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Recovering the Stories of Chinese Immigrants in the Spa City

BY YIYUN “EVIAN” PAN

In her book *The Chinese in America*, Iris Chang asserts that, “...I try to show the Chinese Americans as they really were and are: real, and diverse, flesh-and-blood individuals in search of a dream. All I ask of the reader is to look past ethnicity and see the shared humanity within us all” (Chang 2004, xvi). The Chinese American journalist and author ends the introduction to her book with a call to ask her audiences to zoom in, under this broad ethnical topic, onto the individual journeys that she has documented. Although the waves of Chinese immigration to the United States have occurred over nearly two centuries, the individuality and personal narratives of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans have long been packed and stored in a single cabin, represented under the group name of the ethnic population, instead of those of individuals. As sociocultural representations have empowered a collective political voice, individual narratives became culturally blurry and remain in the shadow of large records such as census data, employment surveys, and income numbers.

Therefore, to learn and tell individual stories, The Saratoga Chinese Oral History Project, initiated in June 2015, investigates and documents the historical and contemporary narratives of Chinese immigration and residency in Saratoga Springs, NY. The city’s prosperous entertainment, artistic cultures, stable economy, and picturesque landscape appealed, within a hundred

years’ history, to many immigrants, including Chinese, to settle here. Thus, beyond the larger picture of immigrants’ cultural adaptation to a new country, how did those newcomers and their children, the second generation, on a local scale, interact with the environment of this upstate New York city where white culture is deeply rooted? The oral history interviews aim to learn about the cross-continental journeys and discover the feelings of the individuals upon changing lifestyles. The project also looks into the lives of the second generations of immigrants, the Chinese Americans who were born here, especially to examine how the dichotomy of growing up in a Chinese family and living in an American town impacted their awareness of identity and cultural memories.

Chinese in Saratoga Springs (1970s)

The Oral History Project is not the first to look at individual Chinese stories. From the collection of the Saratoga Springs City Historian’s Office, I found that the *Saratogian* newspaper devoted pages to the stories of several notable Chinese figures in 1970s.

A column of *The Saratogian*, published on February 9, 1975, introduced the family of Pui Pui Wah and Kwan Ling Chang, known as Sabrina and James Chang to their friends, describing how they celebrated in welcoming the Year of the Rabbit in a traditional manner (“Changs of Saratoga”

1975). The members in the family bonded over the preparation and enjoyment of homemade authentic Chinese food and connected the Asian tradition with modern American life. Further, speaking of Chinese cuisine, Willie Lum, Hong Kong-born and a former New York City resident, opened his Chinese American restaurant at the age of 76, in the year 1976 (“At 76” 1976). Two years later, Ronnie Cheuk, who had lived in Saratoga Springs for 15 years, opened the Rice Inn, featuring various types of Chinese cuisines (Von Seggern 1980). Apart from running restaurant businesses, the Chinese also adopted roles in education. In 1975, sadly, Dr. Yu-Kuang Chu, who served for many years as a professor of Asian Studies and the department chair of Education at Skidmore College, passed away. A native of China, Dr. Chu immigrated to the US in the late 1940s, introducing the discipline of Asian Studies to the Skidmore campus (“Dr. Chu” 1975). His wife, Mrs. Chu retired as head librarian at the Saratoga Springs Public Library in the summer of 1973 (“Mrs. Chu” 1973).

These newspaper writings, published in 1970s, highlighted the Chinese people’s unique journeys from the parts of China where they grew up to Saratoga Springs, as well as how their lives in the Spa City reflected the culture and traditions they carried with them. Similarly, the Saratoga Oral History Project aims to revitalize the attention that these personal narratives of

Changs of Saratoga to welcome year 4673 in traditional manner



AT HOME IN THE KITCHEN — Sabrina Chang loves to cook and whips up Chinese dishes as quickly as Americans broil hamburgers. She also grows her own vegetables, even during the winter months. In one of her

THE YEAR OF THE TIGER will be shered out and the Year of the Rabbit welcomed in on Tuesday, when Chinese people throughout the world celebrate the new year, based on the ancient moon calendar.

