

"This book is a wonderful source for people who are interested in Chinese American history, Los Angeles Chinatown, women rising up through the ranks of a newspaper organization during an era when few women worked in journalism, and family memoirs in general."

LISA SEE, author of *On Gold Mountain*



Sweet Bamboo

A Memoir of a Chinese American Family

Larson

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of a

Chinese

American

Family

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Sweet Bamboo
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Louise Leung Larson

*With a Foreword by Shirley Hune
and a Postscript by Jane Leung Larson*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley Los Angeles London

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 1989 by Louise Leung Larson
First California Paperback, 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Larson, Louise Leung.

Sweet bamboo : a memoir of a Chinese American
family / Louise Leung Larson ; with a foreword
by Shirley Hune and a postscript by Jane Leung
Larson.

p. cm.

Originally published: Los Angeles, Calif. :
Chinese Historical Society of Southern
California, 1990.

ISBN 0-520-23078-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Chinese Americans — California — Los Angeles.
2. Liang family. I. Title: Memoir of a Chinese American family. II. Title.

F869.L89 C53 2001

979.4'94004951—dc21

2001027343

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

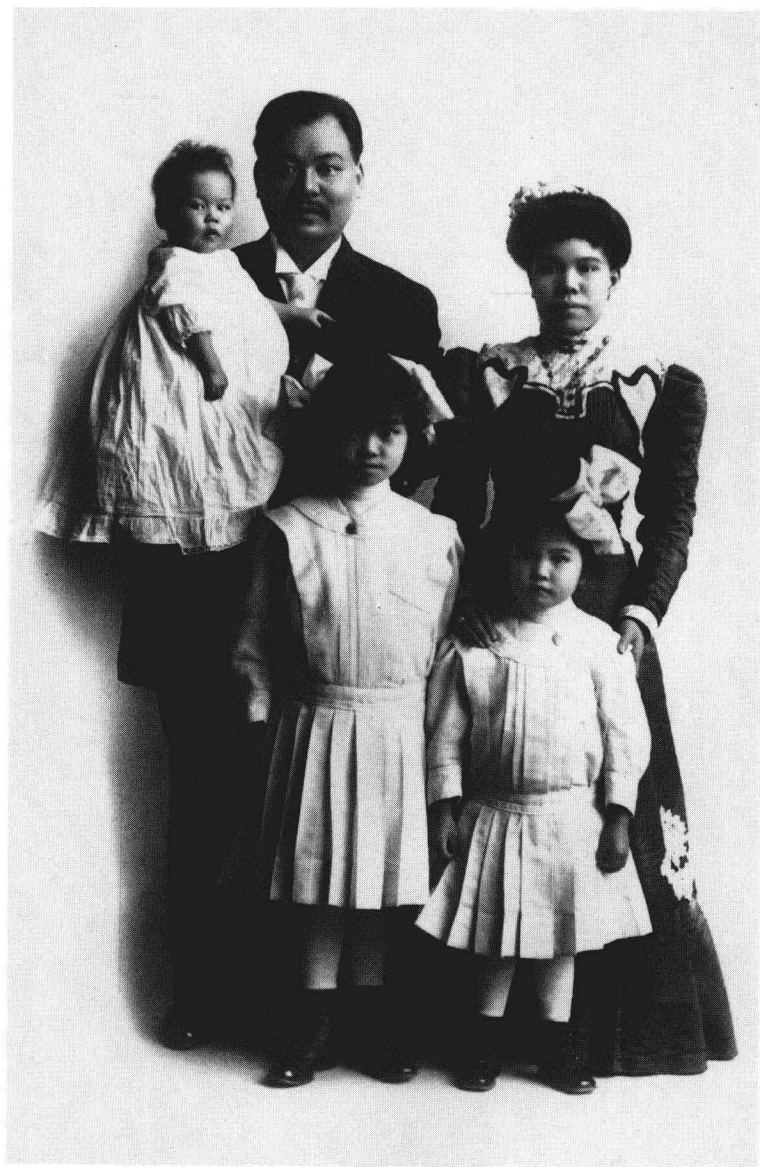
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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(*Permanence of Paper*). ∞

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The Tom Leung family in 1909. The children are Taft (baby), Lillie, and Louise (the author).

