

# Introduction

In 1948, when I was 7 years old, my family moved from our crowded rented house in Oakland's Chinatown to a spacious five-bedroom split-level house in a predominantly white neighborhood less than two miles away. I was still too young to be of significant help at my parents' restaurant, so I stayed home more than my older sisters, who were practically held hostage at the restaurant. A favorite pastime was to listen to the radio in our new home. (It wasn't until 1952 that our family bought our first television set, which was still a luxury for most households.) On autumn Saturday afternoons, my ears were glued to radio broadcasts of football games played by the University of California at Berkeley ("Cal" to locals). The late 1940s were the glory years of Cal football, whose coach, Pappy Waldorf, was a living legend. It didn't matter that I was a Chinese American kid whose immigrant parents spoke broken English and didn't know the first thing about American football. I became a football fanatic and by extension a sports nut who supplemented my radio listening with hours spent reading the stories and memorizing the statistics of my favorite teams and players in the sports pages of the local paper.

Kids don't immediately realize any limits. When I started high school in the ninth grade, I had the brilliant idea of trying out for the freshman basketball team. After all, I had spent years playing schoolyard football, baseball, and basketball. I was barely taller than five feet. As I joined other boys my age—but not necessarily my height—it became painfully obvious after one quick scrimmage that I was delusional. While my skills were about average, my height wasn't, so I was not invited back for the next tryout. I don't recall whether I was emotionally crushed by this rejection, but I turned to the next best thing—writing about sports for the school

newspaper. Since I had absorbed by osmosis the sportswriting idiom—military analogies, action verbs, and colorful clichés—I felt confident I could chronicle the exploits of my high school’s sports teams. So began my journalistic writing “career.”

Sportswriting took a backseat in my senior year, however, because my journalism teacher, a slender, nervous woman in her fifties named Blanche Hurd, appointed me to be editor of the school’s yearbook. I agonized over a decision since I really loved writing sports for the school newspaper, but Miss Hurd persuaded me to head up the yearbook staff. I’m not sure why I gave in, because she was not dealing from a position of strength. She had taken over my high school’s journalism classes in my junior year, succeeding the exceedingly popular James Black. It took a long time for the mousy Miss Hurd to win any respect from her students, although I didn’t have any animosity toward her. In fact, what I remember about her—other than her naming me yearbook editor—was some prescient advice that resonates with me even today.

One day during my senior year, Miss Hurd took me aside to talk about my future. I don’t remember what I said, but I vividly recollect what she said. If I wanted to pursue journalism as a career, she said, I would have to be “twice as good” to succeed. I heard her words, but I did not fully grasp her meaning. Twice as good. I was 16 years old and while I thought I knew a great deal about myself and the world, I knew very little.

Miss Hurd was one of two high school teachers who were most significant in my development as a writer and thinker. The other was George Stokes, a history teacher. Mr. Stokes had only one arm; he wore a prosthetic for his other arm. He didn’t let that disability bother him. More than any other teacher, he pushed me and my classmates to think for ourselves. His class lessons were filled with dates and important events, but he insisted that we think about dates and events and that we write critically in our essays. And he did it in an aggressive style that challenged us to do our best.

When I enrolled at Cal in 1958, I pursued my first love—sportswriting. Even before I registered for any classes, I signed up to be a sportswriter in the dungeon that was the office of the *Daily Californian* in Eshleman Hall. I had the good fortune of covering Cal’s football team coached by Marv Levy before he became the successful head coach of the Buffalo Bills and the superb basketball teams under Coach Pete Newell. I saw Newell’s team

win a national championship, then lose it the next year. I even rose to the exalted position of sports editor in my sophomore year, a precocious rise for a Chinatown kid. Alas, my sports editorship was truncated by a political revolution at Cal, a precursor to the Free Speech Movement of 1964 that shook the world.

My Cal experience helped shape my political worldview. I was there a little more than ten years after the United States, as the leader of the Allied forces that defeated the fascist regimes of Germany, Japan, and Italy, emerged as a world power. Russia turned from friend to foe. The Cold War set in. Rabid anticommunism was in the air in Washington, D.C., and coursed through universities like Cal, where professors were forced to sign loyalty oaths and where nervous administrators tangled with student freethinkers.

I had only cursory knowledge of these irresistible forces from my cubicle at the *Daily Californian*. I was content to write a column, which I called “The Chinese Bandit,” after the nickname given to the defensive unit of the Louisiana State University football team. As sports editor, however, I was a member of the editorial board of the *Daily Cal*, led by a quiet intellectual named Dan Silver. Silver and his news-side editors, all seniors and liberal to one degree or another, decided to endorse a set of candidates representing a leftist student group called Slate who were running for student government positions. I went along with the endorsement even though I was not fully invested in the ideological leanings of Silver and his top editors. It was not as though I were a political eunuch. I was simply less mature politically than the top editors of the paper, who were my elders.

