinese] residents of Hanford and

the outlying areas in his shop in Sue Chung Kee's building, and later across the Alley at No. 15. It wasn't long until L. T. Sue's practice included a goodly number of Caucasians, as well as the [Asians], Blacks, and Mexicans he had served since putting out his shingle in China Alley.

But with that success came problems. In early 1909, Sue was arrested for practicing medicine without a license and ordered to stand trial. He posted the \$100 bail and vowed to find a lawyer who would help him fight the charge, according to the November 1909 article in the *Hanford Journal*.

Despite his efforts, Sue was convicted in December of practicing medicine without a state license and fined \$100. He announced he would appeal the conviction. In January 1910, however, Sue once again was charged with practicing medicine without a license, and he once again made bail. His appeal of the first conviction was still pending.

The first complaint had been made by a doctor from town. The second complaint was filed by a citizen who had posed as a legitimate customer.

Later in January, Sue was arrested for a third time on the same charge, filed by another "customer," and his books and copies of prescriptions were confiscated. Authorities vowed to summon all recent patients of the Chinese doctor. According to the *Journal*, a lawyer representing the State Board of Medical Examiners wrote Kings County officials that the organization wanted to play a key role in the prosecution of L. T. Sue. The attorney pointed out that other prosecutions of Chinese herbalists in the state had been successful.

By February, Sue had been arrested twice more on the charge, and he demanded a jury trial. On February 18, 1910, Sue was found innocent by a Kings County jury whose members had deliberated only 40 minutes before freeing the doctor.

"The verdict was a surprise to nearly everyone, for it had been the expectation of those who had heard the trial of the case that the best Sue could hope for would be a disagreement of the jury," wrote the *Journal* reporter covering the case.

Sue's defense centered on the fact that he merely sold herbs to people who came to buy them, and had not diagnosed a disease or prescribed medicine within the meaning of the law. In March, Sue's attorney filed suit for a new trial in the previous

case in which his client had been convicted. That conviction later was overturned, and the three other cases against Sue were dropped by June 1910.

The *Journal* said the State Board believed that "the community is too strongly in sympathy with Sue to warrant prosecution, and that it would be futile to attempt to convict him before a jury."

All five \$100 bail bonds were returned to Sue, according to the *Journal* report, which added, "It has been impossible to secure but one jury that would convict him, and an appeal from that conviction resulted in a reversal in the upper court."

Sue's success in the courts, as well as in his pocketbook, was not lost on Sue Chung Kee. The prominent merchant sent his son to China to earn his degree as an herbalist so he, too, could serve the Kings County community. After completing his degree, Y. T. Sue returned to Hanford to set up shop in his father's general merchandise store. Eventually, he moved across the alley to No. 7, where he worked until 1948.

Y. T. Sue was born in Hanford in 1890, the oldest of three children.⁸ By the late 1930s, Sue's herb store fronted on Seventh Street in order to make access easier to his Caucasian patients. By that time, the Chinese population had dwindled and the majority of the herbalist's clients were Caucasian laborers. He died in Canton, China in 1949 on a visit to the old country with his wife and daughter.

Next door, at No. 9 China Alley, Harry Lee joined the Choon Sue Herb Company as an interpreter in 1914.... Born in 1885 in Mendocino County, Harry was one of 11 children of Lai Ming and Kan Shee Lee. He moved to Hanford in 1914 and worked at the Quon Lee Grocery Store, in addition to serving as translator.... He soon learned enough to take over as herbalist, and rapidly became one of the leaders in the Chinese community.... He was married to Moey Lee and had nine children. In addition, Lee owned a ranch where many of the Chinese would work cutting apricots and peaches in the summer. Harry Lee organized the Kings County Chinese Association and contributed to the Chinese School and the Drum and Bugle Corps. Harry died in 1957.⁹

Less is known about the On Sang Herb Company, which operated at No. 14 China Alley. Some say On Sang Herb Co. predated L. T. Sue's operation, but Sue advertised his business as the "first and the oldest" herb company in Hanford.

Early Chinese Laborers Suffered Discrimination

By Karen Clark

An October 26, 1876 report in the *Weekly Delta* wrote, “Near the first bridge of Cross Creek, on the Mussel Slough road, we struck the first graders’ camp, consisting of 40 or 50 tents, and near them in a long line were the Chinamen in a trench about 10 feet wide and three feet deep, armed with shovels throwing the dirt to leeward, a continuous cloud of dust rising like little puffs from powder, as the moving dirt struck the firm ground.”

“On the other side of the line of embankment, a similar trench had been marked out, and out of these, the elevation for the roadbed and track was being formed. One white man was in charge of this force.”

This is confirmation of the obvious—that the railroad did bring Chinese into the area. Chinese owned lots in China Alley as early as 1877—only a few months after the railroad had auctioned off lots in the newly laid-out town of Hanford. That auction occurred on January 17, 1877, and no Chinese bought any of the 68 lots sold for a total of \$11,422.

However, on the delinquent tax rolls published in the *Weekly Delta* in February 1878, Ah Gan is shown as owning two lots in Chinatown. Gee Lee and Co. owned three lots, On Ching and Co. owned two lots, and Sam Sing owned one lot. The earliest indication of a Chinese person owning property in Hanford was the delinquent tax list for 1876, when Young Chow, who was to become a prominent citizen and possibly the main force behind the development of China Alley, was listed as owing back taxes on his property.

An editorial in the December 15, 1877 edition of the *[Weekly] Delta* outlined the spreading agitation—with special emphasis on how the Chinese workers affected the farmers’ role in the state’s economy: “The sentiments expressed by grange lecturers... are, we believe, common to all laboring classes as against politicians, land grabbers, loafers.... For ourself [sic], while we believe that the Chinese are a universal blight, they are not the only nor the worst enemy of this state.... The Chinese are a laboring class and pay their way in the world, which the other classes referred to do not.”

It wasn’t until the 1880s, when anti-Chinese feelings swept through the state in the depths of a depression that left thousands of White men out of work, that Chinese laborers in Kings County felt the string of newspaper criticism.

In June 1888, the *Hanford Sentinel* wrote: “The labor question is one that is facing the many who are just entering upon fruit culture on an extensive scale. Heretofore with the Chinese help that could be obtained, orchardists and vineyardists have managed to get along; but with the greatly increased acreage of trees and vines... come the problem. Chinese are demanding higher wages and heretofore are getting it.”

[In 1889, the *Sentinel* discussed the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act] “To repeal the Chinese act would allow... large owners to flood the country with Chinamen for their own use while the season demands them and the rest of the time, these industrious heathens would be competing with our free American citizen and degrading our labor system.”

In June 1893, the seven-year-old newspaper continued its attack on local growers who hired Chinese instead of White laborers: “Let the Chinese be deported and the Japs vamoose....” The editorial writer pointed out, however, that some packers preferred to hire Chinese workers because they did better work. In other editions, the newspaper admonished girls to learn the ways of the kitchen so there wouldn’t be a need for Chinese cooks in Kings County.

Early Gamblers Flocked to Hanford's Chinatown

By Karen Clark

In the early days, when Kings County was a haven for Chinese weary of the violence that scarred other areas of the state, gambling in the Chinatowns of Hanford, Armona, and Lemoore was an Oriental affair that didn't include the Caucasians. It wasn't until the 1920s, according to the older Chinese, that the Whites began coming to the Chinatowns to gamble in large numbers.

Before gambling petered out in the 1940s, Chinese came from three counties to take their chances at fan tan, pai gow, mah-jongg, and bok cup bui. They gambled in back rooms, basements, upstairs, and even on the benches that stood outside every establishment in Hanford's Chinatown.

On weekends, the county's three Chinatown neighborhoods were filled with laborers who needed a break from the bone-weary chores of the orchards and fields.

Alice Chow, 72, remembers her mother, Dung Shee Chong, spending hours in their small two-room house on Visalia Street marking thousands of lottery tickets [for bok cup bui, now known as keno]. Her father, Dung Chong, worked in the gambling halls to earn a living for his growing family.¹⁰

While her mother diligently stamped the tickets by hand, Chow, the oldest of 11 children, kept house, did the marketing, and watched her younger brothers and sisters. Although working in the gambling houses often was a family effort, only the men and boys were ever allowed inside the dens.