Foreword

Situating *Sweet Bamboo* in Chinese American History

SHIRLEY HUNE



Louise Leung Larson's "story of Papa and Mama (accent on the second syllable, Chinese style) and their nine children" is a narrative full of richly textured vignettes about the everyday life of a large, upper-middle-class, multigenerational Chinese American family in Los Angeles from the 1900s to the 1950s. Its presentation is enhanced with family photos and flavored by Cantonese phrases — such as "fo yer" (salted bean curd), "Bok Foo" (paternal uncle), "fung sup" (rheumatism), and being "mung jung" (cross or irritable). Most appropriately, this work, first published in 1989, is being reprinted around the centenary of the parents' departure from the village of Gum Jook (Sweet Bamboo) and their settlement in the Gold Mountain (United States). From it, as from many American immigrant sagas, we learn about dreams and disappointments, of growing up straddling different cultural worlds, of food habits, holiday celebrations, and the personalities of relatives. Yet this story is also different.

Sweet Bamboo is distinct in its disclosure of the privileged lifestyle of the Tom Leung family — with its eight American-born children

(the ninth and eldest had died in China), large home in a predominantly white neighborhood, servants, and material goods — in a period of legal racial discrimination against the Chinese. The book provides intimate portraits of family relations and of social interactions with the larger society, as employers — of whites, blacks, and Chinese in both the family herbalist business and the household — and as members of a leisure class. Such a lifestyle was vastly different from that of other Chinese Americans in this period, most of whom were unskilled workers living in Chinatowns. Even where laws permitted otherwise or could be circumvented, many Chinese immigrants maintained “split households,” transnational families comprised of married “bachelors” locked into low-paying menial jobs in the United States and wives and children who remained in China as an economic strategy for their joint survival.¹

The family memoir begins in China’s Kwangtung Province, Sun Duck County, Gum Jook Herng, about thirty-one miles south of Canton. Here both Mama (Wong Bing Woo) and Papa (Tom Cherng How) were born in 1875 and raised in relatively comfortable households in villages across the river from one another. After an arranged marriage in 1898, Papa, joined later by Mama, settled in Los Angeles, where three daughters and five sons (the latter Papa named after American presidents) were born between 1902 and 1917. The author of this family saga is the second daughter, “Mamie” Louise Leung Larson, a woman of independent spirit who shocked her family by marrying outside the Chinese community. In 1926, at age 21, she became the first Asian American reporter for a major American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Record*; later, as a noted journalist, she covered national events and was a recognized pioneer among Chinese American women.

Larson describes how Tom Cherng How developed a successful herbalist business with a broad-based Chinese and non-Chinese clientele, using Tom Leung as a business name. In time, to reduce confusion over their surname, the children adopted Leung as the family name in place of Tom — their proper surname by the Chinese order of names. Papa immersed himself in American life while retaining his interest in Chinese politics. For example, he hired the son of a white business owner from across the street to teach him English, which he never fully mastered, while continuing his long-

time devotion to Kang You-wei's efforts to politically reform China. Papa took great care that Mama, who unbound her feet after the birth of her first American-born child, had fashionable American clothes and someone to advise her on how to wear them. To fulfill his dream of a big modern house, he purchased a lot in a non-Chinese residential area under eldest daughter Lillie's name — as a non-citizen and Chinese, Papa could not own property. There, at 1619 West Pico, with space for the herbalist business on the first floor, Papa had a fifteen-room home built and carefully chose all its furnishings.

Over the years, Mama had Chinese and black cooks to prepare family meals, especially rich banquet-like dinners — Papa's preference. White nannies assisted with childcare and "colored" women washed the clothes. Mama enjoyed smoking a water pipe and joined Papa after dinner in their leather chairs in the second-floor parlor to read books and Chinese newspapers and discuss things together. Mama was the heart of the household and served as the "middleman" relaying the children's wishes and school progress to Papa, who was indulgent and respected, but distant. She had her own interest in the modernization movement in China, and with Papa frequently hosted events in their home and at lavish public banquets to aid Kang You-wei's political movement.

The eight American-born children had a relatively carefree and racially unsegregated life through childhood and adolescence, with household staff to take care of their daily needs. They celebrated both American and Chinese holidays with elaborate meals and gifts, but oftentimes resented being different from their schoolmates, for example by having to eat Chinese meals three times a day instead of simpler American food. Papa provided a series of tutors to teach the children Chinese, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful. While many Chinese customs were followed, such as having a clean house and not cutting one's hair on Chinese New Year, the children also took music lessons and played tennis. The family had a "talking machine" with a horn for the jazz and dance records enjoyed by the second generation; Papa listened to classical music and Mama loved Chinese opera. In addition, the household engaged in many leisure activities, like weekends at beach resorts and Sunday picnics. As the older children started college, their large home — "1619" —

was a site for American-born youth activities, including meetings of the Chinese Students Club of the University of Southern California and parties with dancing and live bands.