Our endorsement of Slate was a giant no-no to the conservative administrators, who engineered a coup of the *Daily Cal*’s editorial board, forcing us to resign. The administration replaced us with more compliant students from the fraternities and sororities. The *Daily Cal* staff went off campus and published a newspaper called *The Independent Californian* with the generous assistance of a veteran local journalist named Orr Kelly. We hawked our newly minted paper on the streets near the campus, but our enthusiasm wasn’t sufficient to sustain our resource-poor efforts. Eventually, a deal was brokered, allowing some of the old *Daily Cal* staff to join the Greek-letter-society interlopers. Since I was the youngest of the editorial board members, I was named to a high news-side position—

managing editor—thus joining the ranks of the more serious news-side staff, and I haven't looked back since. In the last semester of my senior year, I took over as *Daily Cal* editor and led the staff back into a more liberal territory. The civil rights movement in the south was heating up, and I had friends who spent summers on freedom rides and otherwise lent their support to southern black people who fought to end legal segregation.

In the summer following my graduation from Cal, I got my first professional journalism job with the help of a Cal journalism professor—as a summer replacement reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I was only 21 years old, still wet-behind-the-ears. A veteran reporter told me at the time that I broke a color line, becoming the first Chinese American reporter on a daily newspaper in the city with the largest ethnic Chinese community in the United States. That summer job lasted only five months, but I was able to land two other jobs at Bay Area papers during the next year and a half. One was with the afternoon San Francisco paper at the time, a hybrid called the *News Call Bulletin*. There I continued my political education. One of the big stories I covered was the local civil rights protests at the famous Sheraton Palace Hotel, which didn't hire black people or other racial minorities.

With two years of journalism under my belt—and too many stories about five-alarm fires, petty crimes, and murders—I needed a break, so I signed up for the Peace Corps. I served three and one half years in the Philippines, which wasn't my specific choice. But since I wanted to go to Asia to get closer to my ethnic Chinese roots, the Philippines was a good alternative because it hosted a Peace Corps program, whereas China did not. With my unaccented American English and my Chinese face, I baffled ordinary Filipinos who thought Americans were white and blonde. As much as any experience of being a racial minority in the United States, my years as an *inchick* (the Tagalog word for Chinese) in the Philippines enriched my understanding of the sensitivities and pitfalls of interracial relationships.

Racial matters were never at the forefront of my early journalism career, which I resumed after the Peace Corps and a master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The *Wall Street Journal's* hiring me in 1970 after my Columbia education was not because I was a racial minority. Newspapers in those days, like many other American institutions, did not have affirmative action programs.

Nonetheless, as I settled into a routine life as a staff reporter for the *Journal*, first in Cleveland, Ohio, then in San Francisco, a yearning to write about my racial roots and identity issues began to surface. The *Journal* was one of those rare major newspapers that encouraged young reporters to propose their own stories, especially for the three precious feature slots on its rigid front page. After President Nixon stunned the world by resuming relations with communist China, I wrote a front-page *Journal* story about how some Chinese Americans were being used as cultural “bridges” between the two societies. I profiled a new Chinese American civil rights group, Chinese for Affirmative Action of San Francisco. A year after the so-called fall of Saigon, I wrote a feature story about how newly arrived Vietnamese refugees were faring in their new home state of California. During Labor Day weekend of 1977, a San Francisco Chinatown gang shot up a busy restaurant in a spectacular revenge hit. Going beyond that criminal act, I wrote an in-depth front-page feature about how Chinatowns formed and why they incubate conditions that can lead to such acts of organized violence.

As prestigious as it was to work for one of the nation’s finest newspapers, I ached to get closer to my community—both geographic and ethnic. When I heard that Robert C. Maynard was taking over the *Oakland Tribune* as its new editor in late 1979, I asked him for a job. I had met and conversed with Maynard before. He had a solid national reputation through his reporting, writing, and editorializing at the *Washington Post*. He quit the *Post*—and his wife Nancy Hicks had quit the *New York Times*—to launch an ambitious initiative to train more racial minority journalists to become staff members at more daily newspapers in the United States. This time, for me, race was a factor in my hiring. I had told Maynard I wanted a writing job. He replied that he wanted me to be business editor of the *Tribune*, taking advantage of my nine years at the *Wall Street Journal*. I had not given any thought before to an editing job, but I felt it was an opportunity I could not pass up. So began a seventeen-year association with the *Tribune*, the newspaper I grew up with but one I never thought was friendly to me or the neighborhood of my childhood, which happened to be in the shadow of the Tribune Tower.

The *Tribune* had its zenith under the ownership of the Knowland family, led by patriarch Joseph Knowland, a Congressman who happened to own a newspaper. Under the Knowlands, the *Tribune* ran Oakland, along

with Henry J. Kaiser, the industrialist responsible for building dams and paving thousands of miles of highways throughout the western United States and building and repairing ships during World War II and whose legacy is the pioneering Kaiser Permanente health-maintenance organization.