Confusing as it may seem, gambling was outlawed by Hanford City Council in September 1906. In the years after this decision, local police officers made regular raids on the Chinese gambling houses, but rarely ended up arresting more than five persons on a raid, according to news accounts in the *Hanford Sentinel*.

Many of the Chinese who still are living today say these raids were not more successful because some authorities were being paid to alert gambling house owners about impending raids.

Dr. William Lee, a Hanford native now practicing in Visalia, says three main Tongs controlled the gambling houses in Hanford. Chew Yee Tong was the biggest, he says, with Bing Kong and Suey Ding Tongs also having sizable influence.

Endnotes

¹ Sue Chung Kee was Bessie Loo's father. For further reading, see "From Hanford to Hollywood: Remembering Bessie Loo" by Jack Ong.

² Prior to being referred to as Sue Chung Kee Street, China Alley was also known as Young Chow Alley.

³ When the Hanford Taoist Temple and Museum registered as National Landmark 72000226, the official date of the founding of the Temple was put at 1893. But a historic photograph has more recently been found that shows the Temple without the neighboring Soo Chung Kee building. The Soo Chung Kee building is known to have been built in 1886 so the Temple may very well have been built before 1886.

⁴ While the majority of Hanford Chinese were probably from Sam Yup District, many Chinese from neighboring Armona were from Heungsan District. There were people from Sze Yup in Lemoore. Armona once had its own Chinatown and temple.

⁵ With further research, the Taoist Temple now recognizes that the tapestry is not "three brothers" but Kuan Kung with a disciple and a bodyguard holding a sword.

⁶ Only the roof of the porch was made of corrugated metal.

⁷ At that time, Henry Wing was the only living trustee of Hanford's Sam Yup Association. Upon his passing, the duties of trusteeship were left to his sons, first Ernest and then to Richard.

⁸ Y.T. Sue may actually have been born in San Francisco. He is the older brother of Florence Sue Chan and Bessie Sue Loo.

⁹ Harry Lee probably died in 1947.

¹⁰ Alice's father was Dung Tai. Most probably, her mother was known as Chong Shee Dung. Her father's surname was Chong, and Shee Dung implied she was married to the Dung family.

Dreamer in the Kitchen: Richard Wing and Hanford's Imperial Dynasty

By Susie Ling

California's Central Valley, "the greatest garden in the world," produces about a quarter of the food that America eats. Covering a length of 400 miles are California grapes, nuts, vegetables, and fruits nestled between the coastal mountains and the Sierra Nevada range. Farmers and farm workers carefully nurture the precious heritage as they have for decades and decades. From the 19th century, Chinese American pioneers were here—digging the irrigation canals, tilling the soil, picking the fruits, building the wine cellars, and building the railroads. Gong Ting Shu 江庭樹 was one of these early Chinese pioneers in Hanford.

Hanford was a railroad town with a sizable settlement of about 600 Chinese in 1920. China Alley environs had 20 businesses and was the center of Hanford's Chinese community. In 1883, Gong Ting Shu began serving noodles at his restaurant, Mee Jan Low, upstairs from the grocery store Sun Lung Jan. Four other generations of Wings continued to serve diners until the family finally closed their China Alley restaurants in February 2006.

But the metaphor is that it was the Wing family who brought the world to Hanford. Indeed, Richard Wing, Gong Ting Shu's grandson, introduced "continental cuisine with a Chinese touch" in the 1950s—later christened chinoise cuisine—and put this hamlet on an international circuit for fusion cooking.

Richard Wing's 江憲泉 culinary training is unique. Like his siblings, he was put to work in the family restaurant by the age of six. But it was perhaps fate that assigned Richard to be General George Marshall's personal cook when he joined the Army in the 1940s. As part of Marshall's entourage, Richard traversed some of the finest kitchens in Washington, D.C., Moscow, Paris, London, Shanghai, and Chungking. Richard learned very fast. Meanwhile, brother Ernest worked for the wine makers in California and he learned very fast, too. Richard was genetically born with another trait: He was a dreamer. He dreamed up the design for Imperial Dynasty. He dreamed his creative dishes. He dreamed to his success. He took his family legacy and brought it to incredible heights.

Hanford's Imperial Dynasty at 406 China Alley is legendary. From its inception, it has

won accolades beyond belief from the American Academy of Chefs, the Chefs de Cuisine Association of California, and the Black Hat Chefs Society. Richard's Escargots à la Bourguignonne have won two Cordon Bleu Awards from the Wine and Food Society and have been enjoyed by hordes of political dignitaries, international jetsetters, plus the average Joe. People came by car, by train, and by plane to Hanford to dine. The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California arranged a special fieldtrip to Hanford in 2002 to enjoy a banquet prepared by Richard Wing. We also got a special grand tour of Hanford's Taoist Temple and Confucian School from Richard's sister-in-law, Camille Wing. This interview—interrupted frequently by Richard's laughter—was conducted in April of 2006 at Imperial Dynasty. Special thanks to the other family members for their hospitality.

Family Legacy in Hanford



◆ Richard Wing and his family in Fa Yuen District in China. Photo courtesy of Richard Wing.

Like other Chinese American families, we are not certain about our family history. My grandfather, Gong Ting Shu 江庭樹, came to America around 1881 and went to Kingston and Grangeville before settling in Hanford. He was active with the Taiping Rebellion and had to escape to America. The leadership of Taiping was from our district of Fa Yuen (Huayuan, 花園) near Sam Yup District. My grandfather was a kung fu expert—but how could they use kung fu against foreign rifles? In fact, they even used buckets of human waste in an attempt to stink away the British foreigners; it was crazy. The story is that Grandfather ended up in the water escaping the Qing soldiers; he climbed a vessel and it sailed and brought him to America. I don't know much more about our grandfather because he died in 1923 when I was a year and a half old. My grandfather was also known as Henry Wing; we don't know exactly where we got the name Wing. They came over with no passports or papers. We are Jiaangs.

My family was not poor in China, as we had 21 acres of rice paddies in Fa Yuen village, about 40 miles north of Guangzhou. When I went back in 1946 while in the U.S. Army, I saw a row of six houses for the clan and a two-story “Western-style” brick house which served as the living room and guest house. There were no bathroom facilities; that's behind the house. [Laughs.] This was built by my father and family sending home money. I guess we have a traditional sense of Chinese family obligation.

We suppose that my grandfather came to Hanford in 1883 with a lot of others from Sam Yup. Those early pioneers would stick in a group. In fact, upstairs from here at 6 ½ China Alley is the first location of Mee Jan Low, my grandfather's restaurant. This brick building was built by his cousin Young Chow after fire destroyed the wooden buildings of Sixth Street Chinatown in the 1870s. In a little corner upstairs on China Alley, grandfather hid Dr. Sun Yat-sen for four days and four nights.¹

My father, Gong Wing Chew 江榮釗—and also known as Henry—was born in China. My grandfather had four sons and my father was the youngest. Uncle Willy, the oldest, also came to the U.S. The other two brothers became a lawyer and a general. Third Uncle was brilliant; he was a great orator. My uncle was the number one student of the Whampoa Military Academy.

My father came over in 1906, right after the San Francisco earthquake. A few years later, my father returned to China to marry. He came back to America first and my mother, Chan Shee Wing, followed. She was pregnant on the voyage to America

and Emma was born in the house just a block behind this restaurant. My father and my cousin Howard built that house by themselves. All seven of us were born at 64 Visalia Street: Emma, Ernest, Woodrow, Harriet, me, Fred, and Calvin born in 1927. Calvin is a CPA. Fred is a stockbroker. Ernie and Woodrow ran Chinese Pagoda and Harriet and I just retired from Imperial Dynasty. Because of the Alien Land Act, my father put all his China Alley property in our names. Both of my parents died in the 1960s of cancer.

We all went to American school in the daytime: Hamilton Elementary, Woodrow Wilson Junior High, and Hanford High School. I actually graduated from Visalia High School because we had a restaurant there and my father had me running it. That was ridiculous because I couldn't study. We went to Chinese school for two hours after American school.

My father was also a contractor for the fruit orchards in this area. At one point, he contracted 800 to 900 Chinese to pick peaches, apricots, prunes, and grapes in the Valley. We also had the restaurants and all the relatives worked in the kitchen. We were cooking, raising our own bean sprouts, and even making our own tofu and soy sauce. My mother's family in China made soy sauce so she knew a lot. We still have the knife that was used to cut our noodles. My mother raised chicken, squabs, and poultry. She grew the vegetables. It was hard to get ingredients that catered to Chinese people so we even made our own dried black beans. The contract laborers often ate for free and we were cooking for big groups.

