U.S. Chinese culture

The honeymoon - era of good feeling

By H. M. LAI

The original Chinese settlement in San Francisco was on Sacramento Street west of Kearny Street; to this day, older Chinese still know Sacramento Street as "Tong-Yun Gai", or "Chinese Street". Beginning with the late 1840's, San Francisco's world-famous Chinatown had begun to take shape and in time sprawled over the area north of Sacramento Street and around the Plaza (now Portsmouth Square). By the end of 1849 some seven hundred Chinese were residents and the increasing numbers created the necessary conditions and reasons to organize.

ADVISOR WOODWORTH

The ALTA CALIFORNIA of December 10, 1849, reported a meeting of some 300 Chinese at the Canton Restaurant on Jackson Street. The following resolution was adopted which gave an outline of the objective of their gathering:

"Whereas, it becomes necessary for us, strangers as we are, in a strange land, unacquainted with the language and customs, of this, our adopted country, to have some recognized counselor and adviser, to whom we may all appeal, with confidence, for wholesome instruction and advice, in the event of any unforeseen difficulties arising, wherein we should be at loss as to what course of action it might be necessary for us to pursue; therefore, resolved, that a committee of four be appointed upon Selim E. Woodworth, Esq., and request him, in behalf of the Chinese residents of San Francisco, to act in the capacity of arbitrator and adviser for them."

The next day a committee of four, consisting of Ahe, Jon-Ling, Atung, and Atoon waited upon Mr. Woodworth and obtained his assent.

WISE STEP

Obviously, the Chinese community at the time, being some 10,000 miles outside the protective folds of the Emperor, ignorant of the customs and laws of their new home and living amongst a potentially hostile populace who at best are ignorant or have distorted ideas of Chinese customs, felt strongly that a liaison with the white community is needed for their own protection and for better community relations. Later events were to show that these precautionary steps were quite necessary and wise.

In 1850 the Chinese were still tolerated in California, and in that year we found the first record of a semi-official mingling of Chinese with Americans. Apparently, certain leading San Franciscans, in the interest of morality and religion, conceived the idea that it would be a most pious gesture to acquaint the resident "heathen Chinee" with the "Scriptural truths." To achieve this end, a number of pamphlets and tracts printed in Chinese were ordered from Canton, China.

"CHINA BOYS"

Upon the arrival of the printed material, invitations were sent out to the "China Boys" (as the Chinese were known at that time) to be present on the afternoon of August 28th in front of the old Mexican Custom House in Portsmouth Square to receive the consignment of "Christian truths and useful knowledge."

The China Boys responded with courteous gravity, and at least 300, dressed in their best holiday attire, marched in a procession to the square. There following exchanges of flattery and platitudes by various dignitaries, the presentation was made. The interpreter on this occasion was one Ah Sing.

The histories did not record whether any of the Celestials "saw the light" as a result of this gathering; however, Mayor Geary did seize the occasion to extend to the

Part 2

"China Boys" an invitation to march in a mock funeral procession in memory of President Zachary Taylor, recently deceased. After the funeral, the Chinese community wrote a letter of thanks to the chief magistrate:

LETTER OF THANKS

Sir:

The "China Boys" wish to thank you for the kind mark of attention you bestowed upon them in extending to them an invitation to join with the citizens of San Francisco in doing honor to the memory of the late President of the United States, Gen. Zachary Taylor. The China Boys feel proud of the distinction you have shown them, and will always endeavor to merit your good opinion and the good opinion of the citizens of their adopted country. The China Boys are fully sensible of the great loss this country has sustained in the death of its chieftain and ruler, and mourn with you in sorrow. Stranger as they are among you, they kindly appreciate the many kindnesses received at your hands, and again beg leave, with grateful hearts, to thank you.

Ah-Sing, Ahe

In behalf of the China Boys"

HONEYMOON ENDING

After their initial appearance in the funeral procession of President Taylor, the "China Boys" became a feature of every parade which followed, viz., the first celebration of the admission of California into the Union, Washington's Birthday, Independence Day, etc. In all of these, the Chinese with their picturesque and colorful costumes easily outshone all other participants. This was the height of their popularity. However, the early California attitude toward the Chinese was at best patronizing indulgence or amused tolerance. In reality, few understood the Chinese or his cultural background. Soon conflicts would arise, indulgence turning to contempt and tolerance to hostility. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon; the honeymoon was coming to an end.

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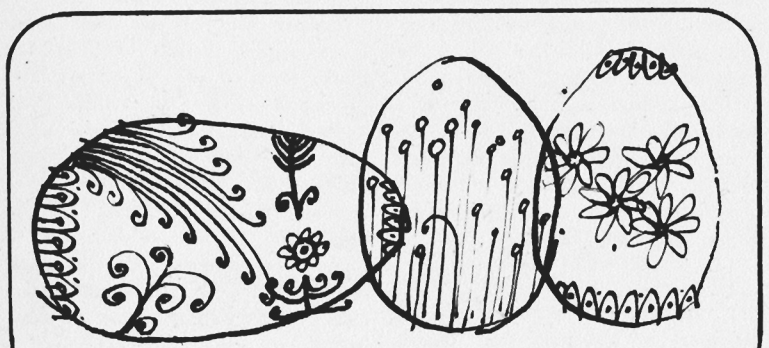
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