Pui Pui Wah and Kwan Ling Chang, now to their Saratoga Springs friends

the New Year are confectionaries—kumquats, crystallized coconut, crystallized ginger, crystallized lotus root, dry sweet lotus nuts, crystallized eater chestnuts and dry sweet coconut slices. As most of the authentic Chinese foods are not available in this area, friends of the Changs oblige them by

thin slices, with carrot and radish slices for garnish.

Celebrating the Chinese New Year in America is much different than celebrating it in the Orient, said Chang who was born in the northern part of Shanghai during the Japanese occupation in 1935. When still a boy, his

Sabrina Chang shares recipes

SABRINA CHANG offers her own recipes for those who wish to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

Chang's Spiced Drunk Chicken

3 whole chicken breasts—boned and skinned
3 tsp. salt
1 tsp. crushed Chinese spice (star anise)
¼ cup dry sherry
Mix wine, salt and spice. Marinate in a tightly closed jar in refrigerator for five days. Turn chicken twice daily.

Remove from refrigerator and leave at room temperature for at least 3 hours before cooking.
Place breasts on rack over boiling water. Be sure chicken is not touched by water. Steam approximately 20 minutes.
Remove and cool. Slice thin across grain and serve cold. Garnish platter with raw vegetables—such as carrots, radishes, etc. Sprinkle three tablespoons of sherry over chicken to moisten.

Chinese Dried Beef

3 lbs. top round, or top sirloin beef sliced ¼" (or thinner). (Ask the butcher to machine slice.)
½ cup soy sauce
¼ cup honey
2 tsp. salt
4 tbsp. sherry
Mix soy sauce, honey, salt and sherry. Marinate beef in liquid for one hour. Remove beef to baking dish and cover with aluminum foil. Bake in preheated oven 350 degrees for 15 minutes.
Remove. Let cool. Store in jar or closed container in refrigerator. Beef will harden. Serve as snack or hors d'oeuvres.

Tung on Chicken

(The name of this dish is for the town in China that made it famous.)
2 whole chickens—cut in small pieces
¾ cup soy sauce
1 tsp. sugar
3 tbsp. Sherry
1 pkg. scallions (cut entire scallion to one inch pieces)
Mix soy sauce, sugar, sherry and scallions. Marinate chicken for two hours. Put in pot, cover. Bring to boil and simmer for ½ hour. Remove pieces of chicken to broiler pan—skin side up. Broil for 3 minutes to crisp skins. Pour hot sauce over chicken. Serve.

兔
年
year of
the rabbit

SUNDAY—Sunday, Feb. 9, 1975—3C



CHINESE CONFECTIONARIES — Chinese and is about 100 years old. The Elaine Chang, seven, and Douglas Chang, three, share some of the traditional confectionaries served during the Chinese New Year. The red satin coverlet on the couch is authentic

Images from *The Saratogian* column, published on February 9, 1975, introducing Sabrina and James Chang and describing their traditional celebration of the Year of the Rabbit.

Chinese people received around 40 years ago, by collecting, documenting, and presenting the contemporary stories to continue the historical writing.

The Contemporary Stories

The three sets of interviews that the Project have collected thus far are from three individuals or pairs of interviewees, all with distinctive cross-continental experiences and different types of social and cultural engagement with the town of Saratoga Springs.

I. A Working Life

“Food culture of contemporary Chinese Americans reflects a seemingly paradoxical adaptation strategy. It is not only possible but also increasingly preferred for many immigrants to maintain their Chinese ethnic tradition while becoming Americans” (Liu 2015, 5). Restaurant jobs are what most Chinese immigrants favor and seek due to the business’s low economic risks, as well as its relative cultural proximity for immigrants to their recent memory of the mother country. In Saratoga Springs, Chinese immigrants who came from Fujian

and Canton, the two Southern provinces, are now running almost all the Asian restaurants in the city.

