

Ging Wei Wong 黃景煒 was born into a market gardening family in Edmonton, Alberta. He has been working on his family tree since 1990 after the passing of his parents who left Toisan, Guangdong Province, China for a better life in “Gold Mountain” (Canada).

He retired after a 35-year career in air traffic services. He is the Associate Producer of the award-winning documentary film *Lost Years: A People's Struggle for Justice* (2011).

Wei was a presenter at the 2015 and 2019 Alberta Genealogical Society Conferences in Edmonton and most recently presented a webinar in January 2021 “Immigration to Gold Mountain: Chinese in Canada.”

His writings have been published in the Alberta Genealogical Society's Journal *Relatively Speaking*: August 2015, November 2015, August 2017, August 2019, August 2020. Wei was the winner of the Peter Staveley Memorial Award in 2018.

Tumult, Toil, And Turmoil In The Thirties

by *Ging Wei Wong* 黃景煒

My father, Wong Bark Ging 黃柏振, was born into a country in the throes of a massive political upheaval. This country was known as the Middle Kingdom 中国, China. My mother, Young See, was born in the final year of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), the same year that the Republic of China was formed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen.

But the country's political instability was far from the minds of families who tried to eke out a living in the southern province of Guangdong where both of my parents' and coincidentally Dr. Sun Yat-sen's ancestral villages are located. Natural disasters pummeled China with typhoons, floods and drought that decimated crops and threw farmers into abject poverty which often resulted in starvation and death.

Since then, and even now, many villages are dominated by inhabitants sharing a common surname although in dwindling numbers. My father's village of Chew Ging (now known as Chaojing Village 潮境村) was occupied by Wongs. My mother's village was occupied by Yuens, although I have never discovered the name of her village nor its exact location.

My father was born into a poverty-stricken family in an agrarian society on the brink of disaster and I surmise that was the same situation for my mother. My father was the third born in his family; he had two older sisters. By 1919, the family had grown to six children - too many mouths to feed from the meagre harvests.



Canadian Immigration Certificate of Wong Bark Ging 1921.

I found out last year from a family friend that my father was hired as a common labourer and carpenter by a wealthy village nearby. “Sacred Heart” village was eight miles from my father's ancestral home of Chew Ging. He would have walked to and from work as there was no other means of transportation. What is sobering is that my father toiled on the family farm from the time he could stand up and was hired out before he was a teenager! His earnings helped to augment his family's income, but it wasn't enough. Their fate was a bleak future if conditions didn't improve.

When a neighbour returned from overseas, and reported that there were opportunities for work, an agreement was made between my father's parents and the neighbour. The neighbour would sponsor my father to a far-off land called “Gold Mountain” (Canada). How my father came to Canada over 100 years ago in 1921 at the

age of 13 was covered in my story “Chew Ging to Edmonton: Journey to the West” published in *Relatively Speaking, Volume 48, Number 3 (August 2020)*. Chew Ging is in the county of Taishan (formerly Toisan) regarded as the “First Home of the Overseas Chinese.” My father joined their ranks.

In 1921, the year my father left for “Gold Mountain,” the Communist Party of China was established. Two years later Canada’s Chinese Immigration Act also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the government of William Lyon Mackenzie King. It slammed the doors shut on immigrants from China and was later deemed racist and cold-hearted by Canadian courts. My father’s future in Canada became more uncertain.

Back in China, despite the change in political winds, my mother’s peasant life continued unabated with her brother and sister. She was nine years old. Families in China considered male children to be assets and female children to be liabilities. Boys were expected to grow up and take care of their families, with the oldest responsible for his parents in their old age. Girls were expected to be married out and become part of her husband’s family. Girls were considered no more than an extra mouth to feed!

Meanwhile in Canada, having worked his way through British Columbia and southern Alberta, as a labourer and cook in work camps and restaurants, my father eked out a living as a market gardener in Edmonton. From the money he earned, he diligently sent remittances home to help his family, keeping only a scant amount to maintain himself. News would have been shared in their correspondences.

Before 1930, word came to my father from China that he was to return home for the purpose of getting married. His wedding was being arranged by his parents. It is not certain, but my father’s parents may have engaged a matchmaker to find a suitable companion to be his bride. The parents of the groom-to-be and bride-to-be would have agreed to the arranged marriage before breaking the news to even their own children.

In preparation for the announcement, the bride-to-be was taken to a photo studio to have a formal portrait taken, an expense the family could ill-afford, but a necessary expenditure. This photograph was mailed to my father in Edmonton accompanied by the news that this was the girl he was going to marry.



Young See studio portrait possibly taken around 1928.

In the autumn of 1930, he had saved enough money to pay for his passage by train from Edmonton to Vancouver and by ship, Vancouver to Hong Kong and incidentals from Hong Kong back to his ancestral village of Chew Ging. When he arrived home, it was the first time he set eyes upon his six-year-old sister who was born while he was away.

Despite their poor circumstances of the time, the Wong family prepared for the upcoming wedding celebration. As was the custom then, Bark Ging would not set eyes upon his bride, Young See, before the wedding day. They were married on December 30, 1930. He was 22; she was 18.

In my teens, my mother sometimes would admonish us kids for misbehaving and would remind us of our chores and responsibilities around the house and on the family market garden. She would invoke the guilt-trip quote that I remember well - “*I was married by the time I was 18,*” implying that we kids had an easy life.

Applying for her Canada Pension years later at age 65 she recalled that the wedding was a simple affair attended only by family and a few local people. She couldn’t remember their names. After the wedding, she was considered the possession of the Wong family, immediately attending to their needs. If the bride and groom had any time together, it was under the auspices of the family where even a little privacy was hard to find.