Oakland was a different city before World War II than it was after it. Racial minorities such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans were a relatively small presence before the war. But the Kaiser industrial complex needed workers for its shipyards, so thousands of black people from Texas, Louisiana, and other southern states migrated west for wartime jobs. Federal immigration restrictions kept the numbers of Asians low in Oakland and the rest of the United States. After the war, many African Americans stayed and immigration restrictions were loosened, allowing in more Asian and Latino immigrants. Meanwhile, flush with prosperity and a new hubris born of the war's triumphs, America was on the move internally. Suburbs blossomed everywhere, luring middle-class white families. The gritty industrial base began eroding too, leaving cities like Oakland to poorer racial minorities with fewer and fewer industrial jobs.

For about thirty years after the war, the *Tribune* managed to live off the wealth generated by its earlier successes. It was a powerhouse not only in Oakland but also in suburbs to its north, east, and south. Leadership at the *Tribune* shifted from the founding patriarch Joseph to his son William, who had been a conservative Republican United States Senator made famous by his staunch defense of the Nationalist Chinese regime that had escaped to Formosa, now called Taiwan, after losing to Mao Zedong's communists in 1949. William F. Knowland was apparently better as an anticommunist zealot than he was as a businessman, however. At a time when the suburbs were exploding, the *Tribune* inexplicably pulled back its resources and basically ceded that advertising-rich territory to two small chains—one owned by Dean Leshner, the other by Floyd Sparks—that later became prosperous at The Tribune's expense. By the time Robert C. Maynard took over as editor of the *Tribune* under the new ownership of The Gannett Corporation in 1979, the *Tribune* was a mere shadow of its former self.

Nonetheless, Maynard wanted to put his (or Gannett's) money where his mouth was, so he set out to hire qualified racial minority journalists to

work at the *Tribune*, whose staff until then was predominantly white. I was among those he hired under his plan to further integrate the *Tribune*'s staff. Maynard gave me many wonderful opportunities. The most significant was the columnist job. First, I wrote a weekly column about journalism issues and ethics, when I was the *Tribune*'s first and only ombudsman in the mid-1980s. Then in 1988, I asked Maynard and Executive Editor Leroy F. Aarons if I could write a column on general issues for the paper's op-ed page. They agreed, with some reservations. Aarons was concerned I might not be able to sustain a column, especially one that occasionally focused on Asian American issues.

A few years earlier, I had begun writing columns for *East-West News*, a San Francisco Chinatown-based English language weekly run by Gordon Lew. Richard Springer, a white editor at *East-West*, had encouraged me to write a column. By the time I started my *Tribune* column, I had two outlets to voice opinions on a whole range of Asian American issues and, in the case of the *Tribune*, issues having nothing to do with my racial roots or identity. After *East-West* ceased publication in 1989, Patrick Andersen, editor at *Asian Week*, another San Francisco Chinatown-based English language publication, asked me to write my column for him. *Asian Week* was created by John Fang, a visionary businessman who, like the educator Gordon Lew, saw the value of a publication that wrote about Chinese American and Asian American issues.

Meanwhile, I continued to write columns for the *Tribune*, until March 22, 1996, when I was summarily fired at 3 P.M. and ordered out of the building without a chance to gather up my files. By then, the troubled *Tribune* had changed owners again—from Gannett in 1979 to Bob Maynard himself in 1983 to a chain owned by William Dean Singleton in 1992. The new editors under the Singleton regime didn't much like me, but they felt they needed me (and two prominent African American editorial page staff members) at the beginning of the transition from a Maynard-owned *Tribune* to one owned by a company notable in the newspaper business for its obsession with profits and its mostly white suburban markets. Oakland, a much-aligned appendage to world-famous San Francisco, was hardly a white suburb. Its population of close to four hundred thousand is approximately 70 percent non-white, and it was not politically smart for the new owners not to have prominent racial minority writers like me and columnist Brenda Payton, who is African American.

My firing ignited loud protests from local readers and supporters, who picketed the *Tribune* offices in a driving rainstorm demanding my reinstatement. That never happened. The official reason for my firing was “downsizing,” but I was the only news-side employee downsized that day. And the way it was done—perfunctory notification by an immediate supervisor, then an order to leave the building immediately—left the distinct impression that I might be a deranged felon. To this day, I do not know the precise reason for my firing, but I suspect that the conservative white editors who took over the *Tribune* from Maynard did not like my politics and did not like my writing so often about Asian American issues. I thought the four other large newspapers in the San Francisco Bay Area—the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and the *Contra Costa Times* in Walnut Creek—might be interested in hiring me, but the best I could do was a freelance column twice a month from the *Examiner*. While the frequency of my columns is much less than what it was when I was at the *Tribune*, I continue to write journalistically, mostly on Asian American issues.