I started working in the kitchen when I was about six. When I was in grade school, I would steam rice milk and make a crepe. We would fry it in oil and eat it with soy sauce. There would be about six to eight people in the kitchen all the time. Sometimes the cooks would sleep on the floor of the restaurant. Today, there are too many health regulations. [Laughs.]

At school, there were about four Chinese kids in my class of 30 or 40. There were more Japanese Americans and Mexican Americans. We had White friends but we weren't too close. There were only a few who didn't like Chinese and called us “Yellow Chinks” and threw rocks at us. There was only one African American in our high school. We got along. I played with Kiyoshi and yet, we were supposed to be enemies as Japan was bombing China.

In fact, we became so Americanized that my mother decided to send us all back

to China in 1936 for about two years. Woodrow didn't go and he and my father opened Chinese Pagoda, our second restaurant, in 1937. We kids loved China because we didn't have to work. We were enrolled in a special class with overseas children and received traditional Chinese tutoring at night. But the Japanese bombing got closer and we returned to Hanford.

After high school, I went to Visalia Junior College [now, College of the Sequoias]. There were about half a dozen other Chinese students there. I joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps hoping to be able to finish an architect degree at Cal Berkeley before military service. I was fascinated by Frank Lloyd Wright. But they called me for active duty in 1944. My other three brothers also served.

General George Marshall's Personal Cook

I took my basic training at Camp Roberts in 1944, but I never finished. Near the end of the six months was a 25-mile hike. I couldn't do it. I collapsed after about 12 miles. They took me to the hospital and I saw psychiatrists and psychologists. It turned out I had a heart murmur and I was put on "limited service." Now, I could get an honorable discharge after six months so they put me on temporary KP duty in the mess hall!

The mess sergeant sent me to learn meat carving. Each mess hall would process about 70 pounds of meat. One of the other cooks was boasting that he could cut 60 slices of bread from a stale loaf. I told my sergeant I could double that easily. So the sergeant challenged the other cook to a carving contest for a dollar. That other guy cut 66 slices from a stale loaf; I cut 144 slices. That story went around!

I would join four other Chinese cooks for Chinese midnight snack. I would use some of the leftover meat. The officers heard about this and started joining us.

One of the officers came one day and interviewed me for about two hours. He asked about my cooking background. They didn't ask me hard questions; I was Chinese and we were supposed to be allies. A few weeks later, I got an order to go to headquarters at Camp Roberts. There were three or four officers there who interviewed me and said, "Wing, you are leaving Camp Roberts tomorrow. You will be flying to Washington, D.C."

I was met in D.C. by another officer and taken to Fort Myer in Arlington. We went straight to Quarter Number One. That's for the Five-Star Generals. I didn't know what was going on; I was stunned from the minute I got off the plane. An officer introduced me to General and Mrs. Marshall and said I was to be their personal cook. General George Marshall was number one in the U.S. Army! Later, I found out that General Marshall preferred a Chinese cook.

The Marshalls were such gracious people and very nice to me. I wasn't treated as a soldier. I told the General once, "I didn't even finish basic training. I don't even know how to salute you." General Marshall answered, "You don't have to salute me." Because I was working for the General, I became a sergeant after about five months in the Army!

Fortunately for me, General and Mrs. Marshall were not fancy eaters. They enjoyed simple, good food like lamb. He was allergic to shellfish, strawberries, and garlic. General Marshall did not drink wine; he may have half a jigger of whiskey in an Old Fashioned.

On the other hand, I'm a very picky eater and I have a very effective taste palate. I realized this when they sent me for training as a food taster at the Pentagon. They tested me for over 300 senses of sweetness. I also learned security, protocol, hospitality, and tasted for poisons. They sent me to the officers' mess hall. There were these seven or nine beautiful French cooks there. The mess officers welcomed me and let me join them in the kitchen. I loved the kitchen. This place was always busy with real fancy food. They even put me in the generals' mess hall and I learned a lot about restaurant and serving etiquette. I also had to learn about wines; I had to taste for poison in wines.

When General Marshall retired from the Pentagon in November of 1945, he encouraged me to get an honorable discharge and return to school. But they also offered for me to spend some time with them in their home in Leesburg, Virginia. General Marshall had about three or four chauffeurs, an orderly, an orderly helper, a houseman, and me. I took care of the whole kitchen but I only cooked for the two of them, and sometimes, their relatives.

After a short while, General Marshall was recruited for diplomatic service. President Truman asked him to lead the China Mission. I went along to Shanghai and Chungking. I studied with Madame Chiang Kai-shek's cooks. She had a Beijing

cook, Sichuan cook, Swiss-trained cook, and French-trained cook. Madame Chiang Kai-shek once taught me how to make a concentrated chicken broth. She steamed the chicken with ginger and let it slowly drip into a consommé. That, she said, was very good for General Marshall's cold. I use that method with chicken, squab, pheasant, and turkey as the base of my consommé for my own kitchen.

George Marshall became Secretary of State in 1947. He had three chauffeurs from the Army and three from the State Department. The Marshalls and I were staying at the Rockefeller estate. But on weekends, the Secretary of State liked to drive himself back to Leesburg and that would upset Mrs. Marshall so much. So I said, "I'd like to join you at Leesburg instead of staying alone on the estate. And I'll drive. I don't have a D.C. license or Army license, but I have a California license." The Secretary of State said that he didn't have a license, either. When I drove, the Secretary of State would sit in the front passenger seat next to me and chat. On Monday, when he returned to work in the chauffeured car, he would sit in the back.

I went with Secretary of State Marshall to London, Moscow, Warsaw, Paris, etc. While great decisions were being made by my chief, I was in the kitchen making friends with the cooks. It is easier to look out for poisons when you are friendly with the chefs.

I would write Mrs. Marshall a lot and she enjoyed my letters. She would read them to her friends. I wrote her from Moscow. Later in 1959, when I went to Secretary of State Marshall's funeral, I saw that she was sobbing and sobbing. I never saw her after that and I didn't continue our correspondence. Mrs. Marshall died in 1978.²

I was discharged in September of 1947. I came back to California and enrolled at USC because it was the only school that had a major in International Relations. It took me four years and four summers. I didn't want to graduate; I loved school. I was a disabled veteran and the government was paying for tuition and everything. It was great. I was getting \$375 a month; that was a lot of money in the 1950s. I had a car and everything. I was also very influenced by Professor Hans von Koerber, who taught mysticism and spiritualism in the Department of Oriental Studies.

After my degree, I worked in Hong Kong as an interviewer for the Refugee Relief Program. The United States allowed about 2,000 slots from China after the 1949 Revolution. But I couldn't stay at that job long. I had so many relatives and acquaintances from Canton and Hong Kong that I couldn't do that job fairly. After

a couple of weeks, I realized I had to quit. Fortunately, someone introduced me to Fok Wah Import Export Company, which was owned by T. V. Soong. I also got married around that time.

Coming Home to Hanford



◆ The Imperial Dynasty began serving food in Hanford's China Alley in 1883.

I received a phone call and a letter from my brother, Ernie. The family wanted me to return to Hanford to help rebuild the dying Chinatown. Lemoore Naval Air Base was being reactivated and Armstrong Rubber Tires came into Hanford. I preferred to stay in Hong Kong and put my degree to use. My brother convinced me to return by promising that I would have complete control over design and management of the food enterprise in Hanford. I returned in late 1956.

I spent six or seven months in 1957 planning. I drew my own design and acted as my own general contractor. I had 22 semi-professional Mexicans working for me. I noticed they spent about 35 percent of their time cleaning. So every night, I would organize and clean the work space to maximize their efficiency. I put my heart and soul into this project.

The slab ceiling in the main dining room is gently sloped on both sides toward a 14-foot center beam. We tried 20 or 30 times before we got the curvature exactly the way I like it. These represent the Chinese arches toward heaven. Arches and spirals represent the concept that there is no ending and no beginning. When we mortals die, our individual souls are at one with a greater soul. Buddhism and Taoism do not have a personified god. I had learned much about this not only from Professor von Koerber at USC, but from my father-in-law, Professor Lo Ka-ping, a Daoist master in Hong Kong.

