BELLE YANG

Odello Artichoke Field, 1996
Gouache, 20 x 28 in

courtesy: the artist

BELLE YANG

All Things Have Roots and Branches

Chinese Stories Planted in the Rich Soil of Salinas Bear Fruit

Forty 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,

They would always remain outsiders, looking in hungrily and then dying alone and forgotten in county hospitals.

"White men refused to work up to their knees in the water, slime, and filth of the sloughs."

Recently I went hiking in the Santa Lucia Range above Spreckels in the Salinas Valley. There, wheat was once dominant, followed by hops and tobacco, and finally supplanted by sugar beets as the emperor of crops. Looking down, I saw Salinas Valley as it is today, with its viridian and chartreuse patchworks of lettuce, and I could picture what the Chinese saw when they unkinked their aching backs and scanned the land.

The Chinese knew that where willows grew, there would be fresh water, not *salinas,* which in Spanish means "salt water." I could smell their desire for land and all the rights that landownership meant. They had known about the poverty of terrain from the populous provinces of Guangdong whence they came. This land—so much land!—could feed many mouths. Most of the arable land was in the hands of a few rancheros, who used it for grazing cattle. In the eyes of the Chinese, those acres were not used at all.

Every time I drive to the valley, crossing the highway bridge over the shallow Salinas River, the sky yawning above me, I recall the topography that John Steinbeck described in *East of Eden.* It was rich land for which men hungered and fought pitched battles to take or retain. It was the same kind of land that the communists in my great-grandfather's Manchuria wrested away from the haves to be redistributed—not necessarily fairly. From the stories passed down to me by my father about the House of Yang, eight generations in the telling, I inhale the love of land.

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act suspended immigration of Chinese to the United States on the grounds that their admission would disrupt the social order. The law barred large numbers of Chinese women from entering the country, which meant Chinese men were unable to marry. I can imagine the strain, their lives suspended between their desire to return to China—but then they would need to obtain certificates of reentry if they wished to come back to America—and their aspiration to stay, living lives of normalcy, jiggling children and grandchildren on their laps. But they would always remain outsiders, looking in hungrily and then dying alone and forgotten in county hospitals.

A generation later, in 1913, the California Alien Land Law targeted the Japanese but in the process snared all Asian immigrants, barring them from becoming naturalized citizens who could own land and property. The Chinese never gained control of the land in the Salinas Valley, but they always had a keen sense of what was valuable where other ethnic communities saw trash or weeds. According to legend, the Franciscan friars had scattered mustard seeds to create a trail of gold hitching one mission to another. The Chinese saw the value of the oil and cut the weeds for landowners in exchange for the seeds. When the mustard crop in Europe was wiped out one year, buyers came to the Chinese and paid well for their stash.

In my adult years, I have read *Cannery Row,* which I was given at age eleven, multiple times. Steinbeck's understanding of the outsider knocks me off balance each time I meet him in those pages: the old Chinaman with one flapping shoe, who walks down to the water at dusk and fishes in the night. A boy from Salinas saw the Chinaman and itched to be contrary. He cried out, "Ching-Chong-Chinaman sitting on a rail—'long came a white man an' chopped off his tail." When the old man turned, the boy saw in his brown eyes a landscape of utter desolation. The landscape of China, from which the Chinese fled in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was indeed one of spiritual waste. In those brown pools the boy encountered the despair of the excluded.

I am currently at work on *Umbilical Cords,* a graphic memoir about my Hakka mother, who lived under the Japanese colonial system from 1895 to 1945. What does this story have to do with the Monterey Bay region? As it turns out, from *Chinese Gold,* I read that Tanka Chi-

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Hunan Farmers, 2003
Gouache, 16 x 22 in

courtesy: the artist

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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 wirhwews 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.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the Sacramento Bee.
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