

# VOICES OF THE SECOND WAVE

CHINESE AMERICANS IN SEATTLE

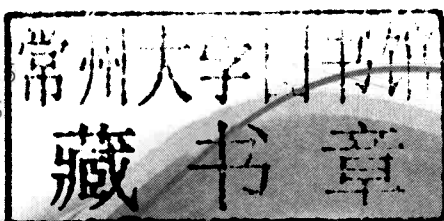


COMPILED BY  
DORI JONES YANG

# VOICES OF THE SECOND WAVE

CHINESE AMERICANS IN SEATTLE

ORAL HISTORIES OF 35  
CHINESE AMERICANS  
WHO IMMIGRATED  
1934-1968



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DORI JONES YANG

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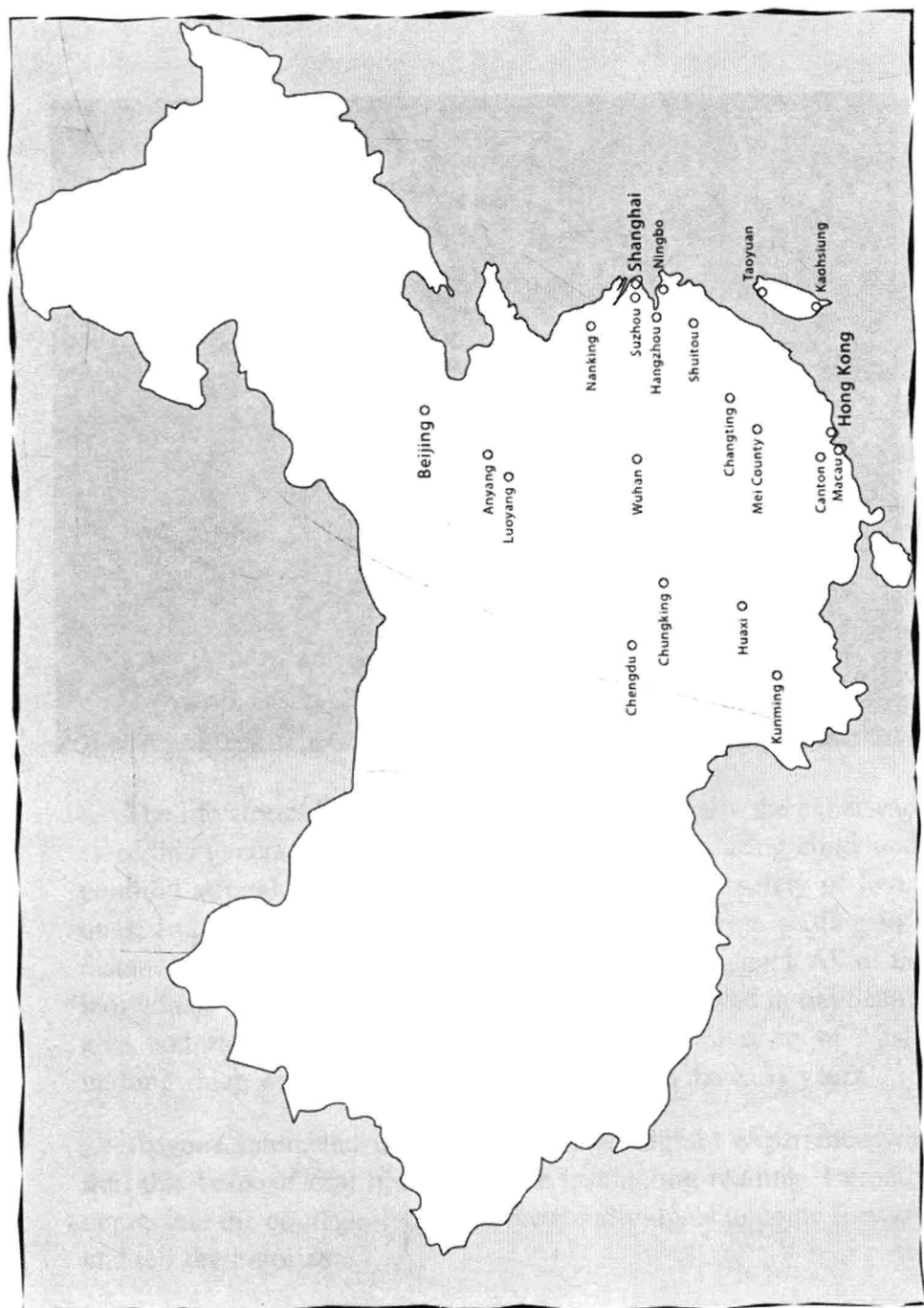