I didn't want to serve Chinese food because my brother's Chinese Pagoda was already doing that successfully. My parents and family were really nervous about my thoughts about continental cuisine. My father, a humble man, thought it was too "high class." But I had spent time in Paris, Frankfurt, Berlin, Rome, London, Moscow, and Warsaw. And I had spent all my time there in the kitchen. I learned a lot from Madame Chiang Kai-shek's kitchen. I love kitchens. People always welcomed me royally. I became good friends with all these cooks.

Chinese cooking is the most versatile. You'll find Chinese cooks all over the world, in French kitchens, Italian kitchens, and Russian kitchens. French cooks were too based on tradition; it was hard for them to accept new concepts. But I changed escargot. I made continental food with a Chinese accent. *Sunset Magazine*, *L.A. Times* and *Bon Appetit* wrote about my "chinoise" food, and the French cooks started to go to China, Thailand, Japan, and Korea to learn and blend a "nouveaux cuisine." I was way ahead of them!

I had loyal fans from all over. There were these four stockbrokers from New York City who would come all the way to Hanford every year to eat. The Lichtenstein royalty came, the vice president of Singapore, high officials from Kuala Lumpur, and Governor Reagan were all pleasantly surprised at my gourmet meals. When they came, it was up to me. I cooked, you ate. I usually served seven courses. Unfortunately, the Marshalls never came; Hanford is hard to get to and there were also many security issues.

At the Pasadena Valley Hunt Club, I had these quail eggs from Taiwan that were barely cooked. I used a plastic straw to punch a small hole to stuff a small piece of Chinese red pickled ginger with a spear of green onion. I served three in a flat champagne glass with champagne poured over the eggs. That was the appetizer for the Wine and Food Society in 1960.

I collected about 400 or 500 cookbooks. I traveled a lot and I ate at the best restaurants. I do enjoy good food. The chefs would come out to talk to me and shower me with special treatment. I was introduced to and initiated into the Confrerie des Chevaliers du Tastevin [Knights of the Tasting Order], a gastronomic society.

My brother, Ernie, had worked for a lot of growers in the Valley. Chinese Pagoda was already known for its wines. Ernie taught me a lot and was the master of the wine cellar for Imperial Dynasty. Ernest Wing was knighted in Spain by the Wine and Food Society. Imperial Dynasty won *Wine Spectator* magazine's Grand Award for eight years before we stopped submitting our wine list. We used to serve Romanée-Conti. Only 25 cases of this elite burgundy come to the United States each year. Of the 25 cases, only five cases come to the West Coast, with one case especially designated for Imperial Dynasty. Very few restaurants offer Romanée-Conti because they can't obtain it. No other restaurant in the U.S. can buy a whole case each year. When Ernie died in 1972, he was only 56 years old.

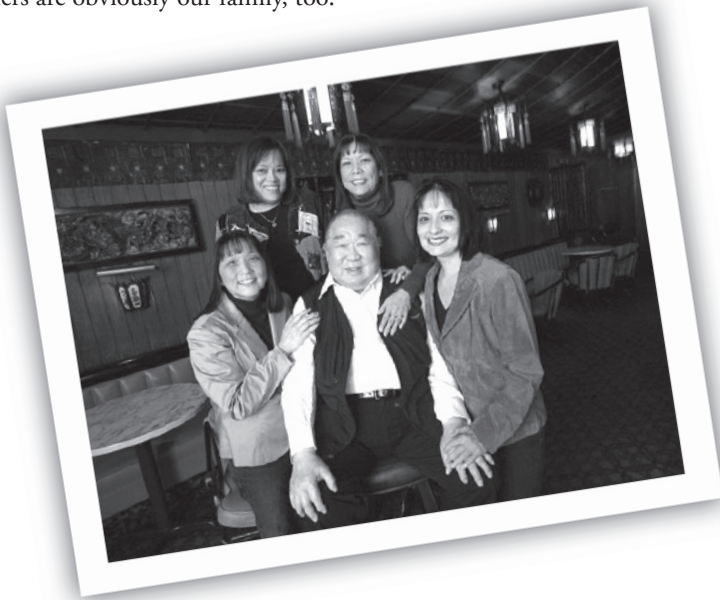
I had wanted to study architecture and I really enjoyed art. When I was in Chungking in 1945, we were staying in the beautiful home of T. V. Soong and using his living room as a conference room. The house manager, a colonel, asked me to help him choose some paintings to decorate this conference room. I was shown several paintings from art dealers. Although I did not know the artists at the time, I selected an eagle because it represents the United States. And I selected a horse that was triumphantly looking behind his shoulder. It was a retired war horse—just like General Marshall. And Marshall begins with "ma," the Chinese word for horse. These were the works of Hsu Peihong. When Zhou Enlai came in, he said, "Fantastic! Who selected this? Most appropriate." Over the years, I amassed quite a private collection of Chinese art and paintings, including the paintings of Hsu Peihong, Qi Baishi, Zao Shaoang, Zhong Daqien, Zhong Shanzi, and others.

Everybody asks me about my women's toilet upstairs.³ [Laughs.] I had a dream about that. I built two pagodas, each hiding a toilet. Half of the room was a

carpeted lounge, while the other half was laid with artificial turf to look like grass. I remember my contractors and I had so much fun building that room. I also had actress Bessie Loo's baby carriage up there because that's the room she was born in. Downstairs from Bessie's first home was Sue Chung Kee Herb Store, the site of our cocktail lounge.

I'm proud of what we have accomplished. Imperial Dynasty did very little advertising and I seldom brag, but we did well. I love the kitchen and I love food. I love inventing new food concepts. I am always thinking about something and I am a dreamer. I seldom get bored. I dream of new recipes and new ideas.

This is a family restaurant, so I felt obligated to stay in Hanford. My grandfather and parents worked here. Ernie was the host and master of the wine cellar of Imperial Dynasty. My sister Harriet supervised the serving of the food for about 50 years. Other siblings and their spouses worked here; everyone was involved. A series of nieces, nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews have all worked here. And our customers are obviously our family, too.



★ The Imperial Dynasty family includes five generations of Chinese Americans. Front row from left: Sherrill Harris, Richard Wing and Arianne Wing. In back are Leilani Wing-Shimizu and Jennifer Wing. Photo courtesy of *The Fresno Bee*.

Endnotes

¹ Dr. Sun Yat-sen was the father of the Chinese Republic and spent much time in California raising support between 1895 and the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Sun was himself of Taisan heritage and much favored by Cantonese Americans up and down California's coast.

² At the Marshall Foundation in Virginia, the "Richard C. Wing Collection" includes original letters received by Sergeant Wing, photographs of Wing and Marshall, and miscellaneous items.

³ The Imperial Dynasty women's lounge is notorious for its surprising elegance and size. It is accented by an ornate wall-sized mirror—and Bessie Loo's baby carriage.

“General George Marshall and I”

By Richard C. Wing, CEC/AAC



★ Richard Wing

Editor's Note: In March 2003, 82-year-old Chef Richard Wing was invited to address the annual Judges' Dinner in Kings County, California. This was his speech.

Introduction

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, most honorable judges and most sagacious attorneys, I thank you very much for being here tonight. It has always been a pleasure to cook for the Judges' Dinner. Year after year, I have been cooking for the Judges' Dinner for over 33 years at the Imperial Dynasty. It was started when attorney Bob Rosson was appointed to be a judge in Hanford, Kings County.

I am proud of my heritage and tradition in the restaurant world. I am double proud, because we have been able to survive in the restaurant operation continuously for over 120 years in Hanford. Our grandfather, Chow Wing¹, was

catering to the Chinese railroad workers, and then he decided to open a Chinese restaurant here at this very location. At that time, there was no City of Hanford and no Kings County—which would come later.

In 120 years of restaurant operation, we like to think that we have established a unique culinary expression in good food, good wine, and good taste at the Imperial Dynasty. I sincerely believe that in order for a dinner to be properly appreciated, the diner, the waiter, the sommelier, and the chef should be united together in good harmony. The creation of such a harmony has been my culinary aim at the Imperial Dynasty.

My good friend, attorney Bob Dowd, who is the chairman for tonight's Judges' Dinner, has told me that he has been reading about General George C. Marshall. He would like to know more about the great General Marshall. He has asked, in a trying manner, if I can say something about General Marshall for the Judges' Dinner. I timidly accepted his invitation. It will be my first time as a humble Chinese cook to talk about the “greatest American general” of this century.

