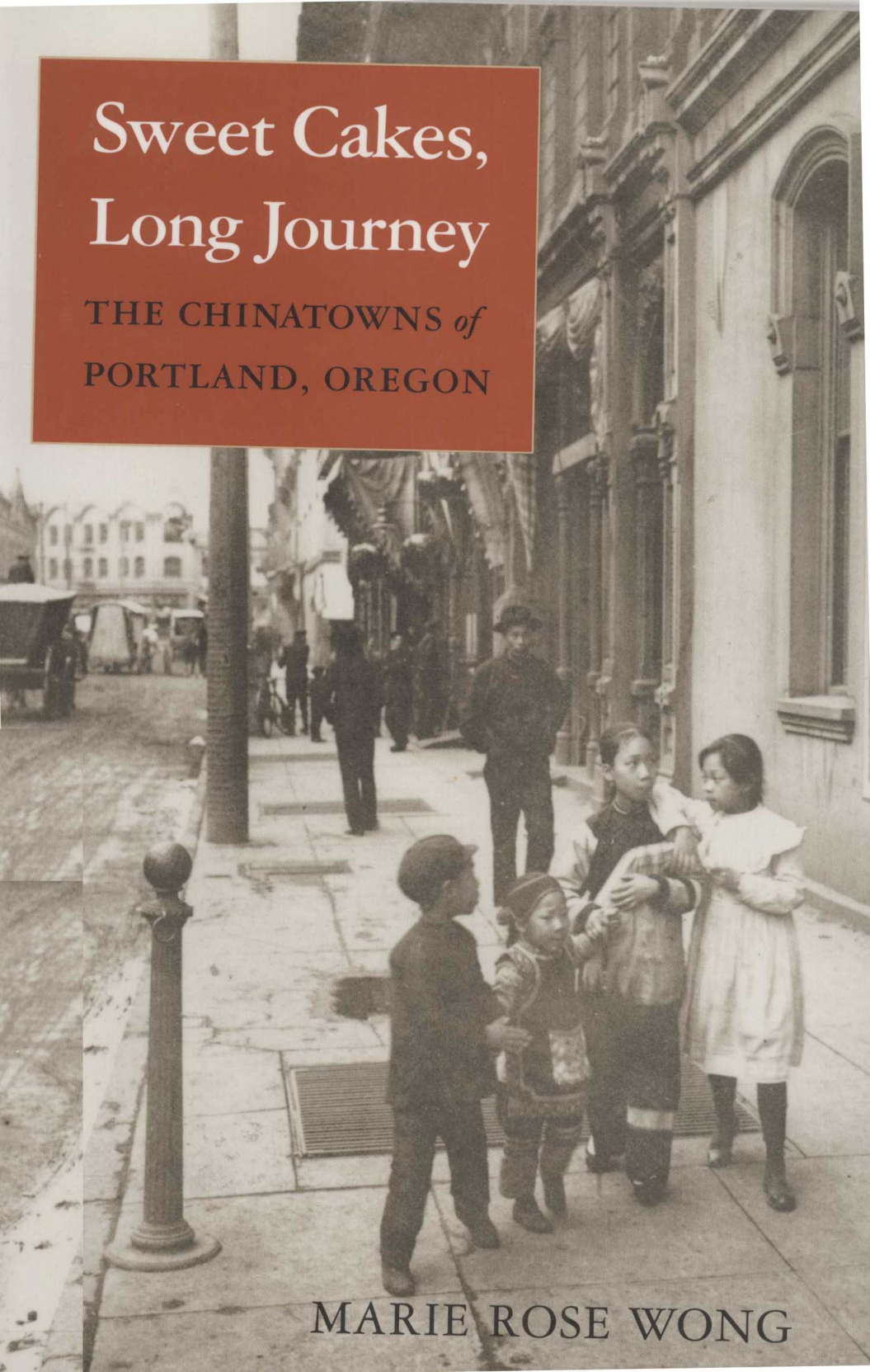
# Sweet Cakes, Long Journey

## THE CHINATOWNS *of* PORTLAND, OREGON



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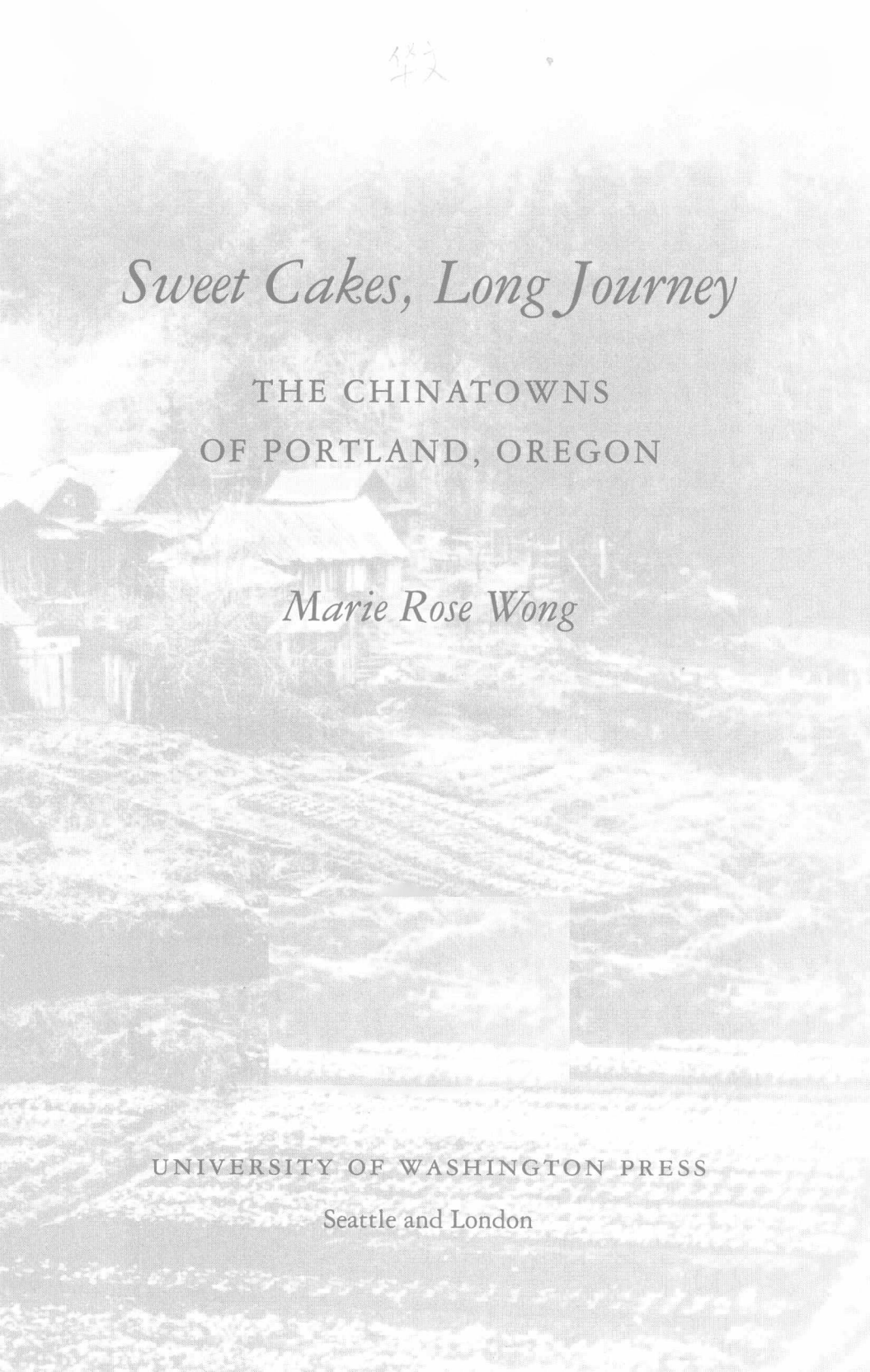

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## THE CHINATOWNS OF PORTLAND, OREGON

*Marie Rose Wong*

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# PREFACE

MY INTEREST IN RESEARCHING Chinese American history and Chinatowns began in earnest in 1988, seven years after the death of my father.