The family's class advantage did not entirely protect them from racism in the larger society, however. For example, the success of Chinese herbalists in Los Angeles drew the attention of the American Medical Association and the Board of Medical Examiners. Accused of practicing medicine without a license, Papa and other herbalists were frequently arrested by the police and required to pay fines before resuming their valued trade. Daughter 'Mamie' (Louise), the author, also recalled rebuffs while growing up, including the humiliation of being turned away with her friends from a dance hall and of being treated with suspicion and mistaken for Japanese during World War II. And Taft, the eldest American-born son, had his dream of becoming a professional musician ended after being denied union membership — a necessity for employment — because of his race.

Mostly, however, *Sweet Bamboo* describes a life of relative abundance with a mixture of Chinese and American lifestyles — until the family was abruptly "catapulted from prosperity into poverty" by Papa's sudden death in 1931 at age fifty-six and the subsequent decline of the herbalist business and impact of the depression. It was the end of their carefree days. During the 1930s and World War II, with four sons and a grandson in uniform, Mama emerged as the matriarch who kept the family together through hardships. Her house was the center, with the eight children, now adults, making sacrifices for the family's survival, including dropping out of college and taking jobs at great distances to send money home. By the 1950s the children and grandchildren visited Mama regularly, sometimes daily. A few lived with her or moved close by long after establishing their own households. Mama died in 1957 having never learned English, and her death marked the end of this memoir and the end of an era for the Tom Leung family.

The author informs us in a brief epilogue that the extended family was in its fifth generation when the book was first published in 1989. With much intermarriage during the third and fourth generations, the family's sense of being Chinese had diminished. More than a decade later, the author's daughter, Jane Leung Larson, pro-

vides an update of the family in a postscript to this second edition. Presently, descendants of the Tom Leung family are of mixed European and Japanese ethnicity as well as Chinese, and are solidly middle class rather than upper-middle class. And while a few family members have retained an interest in things Chinese or Chinese American, others have not. Larson also shares with us her two visits to China in the 1990s, including her return to the village of Sweet Bamboo where the family memoir begins, and recounts the impact of the Communist revolution on the lives of Mama's and Papa's relatives there. Most importantly, she informs us of the discovery of her grandfather's classical Chinese library and papers documenting overseas Chinese efforts to politically reform China, materials now available to scholars at UCLA's East Asian Library. The family still has multigenerational gatherings, now held at the home of Holly, the youngest daughter of Tom Cherng How and Wong Bing Woo.

"Mamie" Louise Leung Larson saw this book as "a collection of memories of a family brought up amidst conflicting Chinese and American cultures." The family saga was her effort to instill interest among the fourth and fifth generations about their roots in China. I view it as more than a memoir. It is also a historical document about a particular time and place in Chinese American and U.S. history.

This highly readable volume sheds new light on the diversity of early Chinese America and its family life, thus challenging many stereotypical conceptions about the community in the first half of the twentieth century. As one of the few studies of privileged Chinese households in the United States in the early 1900s, it illuminates a little-known way of being immigrant and second-generation Chinese Americans.² While much attention has deservedly been given in the historical literature to the "bachelor society" and the struggles of working-class Chinese immigrants, this book reveals that a middle-class lifestyle—and some might view the Leung household as having an upper-class lifestyle (and the arrogance that went with it)—existed for some Chinese Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century. Greater attention to different groups of Chinese immigrants and the experiences of middle-class and upper-middle-class life before World War II enhances our understanding of the range of Chinese American lives and uncovers long-standing class differences within the community.

Sweet Bamboo also contributes to economic and racial history in its details of Chinese herbalist practices and its attention to Chinese professionals before the 1930s, a neglected topic. The window it offers onto that world discloses the racialized complexities of building an herbalist business: for example, the need to wear Chinese apparel to connote expertise but also to hire white receptionists to assist with non-Chinese clientele. A recent study argues that Chinese herbalists utilized skills and knowledge derived from their ethnic culture to create a profession in the United States that served different racial and ethnic groups. In resisting the racially defined occupational positions of the day, they made a significant contribution to the health care of the region, a fact that transforms our understanding of the role of the Chinese in the American West.³