Why write about Asian American issues, and what exactly is “Asian America”? The Asian presence in the United States is both rich and mostly invisible. It is not my intention here to replay the 150 years of Asian American history except to note that Americans of Asian descent have until the past thirty years lived under second-rate (or worse) conditions and have mostly been worker bees—vilified ones at that during extended periods of economic difficulties. The legacies of exclusion and officially sanctioned discrimination are difficult to shed. The Asian American population grew enormously over the last one-third of the 20th century, and most Asian newcomers do not face the same overt conditions of segregation and discrimination. But even the most highly educated Asian immigrant professional sometimes discovers the ugly underbelly of the American experience—subtle (and not-so-subtle) discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Few of us have reached leadership roles on the national stage. Yet there is a great deal to be said about the Asian American experience that informs the complex American political, economic, and cultural landscape.

Which is why I have written this book, a compilation of stories, columns, essays and commentaries that range widely over a panoply of issues that touch Asian Americans and Americans in general. One of the



great American stories of the late 20th century—and one that continues into the beginning of the 21st century—is the increasingly multiracial, multicultural aspect of the American experience. People of Asian descent have been a big part of that story, although the mainstream news and mass media have been slow to recognize our role in a changing America. Considering my background and politics and professional training, I saw the story developing almost from the time I resumed my journalism career some thirty years ago. I needed to find the appropriate forum to begin telling those stories within the story.

The stories, essays, analyses, and commentaries in this book cover many subjects, from the personal to policy, from the serious to the silly. A reader will learn some details of my cultural upbringing and my family's transformation from a poor rice-growing village in China to planting roots in the San Francisco Bay Area. A reader will also learn a little Asian American history and a lot about the nuances and intricacies of the contemporary Asian American experience. The overriding theme of this collection is the courage, forbearance, tenacity, survival skills, and humanity shown by people from east and southeast Asia who never allowed racism and hatred to deter them from winning a rightful place in the American sun.

# I Hometown

## *In the Shadow of San Francisco*

### *American Dream, Chinatown Branch*

*East Bay Express*, July 30, 1999

Walking along the west side of Webster Street between 7th and 8th Streets in Oakland's Chinatown, it's easy to miss the storefront in the middle of the block. Other stores catch your eye: the ones selling produce and fruits in boxes that bulge onto the sidewalk, another displaying roast ducks, chickens, and glistening maroon-colored strips of oven-roasted pork. At the 7th Street corner, strings of minilights showcase a refurbished Tin's Teahouse. On the 8th Street corner, a spacious window houses a bank.

The relatively unobtrusive storefront at 723 Webster, with its nondescript aluminum door and curtained window, is called the Happy Noodle House. From 1943 to 1961, it was the Great China cafe, the base of my universe for most of the first twenty years of my life. It is where several of my older sisters first lived when they came as children from China, and it's where my father ran two businesses, one of them legal, the other shady. The latter nearly cost him his life.

The Great China ("Aye Joong Wah," in our family's Chinese dialect) was owned and operated by my immigrant parents, Gee Seow Hong and Gee Theo Quee. My older sisters and I did hard labor there before going out into the world. With Chinatown today a veritable riot of economic activity, many of its current occupants, let alone outsiders, know little of the Chinatown of that era, when people like me were both of this society and outside it.

I think a lot about my Chinatown past, in part because memories are fading as middle age deepens. I want to hang onto the memory of a time and place that contrasts so sharply with today's version of the American Dream—anonymus suburbs where neighbors barely know one another and young people are bored to death, where multigenerational interactions are rare; where high technology makes a few of us obscenely rich and the rest of us neurotically insecure. And I wonder about the arc of development that brought my family from the poverty of precommunist China to the middle-class comforts of California today.

Occasionally I go to the Happy Noodle House and order a bowl of *chieu jow ho fun*, rice noodles in a hearty broth brimming with pieces of chicken, pork, fish balls, shrimps, kidneys, green onions, and bean sprouts. It's a soul-satisfying meal, especially when it is seasoned with droplets of Vietnamese red chili sauce. As I slurp the noodles and soup, breaking into a sweat, memories of my youth in this very space wash over me.

The Happy Noodle House uses the long, narrow space differently than my parents did a half-century ago. Tables for four line the walls on either side, with a big round table toward the back, on the left. Each table has a container of plastic chopsticks, a stack of small sauce dishes, and a tray to hold the chili and soy sauce. The kitchen is in the back; the menu is exclusively Chinese and Vietnamese.

The Great China had wooden double doors with windows; the doors were set back a few feet, creating a landing where I often sat as a toddler. Fifty-pound bags of rice were stacked inside the door. A counter ran along the length of the right side, curving like a reverse J into the wall at the front. Toward the back on the left side were three booths with bench seating. In the middle of the left wall, a staircase led to a second floor, which was filled with customers in the early days. Beneath the staircase, a rectangular table seated six. Our kitchen was also in the back; the menu contained an eclectic mix of Western and Chinese offerings.

