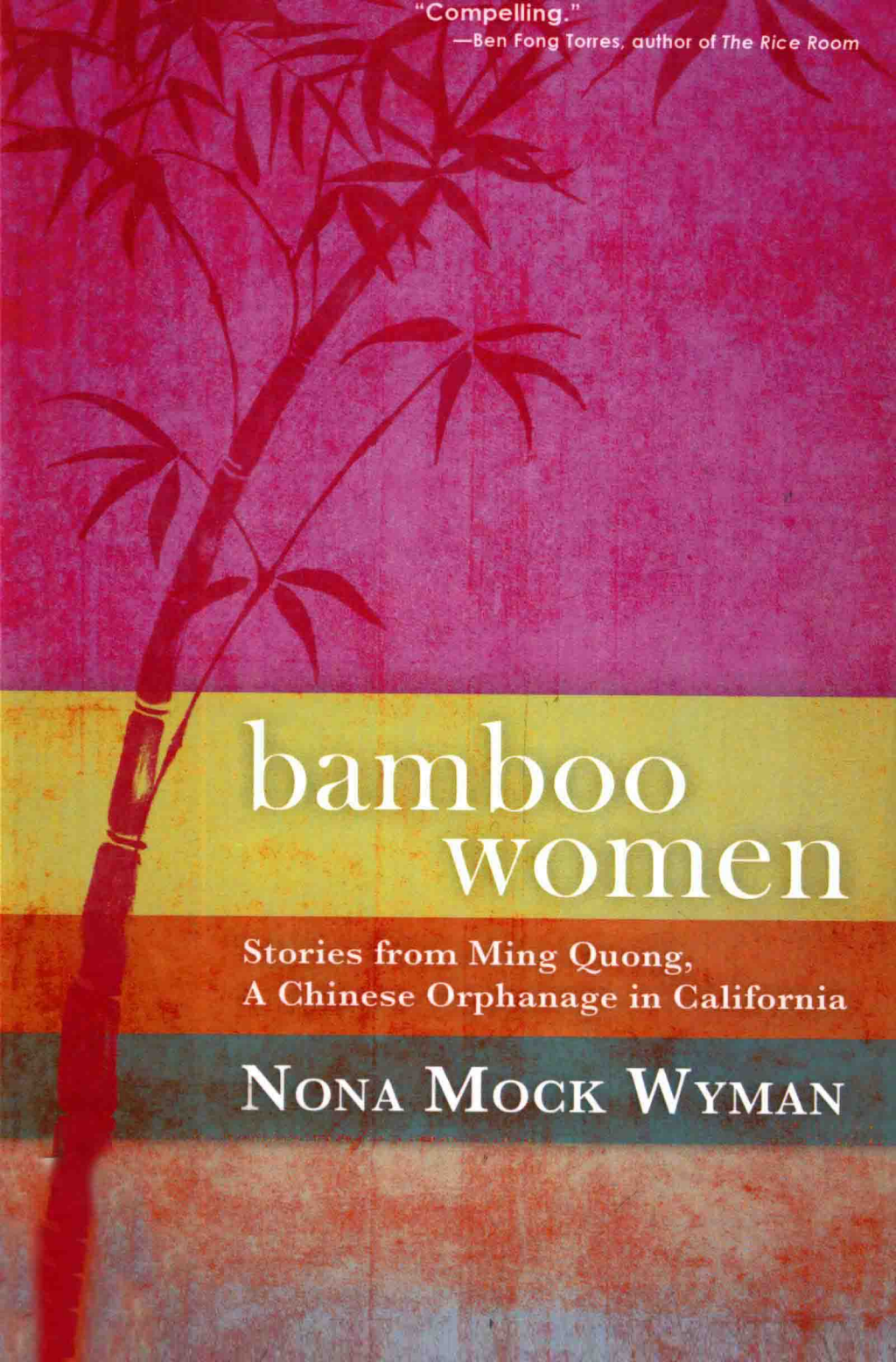


"Compelling."

—Ben Fong Torres, author of *The Rice Room*



bamboo
women

Stories from Ming Quong,
A Chinese Orphanage in California

NONA MOCK WYMAN

BAMBOO WOMEN

*Stories from Ming Quong, a
Chinese Orphanage in California*

Nona Mock Wyman



CHINA BOOKS

San Francisco

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Published in the United States of America by
Sinomedia International Group
China Books
360 Swift Ave., Suite 48
South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.chinabooks.com

Cover design: Nathan Grover
Text design: Linda Ronan

Printed in China

ISBN 978-0-8351-0006-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wyman, Nona Mock.

Bamboo women : stories from the women of Ming Quong, a Chinese orphanage in California / by Nona Mock Wyman. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8351-0006-9 (pbk.)

1.Ming Quong Home (Oakland, Calif.)—History. 2.Ming Quong Home (Los Gatos, Calif.)—History. 3.Chinese-American women—California—History. 4.Orphans—California—History.I. Title.

HV995.O32M558 2012

362.73'2—dc23

2011045298

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With a heart full of gratitude, I thank all these wonderful people who, each in his or her own special way, helped me with this book.