I left my Midwest home for the West Coast many years before he died, partially to find employment as a city planner and also to continue postgraduate work in urban history. I had grown up in a small Iowa town with strong Germanic roots—there were only two Chinese families, including ours—and I loved moving to a large, active city with a significant population of Chinese people. It was so different from what I had known, but I felt as if I belonged there. I was thrilled to be part of a dense and busy urban environment where I could get lost in a crowd of people who looked like me: almond-shaped eyes, darker skin, and black hair. Chinatown felt like a familiar place. It was filled with the same smells and sights of meats and vegetables that I remembered from our kitchen at home, and those endless red and gold decorative lanterns and trinkets were like the ones Dad lit at Christmas.

When my father died, we could supply very little information to the local newspaper, and so his obituary simply read "Jim Wong, aged 76, died in his home on Monday after a brief illness. He is survived by six children." The newspaper listed our names and the date of the memorial service—that was all. We didn't know what else to say about him.

My siblings and I were still deciding what to do with my father's few belongings as we prepared to sell the family house. After all, none of us lived in that town anymore, and we couldn't justify keeping the house. My eldest brother phoned and asked me to "send the steamer

trunk . . . you know, the old one that was left in the attic closet. It will make a great coffee table and conversation piece after I refinish it." No one had even thought of that old trunk since the funeral. At the time, we were so busy sorting out Dad's many business affairs that moving a bulky old piece of ship's passenger luggage wasn't a priority for us. The trunk was nothing special, and I had seen at least a hundred of them in deluxe junk shops: brown and plain, with oxidized metal-tipped edges, the surfaces scarred, scratched, and dented from years of careless and excessive handling. "And make sure to clean the thing before you send it to me," my brother added.

The trunk was easy to open, as the lock had been broken long ago, and the billow of musty air from inside made me sorry that, as the youngest child, I had inherited another messy job.

There wasn't much inside: a couple of old shirts, shabby and stained and similar to the trunk lining in color, a rusty clothes bar with no hangers, and three vertical drawers on the left side. All the drawers were empty and were lined with the same faded, diamond-patterned paper. I was taking each one out to turn it over and tap out the dust when I noticed that the bottom lining of one drawer had come unglued and fallen out along with a small ivory-colored booklet, neatly folded and bound with a still handsome, handmade paper braid. The document was written entirely in Chinese and held four photographs of people I had never seen before, one of whom appeared to be my father as a very young man. Like most children, even adult children, I was shocked to see that my father had ever been so very young.

The calligraphy was beautiful, with small, graceful characters tightly drawn in evenly spaced rows. On one page, twelve neat boxes enclosed blocks of writing and were surrounded by the arcs and swirls of still more lettering. I sat and stared at the papers, wondering what this document was and what I should do with the material. My curiosity and imagination were racing. What if my dad had once been involved in some kind of criminal activity? I couldn't risk taking this to one of his friends for a translation. If it was important enough to hide, it was probably something that ought to remain a private family matter. I was afraid the document would reveal something that would be embarrassing to all of us, and at the same time, I couldn't imagine what it might be.

I was angry with myself because I couldn't read the booklet and with my dad because he had left behind something I couldn't read. The language had never really been important to me as a teenager, and I couldn't say that I had ever really wanted to know it until that moment. Except for reciting the names of popular food items at Chinese New Year's parties, mimicking a few select greetings to make the Chinese elders smile, or hearing my sister sing a Chinese children's song that she could not translate, none of us had bothered to learn the language. Yet my ignorance of my father's native language seemed inexcusable now, particularly since reminders of his Chinese culture had always been everywhere around the house. He was a Buddhist who kept a small shrine and had a Chinese translation of the Bible. He wrote Chinese words in the newly poured concrete walkway surrounding our house and told us that the characters represented the four seasons. He painted a plaque proclaiming, in Chinese calligraphy, that "the garden grows and grows" and hung it outside the house so it would bring him good luck with planting and harvesting. He held onto a stack of Chinese newspapers long after the news was current. He personalized our home by writing our names in Chinese calligraphy on the stepping-stones of his garden. And yet, we didn't ask to learn his language, and he didn't offer to teach us.

I decided not to share the document I had stumbled upon until I knew what it was and put it in a file for safekeeping. Over the years, I thought about this document and my father.

We never pressed my father for details of his life as a boy growing up in Guangdong (Kwangtung) province. He told us that his parents both died when he was young. Dad was not the kind of person to offer detailed information or expound on family history, and we rarely asked questions. He didn't like questions.