At the first staircase landing, as it turns to go up to the second floor, a door opened into a tiny step-down office where my father kept his accounts and abacus. The office had a manual typewriter, which my sisters used to type the daily Western food specials. At my father's urging, I taught myself how to type, using a Gregg's textbook, when business was slow. After we typed the menu using a purple-ink ribbon, my dad would reproduce copies in a tray of gelatin.

Business was never slow in the early days of the Great China, during the last three years of World War II. Oakland's Chinatown prospered from the frenzied war machine that cranked into high gear after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. I had been born exactly five months earlier in a house my parents rented at 725 Harrison Street, one block east of the Great China. Before starting the restaurant, my father and his oldest daughter, Li Hong, worked as welders in a shipyard a half mile from Chinatown. Once the restaurant got going, customers came, day and night, from the shipyards and surrounding neighborhoods. Jobs were plentiful, people had money, and rationing of basic ingredients discouraged home cooking.

Business was so good that my father was able to quickly repay the \$3,000 he borrowed to open the Great China. In 1948, three years after the war ended, my parents paid \$16,000 in cash for a five-bedroom house in the Cleveland neighborhood on the east side of Lake Merritt, less than two miles from Chinatown. It was a neighborhood that had once kept out Chinese and other racial minorities, but such restrictions faded in the postwar years. (Even into the mid-1950s, though, some Oakland neighborhoods did not welcome Chinese Americans, as one of my sisters discovered when she and her new husband went shopping for a home.) As an indication of the demographic changes Oakland has undergone since, the Cleveland neighborhood today is informally called "China Hill" because so many Chinese families moved there after the war.

Before the war, my parents struggled with a variety of small businesses while raising seven children. The war changed all that, launching us and other Chinese American families into the middle class. Yet often that existence was largely played out in an enclosed community.

And Chinatown was a true community, where we grew up surrounded by elders who watched over us if our parents could not. We hung out on busy commercial streets day and night. Some days, especially during the lunar New Year, the streets were festive, with Chinese opera music blaring from family association halls upstairs, accompanied by the distinctive clack of mah-jongg tiles. We practiced Old World customs while quickly adapting to American ways such as team and individual sports, social dancing, flirting, and listening to the radio. We did not have the opportunities that many American children today enjoy, but most of us managed to survive childhoods of constant manual labor and harsh opprobriums from barely educated immigrant parents.

The economic shot in the arm of the war years wore off in the fifties, and Oakland's Chinatown fell into a semicomatose state. The younger generation—my generation—went to college and worked outside of family businesses, which shrank or disappeared because there was no longer a war industry to supply customers. City people, especially the white middle class, moved to burgeoning suburbs, their exodus made easier by new freeways and inexpensive gasoline. Chinatown real estate was gobbled up for the Nimitz Freeway, Laney College, and the Bay Area Rapid Transit system.

By the time America veered sharply into a zesty era of youthful optimism with the presidential election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, the Great China was on its last legs. My father became ill, and in 1961, when I was at Cal enjoying life on the *Daily Californian* and ingesting the liberal idealism of the time, he died. So did the Great China.

Today's Chinatown has attracted big Asian money, enough to build the Pacific Renaissance Plaza on 9th Street between Webster and Franklin. The structure, which opened in 1993, is a Hong Kong-style multi-use development with parking underground, ground-floor retail shops, an open plaza in the middle, restaurants and offices on the second floor, the Asian branch of the Oakland Public Library, a cultural center, and multiple stories of condominiums and apartments.

More than that, where once Chinatown seemed to shrink, now its boundaries have expanded, first to Broadway on the west, and now even beyond Broadway. Core Chinatown in the old days stopped at 10th Street. The main commercial areas were concentrated on a few blocks along the axis of Webster Street between 7th and 9th Streets and 8th Street between Franklin and Harrison. Today, it reaches to 14th Street, with Korean-owned businesses dominating that stretch. Some folks say Chinatown should be called Asiatown.

Chinatown remains the heart of the immigrant Asian population of Oakland, and at some level, for the greater East Bay. Like other American Chinatowns, Oakland's began as a safe haven for sojourners and immigrants terrorized by anti-Chinese sentiments during the last half of the 19th century.

It is difficult to pinpoint when the first Chinese came to Oakland. Large numbers of Chinese people, mostly men, came to California as part of the Gold Rush of the mid-19th century. So, of course, did many others. Almost overnight, San Francisco mushroomed from a nothing town to a raucous

sin city. On the east shore of the bay, three men—two from New York, the other from Connecticut—founded the town of Oakland, which incorporated in 1852.

