

# American *knees*



*"Wong overturns the racial stereotypes perpetrated against Asians in this country, and he does so with humor to spare. . . .*

*No one has more eloquently or joyfully asserted our belonging."*

—DAVID WONG LOUIE,  
*LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

## Shawn Wong

*a novel*







Also by Shawn Wong

**H o m e b a s e**

**S h a w n   W o n g**

SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION

Published by Simon & Schuster

**american**



SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION

Simon & Schuster Inc.

Rockefeller Center

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 1995 by Shawn Wong

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

First Scribner Paperback Fiction edition 1996

SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION and design are trademarks of Simon & Schuster Inc.

Designed by Bonni Leon-Berman

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wong, Shawn, date.

American knees / Shawn Wong. —1st Scribner Paperback Fiction ed.

1. Man-woman relationships—United States—Fiction.

2. Asian Americans—Fiction. I. Title.

[PS3573.O583A8 1996]

813'.54—dc20 96-7261

CIP

ISBN 0-684-80304-6

0-684-82275-X (pbk)

## Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for granting me an inspirational residency at the foundation's Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy, where I was able to complete this novel. A special note of appreciation must go to the staff of the villa and especially to Assistant Director Gianna Celli, for her tender and intelligent care. While I was in Italy, Susan Kanemori, Shaun Olander, Charlotte Oshiro, Trisha Kiyohara, Karen Kodama, and the Tsuchida family offered their invaluable support at home. I also want to express my gratitude to the Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and to the University of Washington; to Kate Trueblood and Linda Miyata, for being critical readers; to Gary Luke; to my editor, Rebecca Saletan; and to my agent, Barbara Lowenstein, for sixteen years of loyalty.

Excerpts from *American Knees* first appeared in *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, edited by Jessica Hagedorn, *Chicago Review*, *Before Columbus Review*, and *Essence*. And finally, thanks to Frank for the *Planet of the Apes* quote, and to Ishmael for permission to use the keys to the college.





To Vicki Tsuchida,  
my love



## Loyalty, Betrayal, & Revenge

“You won’t even be Chinese after your wife’s attorney gets through with you, Raymond,” Sylvia Beacon-Yamaki said, flipping the pages of Darleen’s proposed divorce settlement. Raymond wondered if someone could be a lapsed Chinese, in the same way people become lapsed Catholics. If Darleen took away her family from him and he ceased having the opportunity to be the dutiful Chinese son, would that make him a lapsed Chinese? Raymond made a mental note to ask his Jewish friend, Sam, who was one of those legendary good-boy Jewish sons and who had recently divorced a dark-haired Jewish woman to marry a blond Catholic woman.

What good was a good Chinese son without a Chinese family in which to practice his legendary Chinese filial duty? What would Raymond do—go around telling people, “Hi, my name is Raymond Ding. I used to be Chinese, but my wife got custody of my ethnicity”? Raymond wondered if this was cultural diversity at its worst.

Raymond Ding’s Chinese name translated into English was like all Chinese boys’ names were supposed to be—something grandiose and epic, like the name given to a hole-in-the-wall Chinese greasy spoon nestled at a crowded intersection, with chipped Formica tables and unmatched duct-taped Naugahyde chairs. New Golden Gardens. Golden River Palace. Riverside Palace Inn. Chinese restaurants are not called “Bob’s Place.” Name and fortune are related. Raymond’s name told a tale of a

brave warrior, truthful and loyal to his fellow warriors and the gods, a strong foundation, a fortress of shining light, majestic mountain peaks, a fast car with a 7/70 warranty and a lifetime Die Hard battery. This truthful, loyal, and brave one would marry, and his wife would bear him male children so that his name would be passed on to the next generation. *We are immortal*, the family name implied. Actually, Raymond didn't know what his Chinese name was, the name his grandmother had called him in a language he forgot a year after he started public school.

Perhaps not being Chinese was an option in America. Certainly it was easy enough to change your mind and decide to be some other Asian ethnicity, such as Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Malaysian, or even a different kind of Chinese, such as Taiwanese. What non-Asian would know? Or Raymond could even be Chinese from Little Rock, Arkansas, where folks would refer to him as "Say, Ray—Ray Bob Daing" and his accent would mark him unmistakably as American. He had once met a Korean immigrant who had learned English in North Carolina. Her talk was, for the most part, perfect English—some confusion with *r*'s and *l*'s, an occasional *h* thrown in behind an *a*, and a wandering accent on polysyllabic words that made her sound like Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong*, with Richard Petty as her English teacher. But when she drawled, people knew she was an American. When Raymond spoke, with no accent, they just noticed that he spoke pretty good English. In the schoolyard, kids used to taunt him. "What are you—Chinese, Japanese, or American Knees?" they'd chant, slanting the corners of their eyes up and down, displaying a bucktoothed smile, and pointing at their knees. When Raymond, not liking any of the choices, didn't answer, they'd say, "Then you must be dirty knees."

. . .

Sylvia Beacon-Yamaki was one of those hyphenated-by-marriage women. Raymond concluded from her name that she liked Asian men and therefore would not be too judgmental about any failures on his part when she exercised her duty as his attorney. He had met her when they volunteered at an art auction to raise funds for an Asian community mental health clinic. Now, six months later, he had appeared at her office after five, without an appointment. He didn't know any other attorneys.