General George C. Marshall was the Five Star General of the Army and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II. After that, unexpectedly, he became the Special Envoy Extraordinary for President Truman for the China Mission. After the China Mission, unexpectedly again, he became the Secretary of State. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the European Recovery Program or Marshall Plan. Again, unexpectedly, he became the Secretary of Defense. General Marshall was, indeed, a very great and remarkable general. Winston Churchill and President Truman both considered him as the “greatest American general” of this century.

It was in 1944 when I was in basic army training at Camp Roberts in San Miguel, California. One morning, a colonel from headquarters came to see me and interview me. About two weeks later, I was ordered and summoned to the headquarters at Camp Roberts. I was introduced to a staff of officers. Later on, I was informed that I would be leaving Camp Roberts to fly to Washington, D.C. There, I would meet some officer who would tell me what to do and where to go.

On my arrival in Washington, D.C., a colonel was there to meet me. He drove me to Fort Myer in Arlington, and then directed me to Quarter One, the official residence for the Five Star General of the Army. I was introduced to General and Mrs. Marshall. I was designated to be General Marshall's personal cook in Quarter

One at Fort Myer.

I was in Quarter One for over six months when General Marshall decided to retire from the Pentagon and move to his home, Dodona Manor, in Leesburg, Virginia. General Marshall told me in a thoughtful manner that I could stay in Leesburg with them for awhile, or take an early honorable discharge and return to college. I decided to stay for a while in Leesburg. In less than two weeks, I answered a telephone call from the White House. It was President Truman on the line and he wanted to speak to General Marshall. I immediately rushed upstairs to notify the General and he quickly grabbed the telephone in his study.

That evening, I prepared roast leg of lamb for General and Mrs. Marshall's dinner. After the meal, General Marshall casually asked me if I had been to China. I responded that I went to school in Canton for almost two years during the time of the Japanese invasion. After that, I returned home to Hanford where I was born. General Marshall asked me whether I still had relatives in Canton. I replied that most of my relatives were living in the village, about 18 miles from Canton. My ancestral family had 21 acres of rice paddies and a large spreading residential estate over an acre in the village. General Marshall said, "You will be going to China with me in about a month from now. In the meanwhile, you will be briefed and trained by experts and specialists in security, protocol, and food tasting. As you know, I am allergic to shellfish. Afterward, you will be my personal aide and food taster in China."

I was indeed overwhelmed by such an assignment. It was like a fantastic dream for me. Imagine for a humble Chinese cook to be offered this wonderful privilege to be assigned to a great Five Star General for the China Mission. In late December 1945, we departed from Washington, D.C. on a flight to China. Our first stop was California. Frank McCarthy was there to greet General Marshall; he was the general's assistant in World War II.

China Mission with General Marshall



◆ General Marshall with Richard Wing. Photo courtesy of Richard Wing.

On arrival in Shanghai, General Wedemeyer and Walter Robertson were there to greet General Marshall. After a few days in Shanghai, we were on a flight to Chungking, the wartime capital for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's party. A large group of Chinese officials were there to greet General Marshall. We were in Chungking for over seven months, and then moved to Nanking, the official capital. After several months in Nanking, General Marshall decided to return to Washington, D.C. to report to President Truman on the China Mission. General Marshall went home to Leesburg to join Mrs. Marshall; it was a happy time at Dodona Manor.

After just a short time in Leesburg, General Marshall had to leave for his second trip to China. Fortunately, this time Mrs. Marshall decided to be with General Marshall on the China Mission. General Marshall decided to stop over in Tokyo, Japan to visit General Douglas MacArthur. We had a delightful luncheon at the very spacious residence of General MacArthur. The beautiful residence was surrounded by a magnificently landscaped garden. After the luncheon, I went outdoors to stroll leisurely and marvel at the beautiful surroundings. While I was momentarily in awe of the landscape, someone was tapping my shoulder from behind. I turned around and with great surprise, came face to face with General Douglas MacArthur without his corn cob pipe. Instead, he was holding a package.

General MacArthur spoke directly to me, "Just awhile ago in the house, General Marshall told me you will be going to Canton very soon. Will you take this package with you to Canton? This package belongs to Amah² and is to be delivered to her family in Canton." I replied, "Yes sir, General, I will be glad to do so." General MacArthur boldly interjected, "Splendid. I appreciate your instant and prompt response to agree to help Amah." Afterward, General MacArthur was pleased to introduce Amah to me. As she was born in Canton, we were talking to each other in Cantonese dialect and very much at ease.

On my arrival in Canton, I was very surprised to see Major Henry Ching, who was born in Hanford and lived in Fresno. He was employed by the California State Agriculture Department. I immediately handed over Amah's package to Henry Ching. There was a written note of instruction on the package for contacting the proper receiver. Henry Ching was very excited and anxious to ask many things about me. He hastily mentioned that in recent days at the U.S. Army Headquarters in Shamen, Canton, the staff was stirred up because of two unexpected messages related to me. One message was from the Office of General MacArthur in Tokyo and the other message was from the Office of General Marshall in Nanking. Imagine, two Five Star Generals were concerned about my well-being in Canton.

I drove a jeep to the village to visit my relatives. I had a full duffle bag of goodies which I had purchased from the U.S. Army PX—candies, cookies, nuts, chewing gum, soap, shampoo, dried fruits, etc. I joyfully gave away everything to the relatives. It was a happy time with relatives in the village. After four days of fun and pleasure in Canton, I returned to Nanking.

In 1946, summertime was very hot in Nanking. Generalissimo and his party had

decided to move to Kuling, Lushan, the summer capital. Weather in Kuling was pleasant and comfortable. Meanwhile, Premier Chou Enlai and party would be in Nanking. In order for General Marshall to negotiate between the two parties, he divided the week's schedule accordingly. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, Marshall was in Nanking. On Thursdays, Fridays, and weekends, he was in Kuling. As Kuling was a mountain retreat, there were no proper roads for cars. Along the mountain paths, there were seven tea stops. Normally, it took about an hour and a half by sedan chair to reach Kuling.

That summer of 1946, General Marshall commuted seven times to Kuling from Nanking. The pleasant house assigned to General Marshall and his staff was part of the compound quarters for Generalissimo's group in Kuling. The house had a large veranda measuring thirty feet long and eight feet wide. The veranda had become an outdoor place for evening movies.

The seating arrangement on the veranda was carefully planned. The first and second rows were composed of two sofa chairs which were reserved exclusively for General and Mrs. Marshall and Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek. The third, fourth, and fifth rows consisted of three dining chairs each for the staff members.

The outside of the house was surrounded with beautiful gardens amidst the natural beauty of the Lushan Mountains. In the afternoon, the three great ladies—Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Madame Wei Taomin³, and Mrs. Marshall—usually got together for tea and pleasant friendly chats.

One morning in Kuling, I was with General Marshall and he firmly ordered me to take the day off. He told me that Madame Wei had invited me over to her house. Mrs. Marshall gave me a note to take to Madame Wei. On my arrival, Madame Wei welcomed and escorted me to the dining room for breakfast. She then introduced me to Ambassador Wei Taomin and to a very lovely girl, her niece Jenny. I was seated next to Jenny. I was very impressed with Jenny, who was friendly, charming, personable, sophisticated, well educated, very pretty, and from a high-ranking family. By now, with the happenings going on, I had a suspicious feeling that lovely Jenny was suppose to be my pending date.

After a good breakfast, we went on a picture tour on sedan chairs. We toured many interesting and lovely places and enjoyed the natural beauty of Lushan. There were two servants along on the tour. About noontime, a picnic luncheon was ready

for us to enjoy. After the picnic tour, we returned to the house. Later on, in the early evening, an elaborate dinner was served. Then, Madame Wei intentionally suggested that I take Jenny to the movie.

Normally, the movie would start at 8 p.m., when it became dark outside. From Jenny's place to the movie was only half a block away. We were walking very slowly and hoping that the movie had already started. When we arrived at the veranda, the movie had not yet started. They were all waiting for our arrival. You can imagine how I was feeling in this moment of dilemma.