Few seekers found gold. Many Chinese ended up in San Francisco after being driven out of the hills, but some found their way to Oakland. Says Beth Bagwell in her book *Oakland: The Story of a City*, Chinese “settled in the 1850s on the estuary in Oakland where they lived in poor shacks and fished for shrimp.” Discriminatory laws forced the early Oakland Chinese to live only in “certain concentrated districts,” among them the current Chinatown. Population figures for Chinese in Oakland in the last half of the 19th century are also hard to come by, but according to U.S. census figures of 1870 and 1880, the percentage of Chinese living in Alameda County showed a remarkable growth to about 8 percent. But by 1900, the percentage had dropped to only 1.6 percent, the stark effect of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The reason for the precipitous fall was economic scapegoating. While dodging the hostility of white Oaklanders, early Oakland Chinese worked as farmers and produce peddlers and later as laundry operators because they could not find other work. Chinese workers had been recruited to build the western half of the transcontinental railroad, which was completed in 1869. Once the economy began to slump in the 1870s, competition for jobs grew stiff. White labor leaders in San Francisco organized a political movement, blaming Chinese laborers for the economic downturn. Oakland also had a strong anti-Chinese labor movement. This campaign led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the single most influential law affecting Chinese American history.

My own family’s journey from a remote Chinese rice-growing village to Oakland is inextricably linked to the Exclusion Act and its far-flung ramifications. While Chinese merchants, students, and diplomats could legally enter the United States, the measure excluded Chinese laborers. To get around restrictions, the Chinese devised elaborate fake-paper systems, the most notorious being the “paper son” scheme. Chinese American men would visit China and, upon returning, tell U.S. officials they had sons in China when they had not. The men sold the “paper son” slots to someone seeking to emigrate, thus legitimizing the newcomer’s entry. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed all birth records, including those of Chinese immigrants, which provided a golden opportunity to

create fake documents that said many Chinese men were “sons of natives,” making them U.S. citizens.

That is how my father, Gee Seow Hong, entered the United States on May 27, 1912, at the port of San Francisco aboard the SS *Manchuria*. He came through Angel Island Immigration Station, the main facility enforcing the Exclusion Act from 1910 to 1940. Immigration inspectors tried to trip up Chinese newcomers with detailed—and inane—trick questions about the immigrant’s home village and family relationships. If members of the same family recalled details differently, that could be cause for deportation.

In documents I found at the National Archives regional office in San Bruno, my father’s entry papers said he was born on May 26, 1896, in Goon Doo Hong village, Sun Ning district, China. That would make him 16 years old, but his papers said he was seventeen, perhaps reflecting the Chinese habit of saying a person is a year old at birth. His “alleged father” was identified as Gee Bing Fong, who swore he was born in San Francisco in 1870. My teenage father did not resemble Gee Bing Fong, but maybe immigration inspectors really thought that all Chinese look alike.

My father made four trips back to China, starting in 1919. Each time he returned, he told immigration inspectors quite a story. He said he was married twice, that both his wives had died in China, that he had fathered six children—three sons and three daughters. As far as my sisters and I know, he lied about the death of his second wife and the three sons. We speculate that he told the first lie to pave the way to get our mother into the United States, and the second to make money by selling the “paper son” slots.

The last time my father returned to China, he brought his wife and children to Oakland. According to documents, my father reentered the United States on November 27, 1933, accompanied by my mother and three oldest sisters. Since it was illegal at that time for an ethnic Chinese U.S. citizen to bring in a wife, my father told immigration authorities the adult woman accompanying him was his sister, the daughter of purportedly U.S. citizen Gee Bing Fong. That was a legal category for entry.

All these stories created difficulties down the line. The “sister” lie needed to be addressed when my mother, Gee Theo Quee, became pregnant in 1934. My parents’ solution: Hire a guy named Wong Sheng to “marry” my mother, thus legitimizing the pregnancy. This Wong fellow

never was my mother's husband, but the four children born in Oakland—Nellie, Leslie, Florence, and I—took the Wong surname, while the three older China-born sisters—Li Hong, Li Keng, and Lai Wah—kept the Gee surname. To this day, we retain this strange duality. Inside Chinatown, or what is left of it that remembers us, we are known as Gees. To the outside world, the four Oakland-born children are surnamed Wong.

Even before my parents opened the Great China cafe, 723 Webster Street played an important role in our family's history. Li Keng, who was 7 or 8 years old when she came to America, recalls living in the back of 723 for a few months after leaving Angel Island. In the mid-1930s, 723 Webster was a storefront, all right—with the emphasis on front. It was where my father operated a lottery, the favorite (if illegal) keno-like pastime in Chinatown in that era and the precursor of the California Lottery.

My father was by no means alone. Chinatown then had more than a dozen lottery companies, all operated by Chinese men but patronized by Oaklanders of all ethnicities. Each company issued different tickets daily, made up of eighty Chinese characters. Customers bought and marked tickets at various Chinatown businesses. Runners delivered marked tickets to headquarters and, twice a day, the winning numbers to the retail outlets. Each level of the lottery operation made money by raking off a fee.