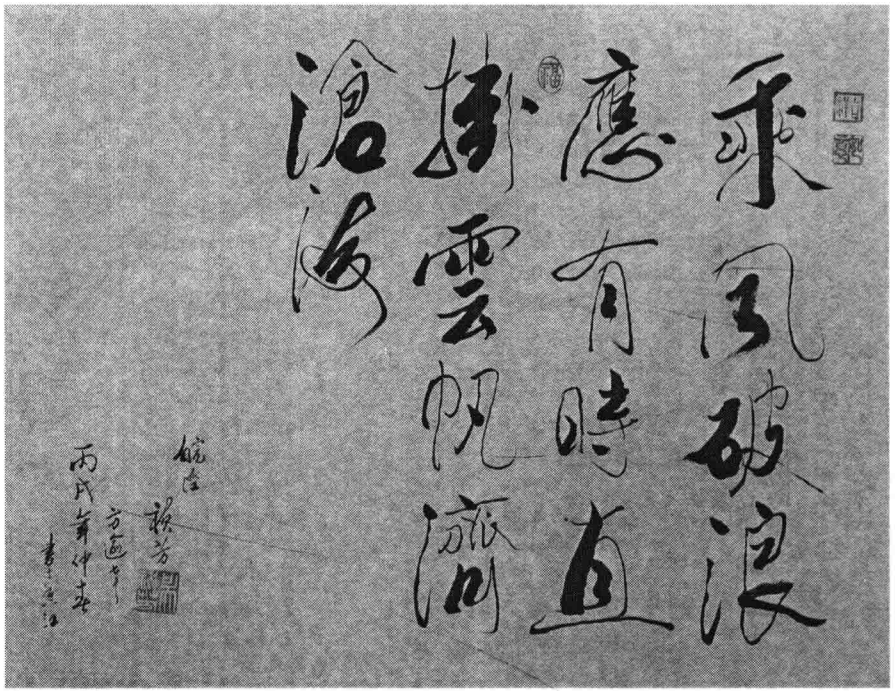
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*Dedicated to  
Maria L. Koh  
and the other 34 people  
interviewed for this book  
with thanks  
for sharing their stories*

Name	Birthplace
Jiu-Fong Lo Chang:	Nanking
Kuei-sheng Chang:	Anyang, Henan
Chen Shi-Han:	Shuitou, Zhejiang
Kao Shu-koo:	Shanghai
George Koo:	Changting, Fujian
Peter C. Ku:	Mei County, Guangdong
Sophia Ku:	Taoyuan, Taiwan
Maria L. Koh:	Shanghai
Agnes Lee:	Chungking
Conrad Lee:	Kunming, Yunnan
H.F. (Hsiung-Fei) Lee:	Shanghai
Shiang-Yu Lee:	Chungking
Winnie Lee:	Shanghai
Winnie Y. Lee:	Macau
Paul B. H. Liao:	Kaohsiung, Taiwan
Hua Lin:	Beijing
Lillian Lin:	Shanghai
Jung-Tai Lin:	Huaxi, Guizhou
Lensey Namioka:	Beijing
Kenneth Pai:	Beijing
Julie Pai:	Chengdu, Sichuan
Y. H. Michael Pao:	Nanking
Jack Peng:	Wuhan
Tzy C. Peng:	Suzhou, Jiangsu
Dennis Su:	Hong Kong
Millie Su:	Canton (Guangzhou)
Harold Tai:	Shanghai
Joan Tai:	Kunming, Yunnan
C.C. Tien:	Wuhan
Betty Tonglao:	Kunming, Yunnan
Peter Tonglao:	Beijing
Timothy Wang:	Shanghai
Shiao-Yen Wu:	Chungking
Chao-Chen Yang:	Hangzhou, Zhejiang
Jean Yang:	Ningbo, Zhejiang
Margaret C.Y. Yang:	Chengdu, Sichuan
Paul J. C. Yang:	Luoyang, Henan
Isabella Yen:	Beijing





Calligraphy by Wu Zhengfan

## Preface

My parents, who came to the United States in 1938, were on the leading edge of what became known as the “second wave” of Chinese immigrants. Coming from China in search of better higher education opportunities, they found themselves cut off from their homeland because of war and turbulence there. Their stories differed markedly from those of the better-known “first wave” of immigrants from China, people who spoke Cantonese, built Chinatowns, and took on tough jobs on the railroads, in factories, and in restaurants.