The first interviewee, Anna Zhu, is a receptionist at Char Koon, a Chinese and Thai restaurant on downtown Broadway. In her late 40s, Anna came to the US, directly to Saratoga Springs in 1997. When I first approached her, she immediately accepted the interview, after hearing my request, with no hesitation of speaking about personal stories. I was impressed by her confidence and independence. She spoke Mandarin with me and shared

stories about her life with me comfortably; she also spoke fluent English with her customers—not only restaurant vocabularies, but naturally greeting and chatting with them—building her confidence through the years, as she adapted to a foreign culture as an adult.

Anna moved to Saratoga with her husband, a Taiwanese American who constantly traveled to Taiwan, to Mainland China, and to the US, and eventually decided to settle here as a restaurant owner. A former office clerk in an electrical utility office, Anna gradually picked up English and learned business skills to assist her husband in running the restaurant. She said, “I prefer to do things on my own. I like to listen and talk. So gradually, after about four years, I feel that I handle everything by myself.” Speaking of her current profession, she said that she had become so familiar with running a restaurant that she could do it with eyes closed.

However, Anna’s outgoing personality contrasted with her demanding work routine in America. She works 12 hours each day, with a Saturday daytime break before work resumes at 5 p.m. Taking a walk early in the morning and a bit of bedtime reading fill her few spare hours. Chicago, where her cousins live, is too far away to visit to secure family relationships. Chances to chat and go out with friends, who are also busy with their jobs, are always limited. Describing her life, Anna concluded by saying, “In my memory, since I’ve come to America, I feel like America to me is a place for working, not for living a life.” It is interesting, as well as a bitter truth, when we consider how Anna describes her days, while living in the cultural environment of Saratoga Springs that is dominated by countless modes of entertainment and enjoyment, such as horse racing, diverse arts experiences, and various businesses located downtown. Though Anna has

always been very actively adjusting to living an American life, a Saratogian life, cultural detachment seems still inevitable for Anna, after living in the city for nearly 20 years.

Nevertheless, Anna’s optimistic personality helps her to focus on the positive aspects of her current life. She favors the elegant cityscape of Saratoga, the snow that she finds beautiful, and the qualities of water and air that often are appreciated by immigrant Chinese due to the emergent problems in their homeland. Specifically, Anna pointed out that living in a two-story house was a huge benefit for her: “It’s impossible for me to afford one back home,” because major Chinese cities, including Hangzhou where Anna comes from, have been experiencing real estate booms, resulting in high prices, such that the majority of the citizens find it difficult to afford home ownership.

Anna defined her experience as a first-generation immigrant in Saratoga Springs



Anna Zhu at the reception counter of Char Koon, a Chinese and Thai restaurant in downtown Saratoga Springs.
Photo by Evian Pan.



Andy Lu in front of his parents' Chinese fast food counter in the Wilton Mall, Wilton. Photo by Evian Pan.

in this really, *really* predominantly white town,” said Andy. For many young Chinese Americans, the mirror to see yourself is the way you look at others, in this case, others being white (Tung 2000). Andy, like others who are the second generation of immigrants, often faced a hesitating process of self-identification.

Since attending a larger university as an adult, Andy has become much more aware of his own identity, and more active in promoting self-awareness, mainly because he has met many peers—Asian Americans, specifically, Chinese Americans and Chinese international students on the Rochester campus. By socializing with others of similar ethnicity, while starting to take Chinese language courses, Andy began and continues to familiarize himself with the Chinese culture, which has helped him to understand many of his childhood questions related to the food traditions and his family's religion and customs.

At the same time, Andy also recognized the boundaries between the Chinese and Chinese Americans, which he had not thought much about in the past. He said, “When I sit around a bunch of Chinese people speaking Mandarin, it's really clear. I'll just be eating, because that's what we're all doing, except you're holding a conversation, and I'm not.” The bitterness of Andy's words conveys his now evident self-identification as a Chinese American, who makes efforts to connect himself with the traditional culture, which is more like his parents' culture, while acknowledging the distance between the social group he belongs to and the group from the eastern country.