The lottery business almost got my father killed. The story goes something like this: My father was treasurer of his company. One day, in 1939, the owners suspected someone had been siphoning off money, and somebody fingered my father. At the time, our family was struggling to make ends meet. A close family friend, also associated with the company, asked to meet with my father, presumably over nongambling business. My parents invited him to dinner at our Harrison Street home. My older sisters weren't home, but the three Oakland-born sisters, all quite young, were. After dinner, the two men repaired to the living room to smoke cigars, while my mother went to the kitchen. Suddenly four shots rang out. My mother screamed, "*Ah Bing Fook ah-uh bah! Bing Fook ah-uh bah!*" (Bing Fook shot your father!). Kicking off her cloppity slippers, my mother ran after the assailant. With the help of two bystanders, she detained Bing Fook several blocks away, at 9th and Webster. As she stood there, she reportedly screamed, "Since you killed my husband, why don't you shoot me?"

Miraculously, with transfusions and surgery, my father survived, though he bore permanent scars on his stomach. Lai Wah, the number three



daughter, said, “Lots of people helped our family. They gave us credit for rice and food. Mom peeled shrimp to help make ends meet.” To this day, my sisters do not believe my father had been dishonest. Nellie, the number four daughter, said: “I don’t believe Pop cheated, and if he did, he did it to help us. I don’t consider him a crook. Pop was so honest. He’d lend out money and never get it back. He tried to help his brethren.”

Those days were over by the time I came along. My father was in his late forties, a slightly rotund figure with thinning hair who stood about five feet four inches tall. He was quick with a smile, a valued trait since he worked the front of the restaurant, while my mother, of sterner visage and demeanor, worked mostly in the kitchen as a sous chef. He often slipped us money and told us not to tell Mom. Sometimes she found out, but he’d give us money again. After a long day at the restaurant, he cooked himself a meal at home, eating by himself in the kitchen. Shots of whisky always washed down the food—and perhaps feelings of pain and suffering. He died of cirrhosis of the liver.

From the start, my father’s life was characterized by hard work. He got some education at Lincoln School, and before he brought the family over in 1933, he sold vegetables to Cal fraternities and sororities, which often hired Chinese cooks. He also worked as a keno marker in Reno for a spell. Between 1933 and 1943, in addition to operating the lottery outlet and working in the shipyards, he ran a grocery store on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley. As the war rolled on, he realized his shipyard job wouldn’t last forever. With \$3,000 dollars lent to him by a fellow Gee, my father opened the restaurant at 723 Webster—the right move at the right time.

By then, I was a toddler, the first real son born to Gee Seow Hong and Gee Theo Quee. “When you were born, Pop felt his luck had changed,” sister Lai Wah told me. My parents were traditional enough to have wanted a son from the get-go, but instead they had five daughters. My father also had a daughter with his first wife, who really had died before he married my mother. My coming along brought great joy.

The kind of danger my father experienced in 1939 was the exception for us growing up. If anything, life was suffocatingly safe for us Chinatown kids. Most of us worked in family businesses and had little time to get into serious trouble. Not that we were goody two-shoes. At Chinese New Year, the boys sold firecrackers to outsiders who streamed into Chinatown hunting for illegal explosives. When cops came around, we hid our brown bags

of firecrackers in the tire wells of parked cars. Sometimes we had firecracker wars on Webster, tossing lit packages across the street at each other.

I don't recall my parents' reaction to the firecracker mischief, but on most matters, they were not permissive. My mother would not let me ride a bicycle or roller-skate. But I could go to Lincoln Square, a concrete playground on the block next to Lincoln School, where all Chinatown kids went, day and night. The boys played baseball, football, and basketball, while the girls hung around the clubhouse. We had dances and parties there. It was a place to go to escape, for a little while at least, our chores at the family business.

And what chores those were. Our restaurant duties—as onerous as they were—taught me and my sisters the responsibility of work, even as they deprived us of a mirthful childhood. More than any house we lived in, the Great China was our home. During its eighteen-year lifetime, it opened variously in the early to late morning and closed at midnight at first and then earlier, when business slowed in the fifties. Each morning, around five o'clock, my father shopped for vegetables in the produce district between Chinatown and what today is Jack London Square. Sometimes I or one of my sisters went with him. Once he was almost killed when his car stalled on the railroad tracks near the produce district; he escaped just before a train rammed into the car.

While my father shopped, my mother opened the restaurant, and she and the chefs began preparing food for the day. From about 6 or 7 A.M., Mom worked straight through to just after dinnertime, seven days a week. Not only was she a sous chef but she waited on tables, wearing a crisp blue uniform. Having started his day early as well, Pop usually took a mid-afternoon break, tending to his garden or napping. Then he returned for the dinner trade and closed up after Mom had gone home. After the frantic war years, they decided to close the Great China one day a week, on Wednesdays. My parents used the time to go shopping or to a movie, but they always had the family over or took us out for lunch or dinner, even after some of their daughters had married and moved out.