The Diablo Writer's Workshop in Walnut Creek, California, with Anastasia Hobbet, Jerry Ball, Cinda McKinnon, and Harrietta Heibel.

My editor, Linda Foust.

Jane Stone, Karin Evans, William Wong, Ben Fong Torres, Roy Chan, Jim Wyman, Kevin Welch, Tanya Lonac, Katrina Gee, Kammy Rose, Doris Yee, Kashina Warren, Shawn Jiminez, Susan, PJ, Bethan Lamb, Alex Lock, Lani Owyong, Paul and Darlene Lee, Pamela Wong, Bob McClean, Carol Lutz, Lissa Hallbergh, Vera Zaskevich, Mauvre Quilter, Dean James, Barbara Wagner, Marlene and Walt Hoy, Lee Anne Quisenberry, Brenda Wong Aoki, Bob Joe, Erica Hatfield, Susan Irene troop, Monk Khoung Viet McCarthy, and others who

read the manuscript or inspired or assisted me in writing this book.

My Ming Quong store customers.

My Ming Quong Home family and Loretta Schauer, the first MQ girl to encourage me to write this book and send it to her!

And now to you, my readers, my deepest appreciation for your interest.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the Ming Quong women and to all women who have overcome adversity.

“Ming Quong,” the Chinese girls’ orphanage, means “radiant light” in Cantonese, which is the spiritual interpretation. In the academic sense, it can also translate to “brilliant, bright, and shiny.” The two Homes where I grew up were located in Oakland and Los Gatos, on the San Francisco peninsula.

My fascination with bamboo stems from early childhood days at the Home in Los Gatos, where a small stand of wild bamboo grew and survived without care from anyone. We all had jobs at the Home; as a preschooler, mine was helping the nursery teacher with the daily wash. One very cold morning, I noticed a strange sight—white smoke wafting in the air from the hillside below. Perplexed, I finally realized it was the dirty laundry water gushing from an exposed pipe and draining

into the bamboo. Surprised, I wondered if the hot suds and bleach would kill the plants. Decades later, while visiting the Home, I was happy to see that the bamboo was not only still there but had grown into a large grove! Later, at my Ming Quong gift store in Walnut Creek, I chatted with a Chinese couple, Marlene and Walt Hoy, telling them how much I loved bamboo, and Marlene remarked that bamboo represents strength and durability. In that moment, I felt a rush of excitement as I realized what bamboo means to me—"the women of Ming Quong!" From that day forth, whenever I have a book reading, I always include the old metaphor, "A good woman is like bamboo; when the winds blow, it bends; it doesn't break."

I especially thank all the women whose stories are told in this book. They had the courage to open up decades of buried childhood secrets. It was sometimes painful to relive the past, and I felt great empathy for all of them. Many of the stories came from life-long friends who had never told me of the suffering they endured as youngsters. Throughout the unfolding of these stories, a sense of incredible strength came through, revealing the remarkable spirit they all possessed—the power of overcoming adversity. Their willingness to reveal their backgrounds completes the human, personal

side of the history of Ming Quong that I began in my first book, *Chopstick Childhood in a Town of Silver Spoons*. To all the women of Ming Quong, I sincerely dedicate this book to you. You are all truly the radiant lights of Ming Quong.

INTRODUCTION

In 1935, when I was 2¹/₂ years old, my world shattered. My immigrant mother took me to an orphanage 30 miles away from our home in San Francisco, placed me on a stranger's lap, and walked out the door. I remember screaming in terror as she disappeared from view, but a group of young girls instantly clustered around me and a small hand reached out for mine. I looked up and saw another little girl not much older than I, her eyes were brimming with tears—and I was comforted.

I never saw my mother again.

I grew up there at the Ming Quong Home in Los Gatos, California along with 35 other Chinese girls who became my family, as close as any “true sisters” could be. We were raised by 5 missionary women (3 Caucasian and 2 Chinese who cared for us in their strict manner).

As an adult in my fifties, I began to hear disturbing statements about the Home. One was that “bad” girls

lived at Ming Quong and that Chinese parents would threaten to send their daughters there if they didn't behave! Two college students I knew also gave me some startling facts: classroom discussions and a required textbook featuring Ming Quong stated that prostitutes lived at the Home! I was shocked. I couldn't believe these untruths! Never in my thirteen years at the Home had I heard such allegations or seen anything to support them!

A decade later I researched the history of Ming Quong for my first book, *Chopstick Childhood in a Town of Silver Spoons*. As with a puzzle, bits and pieces of facts began to fit together, and by the end of my research, I understood the teachers' staunch silence: they had been protecting us!

The history of Ming Quong dates back to 1915, but in actuality it goes back further, to 1848, when a ten-year-old boy was on a stagecoach from Sacramento, looking forward to a romp in the ocean in San Francisco. Even more exciting, this fourth-grader had a secret which he had sworn not to tell to anyone. However, he heard enthusiastic fellow passengers talking about the rumor of gold having been discovered at the creek at Sutter's Mill, near where he lived. The boy was stunned, as that was his secret! Unable to contain himself, he suddenly burst out, "It's true! Gold was found at Sutter's Mill!" And that's