

## BELLE YANG

*Odello Artichoke Field, 1996*  
Gouache, 20 x 28 in



courtesy: the artist

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# All Things Have Roots and Branches

**Chinese Stories Planted in the  
Rich Soil of Salinas Bear Fruit**

**F**orty years ago, amid clanging pots, pans, and a canary in a cage, my parents drove a rusted Ford station wagon south to the Monterey Bay region. My family was drawn to the mist-swaddled crags at Point Lobos, which whispered of our ancestral homeland. Yet we felt ourselves alien people—we were among the first Chinese to have found a nesting place on California's Central Coast.

Until I attended the annual Feast of Lanterns Festival in Pacific Grove, I did not imagine that sixty-five years ago squid boats lit at night were used to attract the mollusks, a harvest no one desired until the Chinese created a market for them. After 1906, the year someone set fire to the Point Alones Chinatown, where the Monterey Bay Aquarium now stands, Pacific Grove residents grew nostalgic for the lights, which glimmered like fairy lanterns on the water.

It took me a long time to get to know that story. In my teens, I moved away from Chinese culture and history—being Chinese did not help me fit in, outside my home. It was only on my return from the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 that I began to understand the importance of stories. I was twenty-nine. Like the lanterns, stories, when burned, glow more brightly. On my homecoming, I was given a copy of *Chinese Gold*, written by a man of passion, Professor Sandy Lydon, and published by a man of philanthropy, George Ow, Jr. That is when I learned about the Chinese of Salinas.

In the nineteenth century, the Chinese in Salinas signed five-year leases to work the land. In the first two years, they cut trees, wrestled out peat soil, yanked out the roots with knifelike spades; they exterminated gophers and ground squirrels; they drained and dried out swampland. In the third year, they planted vegetables dictated by the landowner—large-root crops like potatoes to further break up the soil. Only in the fourth year were they allowed to recover their three-year investment before returning the land to the owner. The Chinese risked all, whereas the landowners were ahead of the game the moment they signed the contract.

Salinas Valley land, worth \$28 an acre in 1875, came to be valued at \$100 an acre in two years. When a big landowner like C. D. Abbott was accused by anti-immigration agitators of being a Chinaman lover, he told them,