The memoir also reveals the efforts and ambiguities of one family's transnational relations with its homeland. To what extent did the Tom Leung family maintain close and regular contacts with China? How frequently did family members move between two or more locations?⁴ Papa's 1921 trip to China to investigate educational opportunities for his sons there suggested a strong desire to maintain their Chinese heritage. However, he found the schools unsatisfactory, and this goal went unfulfilled. Mama rejected pressures from Papa's relatives for the household to return to China after his death, concluding that she valued her independence from the extended family and that she and her children belonged in the United States. And what hold did China have on its emigrants in this period? The participation of Chinese immigrants in homeland affairs at the turn of the twentieth century has yet to be adequately documented by scholars. Larson provides some observations of the efforts of Papa, Mama, and other Chinese immigrants to support political change in China.⁵

The author also informs us of how her family dealt with race, class, gender, and cultural differences in this period. The notion that Chinese American lives were wholly racially segregated or self-contained with other co-ethnics in the early part of the twentieth century is dispelled here. For example, the descriptions of employer-employee race relations and other racial dynamics among whites, blacks, and other Asians initiated and experienced by the Tom Leung household extend our understanding of racial mixing in the

American West during these years. Larson's emphasis on Mama's life in China and the United States and on the activities of the daughters also fills a gap and helps to balance a Chinese American history that is biased toward a male experience. Hence the family memoir contributes to a multicultural history of the United States, showing how interracial, intergenerational, gendered, cultural, and class dynamics were lived every day.

Sweet Bamboo is most revealing about gender and family roles. For example, Papa sought to be very American in his dress and activities and was in many ways a modern man for the time, yet reverted to tradition in securing a concubine ("gip see") during his 1921 China trip. And Mama was not simply a "good Chinese wife." She gave Papa an ultimatum — stay in China with the concubine and send money to support the family, or come home without her. Her many actions before and (especially) after his death to ensure the family's survival underscored her influence on the household. On children's roles, for example, Lillie, as the eldest American-born child, typically at a very early age served as the English translator for Papa on many business matters, and later could be depended upon to drive everyone around in the family car. Lillie bore enormous responsibilities on behalf of the household and continued to do so long after she had established her own family and was holding down an important job in the Chinese consulate as well. Gender and family roles here were not fixed or linear, that is, moving from traditional to modern, but complex and fluid. Mama and Papa were flexible in their roles and activities, sometimes traditionally Chinese, sometimes more American, and oftentimes at once Chinese and American and in between.

The author also provides keen observations of the second generation's adaptation to two cultures and of the formation of a Chinese American sensibility, albeit from an economically advantaged position. Larson acknowledges that at that time the family was *class* conscious (an attitude learned in part from Papa and one that distanced them from other Americans, including the Chinatown Chinese) but not particularly *race* conscious, as was shown in their empathy for — but not outrage about — interned Japanese Americans. Those who study second-generation Chinese Americans of the post-World War II era or of the post-1965 immigration period will

find both continuities and differences in home life and interactions with the world outside the family. The details of daily life, such as meal times, fun times, and times with Mama and Papa, and the discussions of larger social practices, such as making friends and getting jobs, are engaging and reveal both the possibilities and limitations of the period and the family's status. For the most part, the American-born children sought to be American, accommodated being Chinese, and in some ways offered little resistance to their situations. And, in spite of their Americanization, family members even as adults inhabited a multigenerational compound together at "1619" (West Pico) from the 1930s to the 1950s, a practice the author observed as being so like "the Chinese way" and so unlike "the American way."

A memoir presents its participants as subjects of history and agents of cultural change. Here two generations of the Tom Leung family actively interject themselves into American life. They are seen making decisions as to the way they seek to live, whether it be emigrating to the United States, maintaining Chinese food habits, promoting the herbal business through newspaper ads and cards to patients, visiting the 1915 World's Fair in San Francisco, holding dance parties in their home, pooling meager resources to survive and pay off debts after Papa's death, or seeking job opportunities in the arts field.

A memoir also has its weaknesses. This family narrative has many of those moments in which one wants to know more — gaps identified by the author as well. As Larson notes, if only the family had thought to ask Papa or Mama about that, or if only those letters had been saved . . . These empty spaces should encourage more of us to conduct oral histories with our own families and with others — "talk story" — and to gather up those letters, photos, and other mementos and view them as historical documents and material culture. Collections of observations and reminiscences grow more powerful when situated in a historical context and analyzed for their meaning within a larger whole. Each family story is part of a larger history. Historians, social scientists, and others can help draw the connections and place individual and group lives within a larger collective history.