Madame Chiang and Mrs. Marshall were seated in the front row. Generalissimo and General Marshall were seated in the second row behind the two ladies. Upon our arrival, both Madame Chiang and Mrs. Marshall got up from their comfortable sofa to offer the seats to Jenny and me. At the same time, Generalissimo and General Marshall both stood up to offer their seats to the ladies. The two gentle ladies graciously declined the gallant offer and seated themselves in the third row on the straight-back dining chairs.

I was petrified and speechless during the sudden bewildering happenings. I was numb, unable to watch, and had no idea about the movie. When the movie was finally over, somehow I was able and pretentiously bold enough to escort Jenny home. Everyone was watching Jenny and me clumsily leaving the veranda.

The following morning, General Marshall cautiously and carefully queried me, "Did you enjoy last night's movie? You and Jenny were very nice together. How do you feel about Jenny?" I replied straightforwardly, "Sir, I just don't know how to answer or what to say. I actually cannot remember anything about the movie because I was too nervous. I was seated in the front row with a lovely girl next to me. I had no right to be in the front row. It was just not proper for me to sit there. When the two great ladies offered their reserved seats, I should have declined because the situation was strictly forbidden by protocol. I awkwardly slouched down on the sofa chair and tried hopelessly to hide myself in embarrassment. I was stunned, bewildered, in a daze, and hopelessly helpless. It was a moment of ridiculous protocol confusion."

I continued, "Jenny is a lovely girl, sophisticated, and well educated. Jenny has all the fine qualities of a perfect girl. However, I am no match for her. I am too frightened to even dare think about the possibility. The real truth is that lovely

Jenny is just too good and too high class for me. I have not even completed my college education. Besides, I am just a cook."

That afternoon, the three great ladies were in the garden to enjoy tea as usual. Somehow, they had gotten the message that lovely Jenny was too good and too high class for me.

Moscow with General Marshall

When General Marshall became the new Secretary of State, he was scheduled to be at the Big Four Foreign Ministers Conference in Moscow at the end of February in 1947. The U.S. delegation with the Secretary of State consisted of General Mark Clark, General Lucious Clay, General Bedell Smith, Charles Bohlen, Robert Murphy, Benjamin Cohen, and Harrison Freeman Matthews. In Moscow, we were staying at the Spaso House, a large stately mansion residence for U.S. Ambassador and Mrs. Bedell Smith.

I remember when Mrs. Bedell Smith invited us to the ballet at the famous Bolshoi Theater. Secretary of State Marshall did not attend because he was being briefed for the next day's meeting with the Russian Foreign Office. There were six of us who went: Mrs. Bedell Smith, General Mark Clark, General Lucious Clay, Robert Murphy, John Foster Dulles, and me, Richard Wing. We were seated in the exclusive box seat. The ballet was Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, featuring the celebrated prima donna, the legendary Ulanova, the greatest Russian ballerina. *Swan Lake* was spectacular and fabulous. Ulanova was very graceful, outstanding, and impressive on stage. It was a breathtaking performance of perfection, an unforgettable enchanting evening at the Bolshoi.

The following morning, I told Secretary of State Marshall about *Swan Lake*. When he went to the morning meeting with the delegation, he casually asked General Mark Clark about his evening at the Bolshoi. General Mark Clark replied that it was his first time to see a ballet and he mentioned that the ballet was about some kind of feathered birds dancing and tiptoeing all over the stage: "Goose Pond." All of a sudden, there was an outburst of contagious laughter from the distinguished delegation. The entire room became hilariously amused over "Goose Pond." General Mark Clark thought it was funny, too.

In the Spaso House, my bedroom happened to be adjacent to the telecommunications room. One evening, I noticed a group of staff members gathered next to the telecommunications room. I was told that they were waiting to sign a list in order to be scheduled to telephone home to the U.S.A. for only two dollars for five minutes. This diplomatic courtesy was for a one-time deal for today only. Imagine, a transcontinental telephone call from Moscow to your hometown for only two dollars. It was a wonderful deal. I signed my name on the waiting list and waited for my connection. My brother, Ernie, answered the phone in Hanford. He was very surprised and excited to hear from me from Moscow. He was rather worried and asked if there was something wrong. My sister, Harriet, took over the telephone. She was even more excited and worried and kept on talking and asking all kinds of questions. She asked whether I was sick, or in an accident, or some kind of mishap or misfortune, and why I called from Moscow. Because of the brief time limitation of five minutes, by the time I was able to talk, I was able to say only ten words.

I had no expectations that my two-dollar call from Moscow was a frenzied nightmare for my sister, Harriet. That evening, I immediately wrote a quick letter to explain the situation. It was supposed to be a jolly moment; instead, it was a transcontinental confusion. The following morning, I told Secretary of State Marshall about the two-dollar telephone event. Secretary of State Marshall thought the story was very amusing, and worth more than two dollars.

Saying Goodbye

One morning in August 1947, a month before my honorable discharge from the military service, I received a surprise telephone call from the Office of the Secretary of State. It was from General Carter, assistant to Secretary of State Marshall. He told me to be ready. "You have an official appointment with the Secretary of State at the State Department, scheduled for 11 this morning. Rudolph will drive you to the State Department and he will direct you to the private elevator to the Office of the Secretary of State."

I replied, "You must be joking with me. I was with Secretary of State Marshall all morning until he left in his limousine with Rudolph, and that was less than an hour ago. Besides, you know that I live here with Secretary of State and Mrs. Marshall at 2500 Foxhall Road." With a jovial tone, General Carter repeated his definite command, "Just be ready. Rudolph will come by."

With a rather confused and bewildered feeling, I immediately went to see Mrs. Marshall. I told her about my official appointment with the Secretary of State. Mrs. Marshall smilingly said, "You just go along with Rudolph to the State Department and see what will happen."

Rudolph drove me in the limousine to the State Department. He then helpfully directed me to the private elevator. General Carter was pleased to see me, and directed me to the Office of the Secretary of State. At the same time, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and Assistant to the Secretary of State Robert Lovett were coming out from the office.

As I entered the office, Secretary of State Marshall was busy at his desk. He then signaled and summoned me to stand beside him. James Shepley came in with a camera. He was a photojournalist in Washington, D.C. for *Time* magazine, to later become the editor-in-chief for *Time* magazine. He took over a dozen photo shots from various angles of Secretary of State Marshall and me. General Carter pleasantly presented four photos, specially chosen, to me. I was very surprised, because all four photos had been personally autographed by Secretary of State Marshall. I was overwhelmed and deeply touched with joyful delight.

Afterward, General Carter informed me, "In my years of service as Assistant to Secretary of State Marshall, this was the only time—by official appointment on the agenda—that Secretary of State Marshall has ever performed such a memorable memento for a person. And that person is you." I was speechless.

That evening, I expressed my sincere gratitude and thankfulness to Secretary of State and Mrs. Marshall for their precious photo gift, and for their gentle and gracious kindheartedness. I will forever and always be grateful for the privilege and honor to serve Secretary of State and Mrs. Marshall. They are truly two great and magnificent persons.

In October 1959, I received a telegram from Washington, D.C. It was from Colonel George who was an aide to Secretary of State Marshall. The telegram stated that Mrs. Marshall would like for me to be at Secretary of State Marshall's funeral ceremony at Arlington Cemetery. Secretary of State Marshall had left instructions: "Bury me simply, like any ordinary officer of the U.S. Army, who served his country honorably. No fuss. No elaborate ceremonials. Keep the service short. Confine the guest list to the family. And above everything, do it quietly."

The chapel in Arlington Cemetery was rather small with seating for less than 200 people. Inside the quaint chapel, there was one single center aisle. On one side, Mrs. Marshall was seated in the first row and the family members were seated in the rows behind. On the other side, President Eisenhower was in the front row and former President Truman was seated in the second row. I came with General Carter and Forrest Pogue, the military historian; we were in the eighth row.

The ceremony was brief, simple, quiet, and emotional as we were all spiritually touched by Secretary of State Marshall. As we were leaving down the aisle, there seemingly was a strange, mystical, and heavenly feeling that Secretary of State Marshall had arisen to eternity. It was the passing of a very great, extraordinary man, and yet one so simple and humble.

It was my final visit with Secretary of State Marshall, who has transcended to a higher and peaceful place beyond the world of conflicts.

I am at home now, in my kitchen in Hanford, California.

Endnotes

¹ Gong Ting Shu was Anglicized to Chow Wing for reasons that are not clear to his descendants.