All our memories of Dad came from our knowledge of him as an adult who had a house full of children. Like most fathers in the 1950s, he went to work, paid the bills, and wasn't really interested in hugging or playing with us. He was a strict disciplinarian and wrote the rules on "tough love," even before the term existed. He was never involved with the PTA and, in fact, never remembered or cared what the letters stood for. He didn't go to parent-teacher conferences, but he impressed on all of us that our education was the best thing we would

ever have. Dad wanted us to fit his image of "American" children who dressed like, talked like, and had a future like other Americans, and he underscored this idea with his firm instructions to "go to school." One time, my brother Jon came home and told my dad that he didn't want to go to high school anymore. Dad said, "Get out," in a soft, barely audible voice, and that was the end of the conversation. Jon graduated the following spring.

Our father arrived in the United States as Wong Gin Man, and it was perhaps for convenience while completing some kind of governmental paperwork or because of his own fascination with English names that he took the name Jim Wong. He told us he had made the trip from Guangdong province alone, and that within four years, a younger brother named Jung and an older brother, Howe, also came to America.

Howe stayed on the West Coast, but if there was ever any contact between him and Dad over the next forty years, we never knew about it. In 1930, my father joined Jung in Oregon at the Portland immigration station, and the two traveled across the United States, working at numerous odd jobs but primarily as cooks for small-town hamburger joints and mom-and-pop restaurants. They spent a little time in Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, South Dakota, and Mexico before settling permanently in Iowa. Dad was particularly proud that he could speak English and some Spanish, which he learned from a Mexican immigrant cook during his travels through the Southwest. Sometimes, he liked to demonstrate that he remembered how to ask for directions and take food orders in Spanish, and although we recognized that his words were definitely of Latin origin, they sounded unmistakably like Chinese, as did his English.

In 1939, my father met my mother in the King Ying Low Chinese restaurant in Des Moines, Iowa. She was a waitress there, and he was playing mah-jongg with Uncle and the other restaurant cooks. They had a brief courtship, and my grandmother was horrified when her Caucasian daughter announced that she was going to marry Jim Wong. In her mind, our mother would be doomed to life with a "non-Christian, Chinese man who wasn't a citizen and couldn't speak English like normal people." She added indignantly that my mother didn't even know my father's real age. Dad claimed he was born in November, but some-

times his birthday fell in different months of the year because he used the lunar calendar. Grandmother did not go to their wedding, and she never did accept my dad—since he wouldn't give up his "heathen" ways—or forgive our mom for marrying against her wishes.

We didn't know why he decided to raise his family in Iowa, where the weather is so harsh, with bitter cold in the winter and blistering heat and humidity in the summer. There were no Chinese people for him to talk with, and no Chinese goods and food to buy. Iowa didn't have Chinese communities then and still doesn't. At best, the larger towns had a "Chinese chop suey" restaurant sporting a flashy neon sign that screamed "serving American and Chinese cuisine," but the dishes they served were nothing like the food we ate at home. I never saw chicken feet, smelt, or pig snout advertised as an evening special. There was no store selling staples like *fun won* rolls, oolong tea, dried black beans, or tiger balm for aches and pains. Dad got shipments of these, and spices and herbs, on a regular basis from a catalog merchant in San Francisco's Chinatown.

After my uncle arrived in this country, he and my dad were never apart, and even when Dad married and started his own family, my uncle continued to live with us. Dad worked and Uncle did most of the cooking, and my mother was regularly frustrated that the tradition of household duties normally reserved for American women was not part of her life in our house. Dad and Uncle never returned to China, not even for a visit, and did not speak of the life or the people they had left behind.

Like my father, my uncle got his new name from his immigration papers, which were made out for Harry Jung Tung. We didn't know how Uncle got the name Harry or why his last name was recorded as different from our dad's. We just assumed that someone misheard "Wong" as "Tung" and that for one reason or another the error was never important enough to correct. Regardless of what the paper said, we knew him as "Unc."

When Unc and dad were in South Dakota in 1931, my uncle was robbed at gunpoint by "some little guy" who shot him for a few bills and loose change. The wound left him partially paralyzed for the rest of his life, but he was surprisingly mobile with a single crutch. Unlike my father, Unc never married in the United States. According to Mom,

he left his immediate family, a wife and two sons, in China when he came to America. There were no photographs of them displayed in our house, no correspondence ever sent or received, and no discussions of a possible relationship between the Chinese and American cousins.