The sights and smells of the restaurant are almost as fresh to me now, forty to fifty years later, as they were when I wandered the narrow confines of the Great China. I was given an easy task at first, washing water glasses. I filled sugar jars, salt and pepper shakers, napkin dispensers, and

maple syrup and catsup bottles. I placed pats of butter onto small white plates. When I was about seven, my mother thought I was too skinny, so she force-fed me pats of butter straight from the refrigerator. Eventually, I helped myself. She wanted to fatten me up, since girth indicated good health to her. Surprisingly, I still like butter, but not as a pop-in-your-mouth snack.

Hanging out in the kitchen was a favorite pastime. The main chef was a man we called “How Chooey Goong”—*how chooey* meaning “head chef” and *goong* a term of respect for an older man. His family name was Gee, like my father’s. He was a quiet, stoic man who had come to America from China sometime in the early part of the century, leaving his wife and children in a village not far from my father’s. He was always kind to us kids, fixing special dishes if we requested it, to my mom’s chagrin. Since he had few relatives here, he joined us on the Wednesday day-off expeditions and special holiday celebrations. Even in the years after the Great China closed, he was an occasional companion to my mother after my father’s death. It is likely my father sold vegetables to How Chooey Goong when he was a chef at a Cal fraternity, which is where he learned to cook such typical American fare as mashed potatoes, biscuits, roasts, and stews.

In the mornings, the kitchen was the best place to be. Mom and How Chooey Goong chopped and sliced vegetables and prepared a beef rib roast and a loin of pork for the oven. They started the soup of the day, a stew, and brown gravy. Goong also baked wonderful biscuits and rolls. The kitchen smelled heavenly—redolent of beef and pork roasts, the richness of stew, the ineluctable aroma of fresh baked rolls.

While the lunch dishes were being prepared, breakfast customers needed to be tended to. Single men especially came for Mom’s delicious pancakes, a stack of three with a butter pat and maple syrup, all for fifteen cents. A cup of coffee cost an additional dime.

The Great China made its own pastries as well, a chore mostly handled by a man we called Chel Goong. In contrast to How Chooey Goong’s upstanding character, Chel Goong was a drug addict. I or one of my sisters was sent almost daily to wake him up in his nearby bachelor apartment. His eyes were heavily lidded, and he moved slowly, no doubt because of his opium addiction. But could he bake! He worked his magic in the little pastry room behind the kitchen. There he mixed pie and cake doughs on a dedicated countertop. While I didn’t particularly care to be in Chel

Goong's company, watching him make apple and custard pies and strawberry and banana whipped cream cakes was still special, if for no other reason than to anticipate the delectable finished products. After his baking chores, Chel Goong helped Mom and How Chooy Goong in the kitchen.

Before my parents opened the Great China, my dad had a partnership with Harry Louie in a restaurant called Sam and Harry's Cafe, right next door to 723 Webster. That joint venture served up more Western food than Chinese. When my father had a business dispute with Harry and decided to open the Great China, he continued the culinary theme of mostly American food. Simple Chinese dishes (chow mein, fried rice, chop suey, egg foo yung, noodle and won ton soups, and deep-fried prawns) were an afterthought.

The American menu was most likely a response to supply and demand. In the 1930s and 1940s, there weren't enough Chinese people living in Oakland to support a lot of Chinese restaurants. This was well before Americans of all ethnicities embraced exotic "fusion" cuisines. The war years brought many customers to Chinatown, most of them not Chinese. Pragmatist that he was, my dad decided to feed the masses what they wanted: hearty American-style meals, greatly assisted by How Chooy Goong's cooking skills.

We are talking about a full-course lunch or dinner that consisted of a bowl of homemade soup (vegetable, split pea, clam chowder, tomato rice), a lettuce and tomato salad or coleslaw, two rolls with butter, an entree of fried halibut, hamburger steak, veal cutlets, beef stew, pork chops, chicken-fried steak, fried liver and onions, roast pork, or prime rib, served with a hot vegetable and either white rice or mashed potatoes. For dessert, a choice of vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry ice cream; Jell-O; or apple or egg custard pie. The price? From fifty cents to a little over a buck. Those prices changed little in the eighteen years of the Great China.

It is little wonder that crowds descended on our restaurant during the war years and into the late 1940s and early 1950s. After a languid breakfast business, Mom and How Chooy Goong placed the soup and prepared foods such as beef stew, cooked vegetables, and mashed potatoes into metal bins that fit into the stainless steel hot-tray counter that separated the public portion of the restaurant from the kitchen. We children helped our father brew coffee and put salads and desserts on plates. We placed the salads on counters next to one of the refrigerators and the cut-up pies along