This “second wave” of Chinese began arriving in increasing numbers after World War II. Initially, they came not as immigrants, but as students. Not allowed to return to China, many of them got jobs and settled here. With advanced degrees and professional expertise, they enjoyed advantages that the “first wave” of Chinese immigrants did not. Still, assimilating into American life was not easy.

The life stories in this book illustrate dramatically the experiences of this generation, including war-time dangers during childhood, youthful struggles to get an education, fear for the safety of loved ones, and a lingering sense of loneliness derived from settling in a distant land where they would always feel like foreigners. All of the individuals interviewed for this book live or have lived in the Seattle area, and many had a close association with the University of Washington, which was a nexus for this community in the early years.

Anyone interested in the American immigrant experience will find this book of oral histories to be fascinating reading. I greatly appreciate the courage it took for these individuals to come forward and tell their stories.

—Phyllis M. Wise, Interim President, University of Washington



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# Introduction

In the mid-1800s, the ‘first wave’ of Chinese immigrants began to come to the United States to search for gold. As time went on, they built railroads, created Chinatowns, and worked in low-wage jobs in laundries, at restaurants, on farms, and in factories. These men braved the high seas to earn money to send back home to their families in poor, rural areas of southern China. Most spoke Cantonese or the similar Toisan dialect. In 1882, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, a blatantly racist law that prevented further immigration from China and prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. That law was not lifted until 1943, during the height of World War II, when China and the United States were allies in the fight against Japan.

The ‘second wave’ of Chinese immigrants differed markedly from that first wave, and much less has been written about them. After the Japanese invasion of China, and especially after the Chinese Communist Party took control of mainland China in 1949, many young Chinese students came to the United States seeking an education. Men and women, they came from all parts of China and spoke Mandarin, the language of higher education throughout China, as well as their regional dialects. Some came from wealthy or well-connected families and had been educated in English in private schools founded by Americans. Others came from poor families, started school barefoot, and won scholarships by excelling on exams. Most came on student visas and applied for U.S. citizenship only after earning their degrees and securing jobs.

This group of young people included many of China’s “best and brightest,” graduates of China’s top universities, sons and daughters

of its entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, and government leaders. Most came to the United States for graduate school, and many studied science or engineering, the academic fields most valued back home in China. Their education and skills were badly needed in their homeland, and normally, most would have returned home to help modernize China. In fact, most Chinese scholars from earlier generations, those who came in the 1930s and before, had returned home after completing their studies.

The Chinese students who came to the U.S. in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s became a 'lost generation.' Most were cut off from the land of their birth for many decades. After the Communist victory, no students were allowed to leave the People's Republic of China to study in Western capitalist countries, so most of those who came as students after 1949 had escaped the Communists, either directly to the U.S. or through the safe havens of Taiwan or Hong Kong. Some escaped, with dramatic, nail-biting tales of close calls. Others packed onto overcrowded ships and poured into the underdeveloped, rural island of Taiwan, which was not prepared to absorb them. For decades, they could not communicate with their relatives left behind in China, many of whom suffered under the Communists, who were suspicious of their loyalty because of their overseas connections. A few students did go back to Hong Kong or Taiwan, and a handful returned to mainland China, but for most, the door to China had slammed shut. Since the United States offered attractive opportunities for employment, most stayed and became U.S. citizens. Their decision helped fill a need in the United States for technical experts. This was a windfall for America and a huge loss for China.

This book is a collection of the life stories of Chinese immigrants who came as students in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—after the United States had lifted the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and before the 1965 immigration law opened the floodgates and allowed large-scale immigration from Asia. All those featured in this book were born before 1949, so their childhood memories include the turbulent years of the Japanese occupation, the Chinese civil war, and the flight of millions from mainland China because of Communism. Immigrants

from this generation settled in all parts of the United States, so every major American city has such Mandarin-speaking communities; those interviewed for this book have lived much of their lives in the greater Seattle area. Their experiences are typical of their generation across the United States.

This book is not intended to be a 'Who's Who' of Chinese Americans in Seattle, focusing only on the most accomplished and distinguished members of this generation. Nor does it pretend to include every worthy person in this group. The goal is to show a range of individuals, broadly representative of the greater population; it provides a slice of life and valuable source material for future researchers. The 35 people interviewed for this book all told their own stories in their own voices, in English. They responded to questions about their early memories of China, their immigrant experiences, their education, and their careers. This book contains selected excerpts from longer interviews, whose full, polished transcripts are available through the University of Washington libraries.