In 1944 after my sister's second birthday, Dad became a U.S. citizen, an official American who was eligible to vote, although he never exercised that right in any election. He was proud of his citizenship and had the paper and his photograph framed and hung on the dining room wall. My mother told me that as pleased as he was with his citizenship, he was even prouder of the fact that he had purchased our house, a white two-story on a busy street in a lower-middle-class neighborhood. The house wasn't large enough for our family, but Dad never considered building additions, buying a bigger house, or moving anywhere else.

However simple our house was, Dad's garden made the property magnificent. My sister, Moy, was convinced that his loud singing of Chinese songs made everything grow so large and healthy. He seemed to know something about growing things that none of our neighbors knew. Every summer, they came over just to look around and say, "Jimmy, how do you manage to keep the insects from eating your vegetables?"

Unlike other midwestern yards with expansive lawns and elm and oak trees, ours was devoted entirely to growing food and edible flowers in lush, elevated beds. We had a pear and an apple tree, and trellises on which bitter melon and snow pea vines grew. Spring was an exciting time for planting, and summer was an extravaganza of greenery. I had always suspected that Dad loved that earth as much as he loved us, and maybe a little more. Sometimes, when it rained, he went outside and stood amid his plants, looked up at the sky, threw up his arms, and sang loudly, a source of considerable embarrassment to our mother, who worried about what the neighbors would say. Once, the local newspaper came out to photograph my father and his garden and ran the picture in the regional news section with a brief caption. It was his only claim to published fame, and he hung the news clipping and photograph in the dining room next to his naturalization papers.

Dad worked as a chef in a hotel restaurant and spent part of every

summer visiting Chinese friends who operated restaurants in other small towns throughout Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota. He delivered his homegrown Chinese vegetables in exchange for meat and fish. No money was ever exchanged between these Chinese people. My brothers and I carried the buckets of bitter melon, winter squash, snow peas, and string beans through the kitchen service entries that opened onto downtown alleyways while my father talked and laughed with the owners and waitresses. They spoke their language and smiled and nodded at us. We returned the courtesy. It wasn't until I moved away from home that I had the experience of being a patron who entered a Chinese restaurant through the front door.

We knew Dad as a person whose odd foreign habits always kept him separate from his American-born children and who was often difficult to understand and explain to our friends. How can you explain why your father butchers chickens in the basement when the grocer is less than a mile away, or why he grows fresh bean sprouts in a twenty-gallon ceramic crock? And what could be the purpose of drying chicken and deer feet on clothes racks near the kitchen heater? It was invariably the latter sight that cost us repeat visits from some of our school friends.

It wasn't unusual to have local law enforcement officers come to the house to talk to Dad and my brother James about city ordinances and codes that allowed only domestic animals, not "livestock," in town. Dad couldn't understand the distinction, and James wasn't any more successful at telling him why the town thought these rules were necessary. Dad's reasoning was irrefutable and simple. He simply wanted to know what difference it made that we lived in the city. After all, this was his land, and how could we have good five-spice chicken if the chicken wasn't fresh? We had quail in a pen next to the one that held the peacock, and giant turtles that lived in their personal galvanized tubs in the basement. The peacock was there for beauty, but Dad told my brothers Lee and Vic that he was going to roast the quail when they got fat and make turtle soup in the winter. The following spring, he was still tending and enjoying all of them as house pets. James once told the officers that we would find a new home for the peacock and the goat in the backyard if they would waive the ordinance citation. I believe this

was my introduction to city laws and urban planning . . . and may be the reason I entered urban planning as a profession after I graduated from college.