Louise Leung Larson's *Sweet Bamboo* is a family memoir to be en-

joyed for its personalities, observations, and vignettes. It is more than a work for the general public. It makes a contribution to the history of the Chinese in the United States and resonates with themes of interest to contemporary scholars, such as transnational linkages, racial intersections, ethnic entrepreneurship, class, gender, and generational dynamics, ethnic identity, cultural adaptation, accommodation and resistance, and tradition and change. It also has a place in local history, providing details of being Chinese American in Los Angeles. Mostly, it is a story about the everyday lives of people who care for one another through abundance and hardships: a lot like other families, and yet different — for they were privileged at a time when most other Chinese Americans were not.

NOTES

1. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Split Household, Small Producer and Dual Wage Earner: An Analysis of Chinese-American Family Strategies," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45:1 (February 1983): 35–46.

2. For a detailed study of another Chinese American family in Los Angeles of this period, but one that began less well-to-do and was based on an interracial household with the marriage of Fong See, the patriarch, and Lettie Pruett in 1897, see Lisa See, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of a Chinese-American Family* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). Some aspects of the lives of middle-class Chinese American women in San Francisco during the first half of the twentieth century are discussed in Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

3. Haiming Liu, "The Resilience of Ethnic Culture: Chinese Herbalists in the American Medical Profession," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 1:2 (June 1998): 173–191.

4. The opportunities for Chinese Americans to be transnational subjects and maintain transnational households are vastly different in the twenty-first century with the development of Asian capitalism and the contemporary global economy as compared to the colonial era at the turn of the twentieth century. On Chinese transnationalism between Taishan County, South China and the United States, 1882–1943, see Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). For a discussion of contemporary privileged transnational Chinese,

see Aihwa Ong, "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *Positions* 1:3 (Winter 1993): 745–778.

5. More details of the activities of overseas Chinese in the Chinese Empire Reform Association can be found in the Tom Leung papers and documents located by the family after the publication of *Sweet Bamboo*. For information on the Tom Leung papers as primary source materials for Kang Youwei and the Chinese Empire Reform Association, see the following works of Jane Leung Larson: "New Source Materials on Kang Youwei and the Baohuanghui: The Tan Zhangxiao (Tom Leung) Collection of Letters and Documents at UCLA's East Asian Library," in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 1993 (San Francisco, CA: Chinese Historical Society, 1993), 151–198; and "The Tom Leung Papers: New Source Materials on the Chinese Empire Reform Association," in *Origins and Destinations: 41 Essays on Chinese America* (Los Angeles, CA: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1994), 243–256.

Foreword to the First Edition



This is the story of Papa and Mama (accent on the second syllable, Chinese style) and their nine children, eight of whom were born and raised in Los Angeles. It depicts what life was like for one Chinese-American family, the Tom Leungs, from the turn of the century to the present.

Mama provided all the material on her and Papa's lives in China and their early years in this country. The language barrier made complete, in-depth communication impossible, but she spent hours with me and my former husband, the late Arnold B. Larson, who had an abiding interest in the family history.

In 1940, Arnold goaded all the Leungs to write down their memories of family life at 903 S. Olive and 1619 W. Pico, the family homesteads. None of us considered this of any importance. Who would care, we thought. The best response came from my brother Monroe, who at 24, produced a lively, humorous, and sometimes moving document. Many passages are quoted in these pages. Diaries written by my brother William provided more material. Arnold interviewed many family friends and associates and took notes on family happenings.

My daughter, Jane Leung Larson, wrote a thesis at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, in 1967, entitled "The Social Environment of a Chinese-American Family as Explored Through Personal Documents." It was based on the Leung family and was the result of much painstaking, scholarly research. It provided valuable source material. (Of the entire extended family, Jane is the only one who voluntarily studied Chinese and continues to do so, and speaks fairly good Mandarin. She is now executive director of the Northwest China Council in Portland. Working with her teacher, Charles Liu of Portland State University, Jane has overseen the translation of scores of letters written by relatives in China to Papa and Mama.)

For years, the notes and data were filed away and forgotten. But after several trips to China, I felt that the story of Papa

and Mama, two extraordinary people, and the family they raised in Gold Mountain, deserved to be told. There are probably omissions and inaccuracies, but this work is not a scholarly, researched dissertation. It is a collection of memories of a family brought up amidst conflicting Chinese and American cultures.

It is a great honor and distinction that the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California has chosen to publish the Tom Leung family history. I owe special thanks to Angi Ma Wong, president of the Society, Suellen Cheng, Munson Kwok, Kipham Kan, Don Loo, Barbara Larson, Diana Wong and Chung Wong for the many long hours spent on this project. And I am profoundly grateful to my sister, Holly Lee, who supported the publication of this story by reallocating a portion of the memorial funds donated to the Society for her husband, Dr. Edward Lee.

Louise Leung Larson