Every person in this group of interviewees is Chinese, lived in Seattle for many years, and came to the United States before 1969. Otherwise, the group is diverse. It includes both men and women, and people born in Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as mainland China. Most came on student visas, although one came for work, one as a refugee, and one as a diplomat. A few were interviewed about their immigrant parents, who have passed away; they are included because their parents were pioneers in this Mandarin-speaking community, professors or diplomats who welcomed and nurtured the students of this generation, who were so far from home.

## **What Makes Their Experiences Stand Out**

Ironically, these 'second-wave' immigrants did not mix easily with the Chinese-American descendents of the 'first wave,' since most did not speak Cantonese. They did not congregate in Chinatowns but lived in residential neighborhoods in Seattle or its suburbs, mingling with

their Caucasian neighbors because their English was good. Although a few worked in Chinese restaurants during college, most settled in professional jobs as engineers, professors, college administrators, researchers, architects, city planners, librarians, or entrepreneurs. Their U.S.-born children were in part responsible for the “model minority” stereotype, including many excellent students driven to succeed.

Despite their professional training, these students had ‘bittersweet’ experiences, suffering many hardships. Although a few grew up in relatively wealthy families, their parents lost their fortunes, land, and country. Once in the United States, almost all had to support themselves with scholarships, part-time work on campus, and summer jobs. One was nearly deported, and others had to report to the U.S. government year after year as aliens before they gained the right to permanent residence (PR). Congress occasionally passed laws granting permanent residence to technically trained foreigners, but these laws were sporadic and students could not rely on them. They needed to find an employer willing to sponsor them, and that made it difficult to switch jobs. Until they obtained PR status, they could not leave the country. That rule, plus the prohibitive cost of trans-Pacific travel, meant that many could not go back to Asia to see their parents and siblings for ten years or more. Those with parents and other relatives on the mainland under Communism had to wait thirty years or more to go back. By then, it was often too late; many never saw their parents alive again.

Although a few came to the United States as undergraduates, most of those who came from Taiwan had to wait until after college graduation and military service, so they did not come until their early to mid-20s. As a result, many of them never lost their Chinese accent and never perfected their English grammar; this made it difficult to qualify for job promotions. The language barrier made it hard to understand jokes and cultural and sports references, prohibiting the easy camaraderie that smoothes the way for career advancement. Also, the Chinese cultural preference for quiet humility prevented the kind of self-promotion rewarded by U.S. employers. As a result, some felt they hit a glass ceiling and were barred from higher-level management jobs that they were otherwise qualified for. A few also faced overt



discrimination, mostly when trying to buy houses in certain neighborhoods in the Seattle area, where whites-only clauses were written into neighborhood covenants until the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Self-identity remained a lifelong issue for this unique generation of Chinese immigrants. For various reasons, they could not easily integrate into their adopted country, yet they felt conflicted about their motherland. Despite their early education in patriotism and national pride toward China, for years, they could not feel an affinity either for mainland China, with its political upheavals and initial hostility toward the outside world, or for Taiwan, which had an authoritarian government for many years and tense relations between native-born Taiwanese and mainland Chinese who moved to Taiwan after 1945. Not until the mid to later stages of their lives did these immigrants begin to witness the peaceful rise of their motherland, allowing them once again to take pride in their heritage. Even now, though, as some Americans worry about China looming as a potential rival, if not a threat to the United States, these immigrants continue to ask themselves, “Am I American, or am I Chinese?”

## Historical Context

For most Americans, World War II brings up images of Pearl Harbor, Nazi Germany, Japanese kamikaze pilots, and the island-hopping campaign that included the Battle of Iwo Jima. Although the United States supported the war effort in China, few American troops were involved there, so it is not a big part of U.S. national consciousness.

But for the Chinese, that war involved long, wrenching years of resistance to the Japanese imperial army, which had invaded Northeast China (Manchuria) as early as 1931 and rapidly conquered coastal China and most of its big cities starting in 1937. Some rural areas remained relatively free of the Japanese, as did the deep southwest interior, which included Chungking (Chongqing), where the Nationalist government moved its capital during the war. Most Chinese universities had to leave their home campuses and relocate to either Chungking or Kunming, interior cities accessible only via the Burma Road or by flying “over