Seven years after my father's death, I finally asked someone to look at the document from his trunk. I had made close friends in the Chinese community in Seattle, where I was living, and I asked one of them to read it and tell me what it said. I swore him to secrecy. The translated document was in a curious format, arranged on the page in a series of questions and answers. The page with the arrangement of squares depicted a village, and the arcs and swirls marked the nearby mountain and stream, the rice paddy, the village shrine and baths, and the homes of relatives and neighbors. My friend told me that it appeared to be a coaching document, a paper containing the answers that would enable a Chinese immigrant to pass the interrogations of immigrations authorities and enter America. I nodded, looked serious, and pretended to know what he meant. As I had suspected years before, one photograph was of my father, but the others were of "relatives" who were unknown to me. The papers stated that my father immigrated to the United States with his father in 1926, when he was seventeen years old, through a place called Angel Island and that he would be joining his uncle's business in San Francisco. There was no mention of other brothers who were coming to America, and none of the information in that document was anything my father had ever told us.

I was in the beginning stages of my postgraduate studies in urban history and had decided to take a break from selecting a dissertation topic to attend classes and learn more about the history of China and Chinese America. I hoped to learn more about the life my father had known and to understand the experiences that had contributed to his viewpoint as a newcomer to America.

My personal quest to know Dad led me to my research topic and the study of an American Chinatown, beginning with an examination of Chinese exclusion case files for the District of Oregon, held at the National Archives in Seattle. Through these files and photos, I came to know the lives and stories of so many people. I learned about Chinese exclusion laws and a federal immigration policy spawned of ignorance and fear, which spanned an incredibly long period of time, from

1882 to 1943. The ramifications for Chinese immigrants reached far beyond the enactment of the laws. These laws respected no Chinese as a human being and created a national position that categorized laborers as ineligible to enter or ever become citizens of the United States. Instead, temporary visitors such as diplomats and scholars were allowed provisional entry, and merchants were the favored class for permanent residence in America; this was very different from the traditional hierarchy of professions in China, which relegated merchants to the lower social strata. The economic appeal of the merchant class opened the door for its members to immigrate and allowed them a political and social status they did not have in their home country. If a person wanted to ensure his entry into America, he took on the appearance of an "appropriate" immigrant by acquiring a connection to a merchant family. Such a person was known in Chinatown as a "paper son." In order to answer the questions that might be posed by an immigration authority, the prospective immigrant memorized the responses contained in a coaching document, which was sold to him in advance by his new family or an interested third party. The manner in which the information was transmitted typically was ingenious and utilized clever and covert smuggling techniques. So great was the desire of these immigrants to come to America that they were willing to suffer through an arduous ocean crossing and leave behind all that was familiar to them. From the time they landed on American soil, many buried their true identities and suffered insults, indignities, interrogations, and incarceration. In the end, they rarely told their children of these experiences, choosing instead to hide their personal pain in the dignity of silence. The enactment of such a discriminatory immigration law, which caused so many Chinese to conceal their true origins, has in many cases robbed successive generations of knowledge of their real lineage and heritage.

In the course of looking for answers, I finished reading the entire collection of 6,000 individual case files along with district court files, customs records for Oregon, and hundreds of newspaper articles and archival city documents. Each of these cases documented the drama of a human life, and all the stories were, in part, my own.

In file 880, of one Gee Fook, I found a photograph, interrogation transcript, correspondence, and a Chinese letter with a translation much

like the one I had found in my father's trunk; the question-and-answer format covered similar, if not identical, topics. Fook's "father," Louie Ging, had brought him a gift while he was detained in jail awaiting a decision from the immigration inspector. The gift was a bag of sweet cakes to mark his long journey to the United States. Suspicious of the contents, the immigration inspector in charge confiscated the bag, examined the sweets, and found baked within one of them a "coaching letter," a sure sign of the detainee's fraudulent identity. Fook was refused entry by immigration authorities.

I have developed a new appreciation for the importance of Chinatown as place, both in the history of an ethnic people and as part of the grand evolution and metamorphosis of the American city. The Chinese have been identified as sojourners, as people who never intended to remain permanently but rather came to America to make their fortunes and then return to the homes and families they had left behind in China. This label alone could be extensively debated with some degree of intellectual detachment, encompassing discussions of psychological and sociological profiles, personal intentions, and definitions of the word *sojourner* itself. Regardless of these issues, there is the simpler realization that the sheer act of coming to another country to live with little to no money or language skills is an act of immeasurable courage for any immigrant. Through the history of a nation of Chinese immigrants, I have learned more about myself and come to understand that the experiences of their lives also belong to my father and to me. It is this legacy that makes all Chinese Americans participants in the long journey to America.

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