² General Douglas MacArthur's young son, Arthur, had a Chinese nanny—or Amah—named Au Cheu.

³ Wei Tao-ming, close friend of Chiang Kai-shek and Guomindang's lawyer, was the Chinese wartime ambassador to the United States.

From Hanford to Hollywood: Remembering Bessie Loo

(Dec. 30, 1902 – Oct. 28, 1998)

By Jack Ong



★ Bessie Loo, center, at a gala reception hosted by Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty honoring Madame Chiang Kai Shek. With Bessie are (first to right) Mrs. Yorty, actress June Kyoko Lu, Madame Chiang and actress Lisa Lu. Photo courtesy of Jack Ong.

“I was 10 when my parents sent me to school. On my first day, a crowd of boys surrounded me! They’d never seen a Chinese girl attending school here in Hanford! I will always remember their curiosity, the way they pointed and stared at me up and down in my black Chinese pajamas. I felt like an exotic figurine or China doll.”

Bessie Loo never grew much taller than a diminutive “China doll” height of 5’1”, but she certainly rose to lofty heights in the Hollywood entertainment industry, earning respect, success, and fame as the first Chinese American talent agent in the United States. She’d made the big time—from Hanford to Hollywood. She was pleased to relate her earliest memories, and being “on location” in her hometown

made them all the more vivid.

We had driven to Hanford on a bright, crispy autumn Saturday in 1984, just Bessie and I, because she knew my appetite for escargots and wanted me to try them at the five-star Imperial Dynasty Restaurant.

It was also the only opportunity we would have together to start the interview process for an article I was preparing to write about her. So our daytrip to Hanford was a perfect time for the lady to begin telling her tale to me, in the small central California town where the tale began.

Bessie never forgot her Hanford roots, relishing the occasional opportunity to escort friends through China Alley where she grew up.

“China Alley was once called Sue Chung Kee Alley, after my father,” she said, pointing out historic locations preserved to remind callers of one of America’s earliest and largest Chinese communities in California. Bessie’s father immigrated to Hanford from China in 1886 at the age of 16. He married a Chinese woman from San Francisco. Bessie presumed it was an arranged marriage. Sue (family name first, Chinese style) built a general merchandise store at No. 10 China Alley, which Bessie’s brother later turned into a popular herb shop. The family lived above the store; Bessie had an older brother and an older sister. When the Imperial Dynasty was expanded in 1958, the Sue residence was incorporated as part of the restaurant.

Bessie offered up stories of her youth in a soft, ladylike voice with a quality of assurance that beseeched people to be quiet and listen. Her tours of Hanford invariably concluded with a multiple-course dinner at the Wing family’s celebrated Imperial Dynasty, another pride of the town, where proprietor Richard Wing would make a show of inspecting each dish before declaring it fine enough for Bessie and her guests. After all, Bessie had known Richard since he was a boy; they were both Hanford legends, and so was the Imperial Dynasty itself.

Bessie’s visits to the famous restaurant always included a special stop—men and women together—at the second-floor ladies’ room, where she would proudly point out a most unusual object on display: the black baby carriage of her infancy... in the very room where Bessie was born.

“I can only imagine what you’re thinking,” Bessie giggled, “but I think it’s a hoot to

have such a personal memento holding court in such a frequently used room, don't you?" I admired the polished steel spokes of the antique buggy and made some corny remark about "Loo's carriage on exhibit in the loo," causing her to smile with delight and laugh her distinctive laugh, one that got higher pitched as she found something funnier and funnier in a conversation. The laugh built to an occasional throaty guffaw that delighted everyone around her, so it was always a pleasure to make Bessie guffaw!

After dinner, during the drive home to Los Angeles from Hanford, Bessie spoke of her traditional Chinese upbringing in Hanford, recalling how she felt the tremors of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, attending Chinese classes, how she was the first person in her family to embrace Christianity, one of the first Chinese to graduate from Hanford High School and the "very first" Chinese girl from Hanford to attend college (UCLA, then San Francisco Teachers College, where she graduated in 1928). She met her future husband, Richard Loo, in Northern California when he attended UC Berkeley.¹

After teaching for a year at Commodore Stockton School in San Francisco, Bessie married Richard in 1929, which automatically terminated her teaching contract. "Married women were not allowed to teach back then, can you believe that?" Then the newlyweds made their "bold move to the bright lights of Hollywood."

I took notes as Bessie drove. The more stories she related, the more amazed she seemed to become at the life she'd lived, realizing what a pioneer she had been, "a women's libber before women libbed," she joked.

The notes I made while she drove included my "admiration for this little old lady's remarkable memory" and my wish that she would let me take the wheel of that big, baby blue Cadillac of hers, because, even perched on a special pillow, Bessie could barely see over the dash, and it was getting really dark!

Strong-willed, independent, in control, resourceful, proper, elegant, fastidious, well-groomed, proud, a really gutsy woman—those attributes I scribbled became lasting impressions of the once-powerful agent who was now retired. I was getting to know Bessie in her senior years. She had been my agent, a seminal force in the progress of my acting career who even shelled out cash for my Screen Actors Guild membership, which I repaid with my first acting paycheck. Now, in her early 80s, the legend had relinquished her Bessie Loo Agency (America's first talent agency to

represent Asian Americans exclusively) to partner Guy Lee. Guy had been an actor and Bessie's client, becoming her agency partner in 1973, eventually taking over the business.

Now Bessie had time on her hands, and was becoming a close friend. She was eager to share her expertise, her contacts, and her history to benefit me. Her expertise was punctuated with good old-fashioned values. Her contacts were generous and helpful. The history of Bessie Loo... priceless.

Though she was of my mother's generation, Bessie became like a protective aunt to me, a professional with more worldly sophistication and ambition than most of the average Asian American women of her time, certainly compared to my mother, an illiterate woman from the old country. To those closest to Bessie in her time—her small nuclear family and large circle of friends and clients—she was known for her upbeat zest for life, common sense, deep faith in God, no-nonsense work ethic, and a true heart for her Chinese heritage.



◆ Bessie Loo celebrates her 90th birthday at a party planned by friend and client Beulah Quo. The belated party was held Feb. 24, 1991. Photo courtesy of Jack Ong.

To Hanford and throughout the Chinese American community as well as the Asian American showbiz community, Bessie Loo and her legacy as an Asian American pioneer in the movie and TV industry are an enduring treasure.

Bessie was a Hollywood player in that “golden” era when studios were in power and run by people like Darryl F. Zanuck, Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, and Jack Warner; when the movie business was even more of an exclusive men’s club than it is today. She was on a first-name basis with the likes of Robert Wise, Gregory Peck, Howard Koch, and Albert Broccoli.

In Los Angeles, Bessie and Richard both began working as extras. This outraged Bessie’s parents, who felt their daughter was wasting her college education and teaching skills on a “low-class” profession which they didn’t regard as a legitimate profession at all.

Richard managed a pajama store to bring home a regular income while he and Bessie pursued work in Hollywood. (They were to divorce eventually, a subject she kept very private.) Bessie landed bit parts in *The Rainbow Pass* (1937), *The Good Earth* (1937) and *Mr. Wong in Chinatown* (1939). In the latter two films, Richard had larger roles. It was while working on *The Good Earth* at MGM that Bessie’s bilingual skills and outgoing personality made her a valuable liaison between the production team and the dozens of Chinese extras, many of whose English language skills were limited.

Central Casting recognized this outstanding resource, offering a job to Bessie in 1939; she held out until the venerable casting company agreed to set her up to work



✦ Bessie Loo at work in her Sunset Boulevard office in 1973. Photo by Ed Ikuta.

at home with a special phone line.

“I was raising the twins by then [Beverly Jane and Angela Marie, born in 1931], and I didn’t want to leave them with a sitter,” Bessie recalled. “Richard’s acting career was taking off. He was a very good actor, especially in bad guy roles. As for me, I saw the light where acting was concerned—my opportunities were only as an extra or a maid. Even in *Good Earth* I was stuck in the kitchen! The roles for Orientals were very limited as well as stereotyped. Maybe the other actors didn’t look upon the roles that way back then, but I did. They used Caucasians to portray us in the main roles. I felt getting into casting was much more stable a job, and they let me work from home so I could care for the girls. I managed to be a working wife and mother. I was proud of that.”²

When Hollywood began turning out World War II movies, Bessie’s workload increased. Because Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps, the movie jobs for Asians fell to the Chinese, Filipinos, and Koreans in Los Angeles.