Family was another topic raised during my interview with Andy. Like many Chinese immigrant parents, the stories of their efforts in relocating to a new country and their personal dramas through the years have become the most prominent part of the parents' lives. Thus, passing on those memories to the children appears to be some of the few family times for sharing, given the parents' often busy working schedules. Andy mentioned that

as economically beneficial but culturally isolating, which reflects the condition and mentality of many newcomers from abroad. As we glimpse United States history from a Saratogian viewpoint, we hear the continuing dialogue about immigration from the individual stories of immigrants like Anna.

II. Am I Chinese?

Andy Lu, a junior undergraduate at Rochester Institute of Technology, spent his entire pre-college life in Saratoga Springs. Speaking of the city, Andy complimented the picturesque cityscape while

admitting that, “There's not really many activities for the kids here. It's more like for the older people.”

Born to a Chinese immigrant couple coming from Canton, who are now running a Chinese fast food restaurant, Andy has been aware of many cultural restraints at home, at schools which he attended in the city, and at college now. When he recalled his school life, being one of the few Asians among the school population made his ethnic identity invisible, even to himself. “It's not that I forgot, but a lot of times it just didn't come to mind that, oh I'm Chinese, since I was born and raised

his father, Thomas Lu, loved telling stories of him growing up, moving to several Asian countries, to New York City, and finally to Saratoga. In this immigrant family, the father telling the stories and the son listening to them consists of perhaps the only “family bonding time.” “Sometimes I’m not in the mood for a story.” Andy would feel bothered by his father repeating stories when he was busy, rushing to complete his homework. But whenever Thomas wanted to tell Andy some stories, Andy would simply sit by his father and listen, because, “How am I gonna get the time to listen to the story again?” said Andy. Those family memories that Andy could recall have also driven him to connect more with Chinese culture.

When the memory of growing up in a Chinese family blends with the impression of living in an American city, the individuality of being part of a second generation is constrained by the distinctions between the two cultures (Zhou 2003). Especially in places such as Saratoga Springs where American traditions are well rooted, young adults like Andy often face twice the amount of issues that their American adolescent peers encounter. Yet the bicultural

experience also assists Chinese Americans like Andy in clarifying their formerly invisible self-awareness and in exploring where to locate their own identities.

III. Chinese in Art

Restaurant jobs are indeed what most Chinese immigrants have devoted their lives to, yet in the past summer, I have found a couple who moved to the upstate from New York City and have tied their lives intimately with arts development in Saratoga.

Hongyu Chen, or Mary, the English name she goes by, and Yong Li are both renowned vocalists among Chinese immigrants in the Northeast. When I first approached them in August 2015, one of the first things they mentioned was that they had just performed with a Chinese orchestra in Washington, DC, two weeks before. During our conversation, Mary and Yong elaborated more about their arts careers, from their traveling and performances to the gallery they once owned on Beekman Street, in Saratoga Spring’s Arts District. They talked much less about the business they still keep for modest income—the Brentwood Motel—even though it has one

of the most convenient locations, facing the Saratoga Racetrack.

The Gallery of 70 Beekman St., in a three-unit complex, according to Mary and Yong, was the first gallery opened in the District in 1990s and soon initiated the Beekman Street Renaissance—the neighborhood’s cultural and artistic transformation and development that continues today. Mary and Yong showed me their personal archive of the gallery, including photographs, newspaper clippings, and past event programs. The gallery welcomed both Chinese traditional and American contemporary artworks, two-dimensional mediums and sculptures. The space also hosted several Chinese concerts to celebrate Chinese Lunar New Year in January or February and other major festivals. I am indebted to Mary Ann Fitzgerald, the City Historian of Saratoga Springs, who suggested to me that I get in touch with Mary Chen. The concerts in their gallery space gave rise to cultural waves in Saratoga Springs and highlighted the gallery as one of the focal points for the arts on the west side of the city. During those concerts, Mary and Yong were indeed the hosts, as well as leading vocalists to warm up the stage for their performer friends and guests. The couple’s profession in *bel canto* and their hospitality had attracted a number of local institutions and organizations to collaborate for art events.

