

## BELLE YANG

*Plein Air, 2012*  
Gouache, 16 x 22 in



courtesy: the artist

nese—a subgroup of men and women from the minority Hakka people living in Canton, who lived and died on boats—did not come from San Francisco or the mining camps of the Sierra. They came directly to the Monterey Bay region, riding the *kuroshio*—the black tide—and ending up shipwrecked at the mouth of the Carmel River. They settled for a time at Point Lobos, where they constructed a simple home known today as the Whaler’s Cottage. The story of their landing has been passed down to their descendents.

The Chinese characters for *Hakka* mean “guest people.” The Hakka had lost their homeland north of the Yellow River in the third century CE to invading nomads. The wirhwevs eked out a living by farming the poorest soil or were driven in desperation to the sea, founding colonies in Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Borneo, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, galleons regularly crossed the Pacific from the Philippines to the Americas, and so there was an Asian influence on this continent long before the California gold rush. Among the stories is one about a branch of landless Hakka people—to which my mother belongs by an extenuated fourteen hundred years of history—who came to the United States in 1851.

Apart from vague names in the mountains or along the seashore, such as China Camp, Chinese Camp, or China Cove, the Chinese garnered few acknowledgments in local histories. Both the Chinese and white participants wished to obscure the fight: the Chinese to avoid further persecution by immigration officials, and the whites to cover up murder, lynching, and arson. Chinatowns in the Monterey Bay region have been burned down, but their stories remain, awaiting favorable moments for the seeds of history to rise up from incinerated cones.

Since the 1960s, the largest existing Chinatown between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the Salinas enclave, has been boarded up and has become the orbit of prostitution, gambling, drug dealing, and illegal dumping. In the mix are a Confucian temple and a Japanese Buddhist temple. With the determination to redevelop Chinatown, Salinas organizations and students from California State University, Monterey Bay, who teach the homeless how to grow sustainable gardens, are slowly seeing a revival. The community, comprising people of all

ethnic backgrounds—Latinos, Filipinos, and Japanese, among others—has taken up the cause. Their intention is to make this area a safe, livable, pedestrian-friendly mixed-use development, with the old Republic Café at its heart, to become a museum where stories can be passed down in a continuum from old-timers to another generation.

Forty years ago, when my parents moved south to the Monterey Bay region, we felt ourselves strangers in that land. It took a sojourn to China in adulthood for me to care that other Chinese preceded us because of their hunger to extend their muscle and talents. They may not have come to own the acres, but the sweat that was stirred into the soil profited the expansion of this agricultural land. By the toil of early-arriving Chinese, my family is gifted with a sense of inclusion. This is home. This is our chosen homeland.

**Belle Yang** was born in Taiwan and lived in Japan before emigrating to the United States with her family at the age of seven. After obtaining a degree in biology from UC Santa Cruz she went on to study art at Pasadena Art Center College of Design and the Beijing Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting. She returned from China to the United States late in 1989 after the Tiananmen Massacre.

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