She remembered him. She ushered him in, took off her blazer, kicked off her shoes, and motioned for him to sit next to her at the conference table. When Raymond uttered the words "My wife, Darleen, and I are getting divorced. I might need your help," Sylvia realized he was seated too close, her blouse was too tight, her skirt too short. He placed the opposing attorney's settlement papers on the table in front of her and stared at the floor. Was he looking at her red toenails?

"I've got a couple of beers in the refrigerator," she said. It was the right thing to say. In the office kitchen, under the fluorescent lights, Sylvia read the proposed settlement and Raymond explained his marriage.

Darleen's first words to him had been "Say, Ray." When he looked back on that moment, he wanted to offer others this advice: "Never marry your first Chinese girlfriend." Raymond, at thirty, had just finished his graduate degree in public administration at Berkeley. Darleen, at twenty-six, had an M.B.A. degree and was working for a bank while she studied for the CPA exam. Her roommate was a classmate of Raymond's and had convinced Darleen that the Asian guys in the public administration program were less nerdy than the ones in the business school. After a meeting of a minority students' coalition, the three of them went to a Chinese restaurant, where Darleen ordered in Cantonese. The owner of the restaurant knew her

father and didn't charge them. Darleen insisted on paying and left a twenty-dollar bill on the table, but the owner ran after her and gave her a bag of lichee candy, in which Darleen later discovered her twenty-dollar bill. The food, the money, the family honor, were played out to perfection in a classic Chinese morality play.

Raymond recognized all the right cultural signals. Darleen and her family would give him the large Chinese American family he'd never had. Her two older brothers and sisters had already married, in order of birth. He and Darleen would be the next. They would fall in love, get married, and have children—preferably male children—who would be given fabulous red-egg parties on their one-month birthdays. Raymond moved to West Covina, a suburb east of Los Angeles, to join the family and be Chinese. He felt lucky. Believing in luck and fate was very Chinese.

Darleen's father owned two upscale Chinese restaurants that catered to a white clientele. While Raymond was looking for a job in public administration, Darleen's father offered to let him be the night manager at General Chan's Palace restaurant. After all, Raymond had real college training in administration, employee relations, and management. Raymond tried to explain that his training was more in the public sector, specifically in issues relating to affirmative action and human rights. Darleen's father puffed on his cigar. "Perfect! We serve the public." Raymond thought managing a small minority-owned business right out of graduate school couldn't hurt his résumé. Things fell into place.

Raymond had left the restaurant a couple of times, once to become an affirmative action officer at a community college, then later to work as an investigator for Orange County's Department of Human Rights, but he lost both jobs to budget cut-

backs. Each time he came back to the restaurant, and each time Darleen's father matched his salary in the "outside" world.

It was as if at the exact moment he married Darleen, whoever oversaw good Chinese boys had tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Son, your time has come. Follow me. Your dead mother would have wanted it this way." Ancestors for seventy-five generations back had nodded in agreement. "Good boy, good boy, good boy," they had chanted as he was led away.

*Away.* That was the key to the whole matter: away from what? Raymond knew exactly what he had given up and what he had been led away from. For Darleen, the marriage had been something she was directed to, a destination, the beginning of a life branching out in all directions from the common root of their union. But Raymond was already perched on the tip of one of the branches, and the ancestors were sawing it off and planting it in the ground, saying, "Good boy. Grow new roots and we'll forget about your girlfriends who weren't Chinese. You didn't know what you were doing. You were young. Too much rock and roll."

"Too moochie moobies," as Grandma would say about the grandson who strayed too far.

Loretta Young was the only white woman Grandma approved of. She watched *The Loretta Young Show* every week on television, and she never forgot that earlier in her career, Loretta Young had saved Chinese orphans and fought Japs with Alan Ladd in the movie *China*. In *The Hatchet Man*, Loretta Young was a Chinese daughter, her eyes taped and latexed into an "Oriental" slant. Edward G. Robinson was the tong hatchet man who was ordered to kill her father—who happened to be Edward G. Robinson's good friend—because he betrayed the tong. Friendship was one thing, but betrayal was a whole other thing. Before chopping his friend's head off, Edward G. Robinson promised to raise Loretta Young as if she were his daughter.



Business was business, and a promise was a promise. In the end, all Chinese stories came down to loyalty, betrayal, and revenge.

Things fell into place until Darleen's father became Burl Ives and Darleen became Elizabeth Taylor and Raymond became Paul Newman in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Raymond realized what Darleen's brothers had known all their lives—in a family business, there is no free will. The only freedom Darleen's father offered her brothers was to give them their own restaurant to manage. They were destined to work in the restaurant business whether they wanted to or not. One of them once said to Raymond, "If I weren't paying myself such a high salary, I'd quit." But you couldn't quit family.

The freedom Raymond's father had given him as an only child hadn't prepared him for working within the patriarchy of a large Chinese family business. Neither had his studies in public administration prepared him; the courses he would have needed were all in the psychology department. In Darleen's family Raymond became just another son, another brother. He had no other social life.

His life at the restaurant became separate from Darleen's life and from their life together. At work under bright lights, his life was on constant display, surrounded by background music, the constant chatter bouncing off the walls as he moved between tables, and the metallic and ceramic noise of the kitchen. He came home after closing, craving a darkened and silent anonymity, and moved about the house without turning on the lights. Sometimes he pretended he was alone and unmarried. He stopped cooking for himself and Darleen, stopped eating meals at home, stopped listening to music, and watched television with the sound off. He never answered the phone; any call at home was for Darleen.

She was comfortable with Raymond's silence, which was just like her brothers'. Her brothers never spoke of work because it