Recognizing the competitiveness present in the music world from their own career experience—with frequent auditions for precious performing opportunities—and drawing upon Mary’s experience as a vocal instructor at New York University, the couple developed the gallery as not only an elite, professional space but also a local venue for talented, young musicians from Saratoga and the nearby region. Mary leafed through the concert programs they have collected and told me stories about each of the young talents, whom she praised. She would say, “This young man is very talented. Later he participated the National Chopin Piano Competition.... So did this boy,” pointing at another young



Owners Mary Chen and Yong Li inside their Brentwood Motel, Saratoga Springs. Photo by Evian Pan.

performer's profile on the program. When Mary spoke about those concerts, I detected a sense of happiness and caring pride emanating from this dedicated arts educator. The opportunities that Mary and Yong created for the young talents proved to be gateways to these musicians' performance careers.

An art space, a music venue, and an educational center, 70 Beekman St. has sparkled in the couple's Saratogian life, as well as in the public memory of arts in Saratoga. The space prospered and Mary and Yong, two artist immigrants from China, thus created another aspect of immigrants' participation in local development. Unfortunately, since the couple's motel business near the racetrack remained their major source of income, and the idea of retiring had been on their minds for some time, the couple, feeling unable to retain both places, closed the gallery and sold the building complex on Beekman Street in May 2015.

Stories To Be Continued

The Saratoga Chinese Oral History Project has collected these three sets of stories from formal interviews. To acknowledge both the individual stories and public meanings that those personal narratives reflect, the Project seeks to gather more memories and dialogues.

Media Documentary

The Saratoga Chinese Oral History Project was initially designed and developed mainly as a documentary project that will develop into a multimedia archive, a collective portraiture of the ethnic community life. Currently, the Project includes audio and photography as two main media approaches, supplemented by mapping and writing. The bilingual website for the Project, <chineseinsaratoga.weebly.com> is designed and published as the main window of presentation.

The project has adopted ethnographic photography approaches for subjects' portraits and action photos, aiming to capture the natural posture and working environment. Audio-recorded interviews were

conducted in either English or Mandarin. Interview questions have differed according to the primary identity of the interviewees. For the Chinese who have moved to the US as adults, questions have focused on the subjects' cross-continental journey, the potential transitions that have occurred in their personalities or lives, and their relations with the town of Saratoga Springs. For Chinese Americans, such as Andy Lu, the interview has sought to understand processes of self-identification and cultural awareness. Both sets of questions were prepared in advance but not strictly structured, as follow-ups often led to more details or new aspects of a story.

The bilingual website presents the edited outcome of each set of interviews and photographic documentation. Each interviewee has an independent page that contains a basic profile, photos, mapping, playable audio clips, and downloadable transcript, creating a well-rounded portrayal of the interviewees and a multi-layered media experience. The bilingual presentation could expand the range of the audience, as well as provide potential academic research value.

We hope that the Project's materials are useful to people who are interested in Saratoga's local history and the history of Chinese immigration to upstate and the Capital region of New York, as well as Chinese oral history, in general. Future development of the Project includes joining with the Skidmore Saratoga Memory Project and expanding into a Capital Region or upstate oral history project.

Conclusion

The Saratoga Chinese Oral History Project underscores personal narratives in writing the modern history of the city of Saratoga Springs. As documentation of various ethnicities could not be separated from Saratoga Springs' centennial history, such as those of the Irish and Italians, now in contemporary times, the diversity of cultures in the Spa City could not be considered without including Chinese immigrants. The project therefore seeks to

give voice to those newcomers' personal journeys that are indeed fascinating, yet often under-recognized, emphasizing their individuality, as well as the "shared humanity." ▼

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