“We were all just called Orientals back then,” Bessie said. “They couldn’t tell the difference in casting, nor did they care. I focused on the number of jobs available for actors, and decided I could make more money as an agent. I knew all the performers, I knew where to find them, I had connections as a casting director, and I was very confident the Bessie Loo Agency would be successful.”

With her husband Richard as her top client, Bessie quickly signed up a corral of “Oriental” men and women, and never looked back. She and her agency staff (including daughter Angela at one time) made the rounds of studios every day, dropping off photos and gathering employment opportunities for clients.

“It’s so much easier to be an agent nowadays,” she said. “Now, all the roles are broken down and put on a big list that’s delivered to the agents every morning. When I started the agency in the early ’40s, we just wore out our shoes. But I had a wonderful time and met everyone I could. Being an agent seemed to be my true calling. I handled 75 clients at one time.”

Every producer and director who needed Asian actors was soon automatically calling Bessie Loo. By the time she retired, the highly regarded Bessie Loo Agency had enjoyed a 40-plus-year run.

"I had the best martial artists and the best Asian actors," she said. "It was a pleasure to nurture new talent—I felt like a mother hen to most of them. Those were wonderful years, very busy and glamorous."

Bessie maintained a bustling office on Sunset Boulevard and a home in the once-segregated Los Feliz area, where she and Richard entertained regularly. She said she was involved with the casting of too many movies and TV shows to remember, but if there were Asian American performers in the films and TV episodes of the '50s and '60s, one could be sure most of them were represented by Bessie Loo.

"We had the long run of war movies, and big pictures like *Keys to the Kingdom*, *Blood Alley*, *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *King and I*, *Flower Drum Song*... then there was TV—*Adventures in Paradise*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *Hong Kong*, *Kung Fu*, shows like those, lots of supporting roles on the small screen.... Yes, there was plenty of work for my clients. No big starring parts, sadly, but there were roles to be had, and the agency was booming. A writer for *Parade* magazine actually called me a tycoon!"

While operating her agency and being a mother, Bessie also founded Crown International Travel Agency and devoted time to a variety of organizations and charitable causes. She was a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, served on the board of the Federation of Women's Clubs, was president of the Los Angeles Chinese Women's Club, China Society of Southern California and the Committee to Conserve Chinese Culture, and a life member of the Ida Mayer Cummings Home for the Aged. In 1978, she was appointed to the California State Economic Development Committee, sworn in by another Hanford legend, Superior Court Judge Delbert Wong. Bessie also supported the Screen Smart Set, the Motion Picture Relief Fund, the Chinese American Museum (in its early formative years), and East West Players.

In fact, all seven actors in the ranks of the nine founding members of East West Players—America's first and foremost Asian American theatre organization—were clients of Bessie: James Hong, Guy Lee, Pat Li, June Kyoko Lu, Mako, Soon-Teck Oh, and Beulah Quo. Some of the Bessie Loo Agency's other well-known clients were Keye Luke, Benson Fong, Lisa Lu, Robert Ito, and John Lone.

Of all her community work, Bessie was proudest of her efforts for China Relief during World War II and the tumultuous times leading up to the communist

takeover.

In 1976, she was presented an Outstanding Volunteer Service award by the Los Angeles Human Rights Commission during its Bicentennial Salute to the Women of L.A. She was, in addition, honored by the Los Angeles City Council during Mayor Tom Bradley's term of service; the State of California; the L.A. City Employees Asian American Association; and AAPAA, the Association of Asian Pacific American Artists.

James Hong was president of AAPAA in 1982 when the organization produced a major tribute on October 24 called "An Affair With Bessie." He remembers moving from Minnesota to Los Angeles in the early '50s to try his hand at acting. The first Christmas after meeting Bessie, he and a comedy partner dressed up in their bulkiest Midwest winter clothes to pay her a surprise visit.

"She was living in the Hollywood Hills above Franklin Avenue," Hong said. "On a beautiful day you could see Catalina. We went up to her door, lit a candle, and knocked, then began to sing 'Silent Night.' Bessie opened the door, looked at us, and became totally emotional. This was during Christmas. She never forgot it. She became my agent and we were friends for life."

That agent/client friendship was signed, sealed, and delivered with a hilarious comedy routine which James created and performed to the delight of audiences at parties and special events. Bessie herself loved the sketch, relishing Hong's way of mimicking her at work, fielding calls with two telephones at once, barking orders, negotiating bigger bucks for her stars.

"If he had on my wig and a dress, I would swear that's really me up there," Bessie laughed and applauded when James reprised his routine at the AAPAA tribute. "He's got me down pat, hasn't he? What a talent, that James Hong!"

James attributes Bessie's success as an agent to her "charm and fearless quality. She would bulldog her way into anybody's office. She treated them like they were equals. She had no competition. A couple tried, but it was useless. She was all-encompassing. She didn't want to lose anything. She was never a so-called high-priced agent like MCA or the conglomerates. She worked for too many clients, had too much going on for too many people. Bessie Loo did something for everybody."



★ Susan, James and April Hong remember Bessie Loo in scrapbook photos and clippings. Photo courtesy of Jack Ong.

Robert Ito remembers his initial contact with Bessie in the early '60s, when he was dancing in Steve Parker's "Holiday in Japan" at the Frontier in Las Vegas. Bessie saw the popular extravaganza, arranged to meet the young Canadian entertainer, and urged him to look her up if he ever got to L.A.

He did, after touring with "Flower Drum Song," and signed with the Bessie Loo Agency. Her advice to him: "Play the real person. Don't play the stereotype character they expect you to play."

"Bessie was always concerned with her clients' welfare," Robert recalls. "Two weeks before the TV series *Quincy* was scheduled to shoot, I hadn't even gotten an audition and guys were being called back already, so Bessie worked hard to get me an interview." That interview for the role of Sam Fujiyama led to a seven-year gig for Ito.

"Bessie was really, really nice to us," he says. "She never forgot us. She had class and ran with some of the biggest names. The credit she deserved, she didn't get. The thing was, her major objective was to get Asian actors working."

April Hong, because of the close relationship her parents [James and Susan] had with Bessie, grew up calling the agent "Auntie Bessie" and began getting acting jobs

through the Bessie Loo Agency by the time she was four. "It was a Disney print job in 1982," April recalls.

Now a multifaceted, busy young woman and card-carrying actor, April is one of today's generation of Asian Americans who recognizes the value of Bessie's life's work.

"I realize more than ever what an influence she has been to me as a child and now," April says. "She left a legacy, and her example of living has inspired me to do what I feel will make a change in the world. Through hard times, I often think of Auntie Bessie and say to myself, 'If she could do it, I can do it.' She was a woman and Asian on top of that. Women didn't have many rights and neither did Asians. This is why she's an inspiration to me."

April speaks of visiting a very frail Bessie in the hospital a few days before her death on October 28, 1998: "I went to see her with my parents. The TV was on; she'd always been very much into watching Christian TV. Bessie couldn't speak much at all, only mumble, but she was smiling and spirited. I'll always remember that day, how she was pointing to something in the corner behind my parents and me. I don't know what she was pointing at, but I thought it could have been the presence of an angel waiting to take her on to the next world."

Actually, that would make perfect sense if Bessie Loo herself had anything to say about it, a perfect segue in her remarkable life... from Hanford to Hollywood to Heaven!

Editor's Note: Jack Ong is an actor, writer, minister, and Board Member of CHSSC. A former journalist, he edited Valley magazine when it was distributed through the Los Angeles Times. Ong is Executive Director of The Dr. Haing S. Ngor Foundation.

Endnotes

¹ Many archival materials report that Bessie met Richard at UCLA, but in an interview with CHSSC historians, she said they met when Richard was enrolled at UC Berkeley. Richard Loo's distinguished acting career included roles in at least 150 films and television shows. He was born on Oct. 10, 1903, in Maui, Hawaii and died Nov. 20, 1983, in Los Angeles.

² In addition to Bessie's known movie appearances, a number of historical resources (including silent movie archivists) indicate an "uncredited" appearance by Bessie Loo in *Back to Yellow Jacket*, a 1922 silent Western. No known prints of the movie still exist, nor could anyone interviewed for this *Gum Saan Journal* piece recall Bessie mentioning *Back to Yellow Jacket*.