The families would have celebrated the Chinese New Year of the Goat on February 17, 1931 – the good fortune of Young See wed to a “Gold Mountain” man. They barely had four months together as my father returned to Canada

on May 25, 1931, the trip back likely taking three weeks to a month. With her husband gone back to Canada, my mother was not alone but she was lonely and later described the chores and drudgery she endured to please her in-laws. If she had not learned to cook before then, she definitely had to learn fast. Her father-in-law would expect rice that was boiled perfectly and the crust at the bottom of the pot just so. If she had a seat at the dinner table, her bowl had better be clean without a trace of food left in it as every grain of rice was precious.

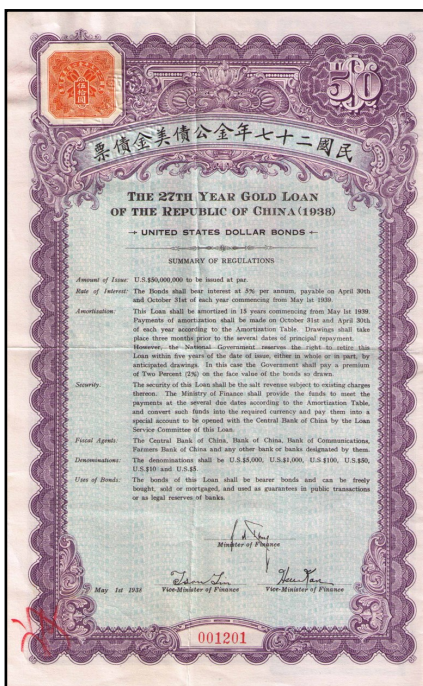
On the rare occasion when she opened up, my mother mentioned one of her chores was to *bai ngom*, literally “watch the cow,” but in fact it was a water buffalo she had to take care for. Water buffalo were well suited for tilling rice fields. The loss of this domestic animal would be devastating. She also mentioned harvesting rice by hand, especially using a curve-bladed sickle-type tool to *gwut woh*, that is to cut the stalks of rice and haul them from the fields back home to be laid out and dried – a back-breaking, labour-intensive activity.

If that wasn't enough, drought followed by floods reached the Guangdong area destroying crops leading to famine. Confirmed by both my mother and mother-in-law when they were alive, they had to scrounge for food in the fields to survive and the only food they dug up were yams. They detested yams even though they are in abundance here in our grocery stores, they brought back bitter memories of near starvation in China. At one point my mother said she seriously thought about becoming a nun. She reasoned a nun would always have food and a roof over her head.

Civil war erupted in China in 1931 to complicate matters. Hungry for information of the goings-on in China, my father tried to keep informed about the political events in China. He possessed Chinese language books about political leaders; two with images of Sun Yat-sen inside the front covers, and a paperback book with images of Chiang Kai-shek.

Whether his income was from working at coal mining camps, cafes, restaurants or market gardening, he sent regular remittances home to his family. Without the remittances his family, including his wife, would have been completely destitute.

The depression was having profound effects in Canada. I have heard stories that my father, on his rounds to deliver orders of vegetables, would accept the parts of meat that merchants discarded to save himself money: ox tails, pork tails, beef liver, pork liver, chicken feet, chicken liver, chicken gizzards, bones of beef, pork and chicken. When he saw other Chinese experiencing hardships feeding their families, he readily shared what he managed to pick up. I have heard from more than one source about his generous nature.



As a self-employed market gardener, my father toiled to keep afloat and continued to send remittances to his family. From his remittances, his family bought the necessities to survive and saved the remaining funds anticipating a brighter future. What came to fruition was the start of a new two-storey house in the New Territories of Hong Kong.

It was only later in my life that I found out that my mother had a brother and a sister. Her sister married and had a son. Her brother's history is unknown. She never talked about her parents. My mother spoke very little about her family – it was too painful as her siblings died during the war. The war we are referring to is the Japanese invasion of China that started in 1937. The cause of her siblings' untimely deaths could have been the brutal Japanese Imperial Army or starvation. Either way would have been a terrifying end. Heartbreaking.

In the 26th year of the Republic of China, 1937, “Liberty Bonds” were issued to finance the war against Japan. The fundraising efforts reached out to

Left : Gold Loan Bond issued in the 27th Year of the Republic of China, 1938



Garden Co. Ltd. Letterhead

Canada and my father supported this cause for the sake of his family as he had in his possession a \$100 bond with 33 coupons that were never cashed. He also held “Gold Loan” bonds that were issued a year later: one \$50 and two \$10 denominations. What else could he possibly do from across the Pacific Ocean to help save his family?

Around this time, a friend wanted to return to China but did not have the money, so he asked my father for enough cash for the ticket home. While there, his friend started a venture in Hong Kong called the Garden Co. Ltd, Biscuits Bakery & Confectionery. My father had some shares in this startup enterprise. His friend may have given him the shares as repayment, or my father made an actual investment betting it would be successful.

In southern China, people lived in daily fear of being captured, tortured, or slaughtered and when a warning came



*Liberty Bond issued in the 26th Year of the Republic of China, 1937
English and Chinese side with 33 coupons of \$4 each. None of the coupons
were ever cashed.*

that the Japanese Imperial Army was in the area, they scattered and fled for their lives often hiding in the nearby hills and caves until the threat was over. My cousin recalled several close calls when artillery fire splattered mud on his clothes. He remembered a secret brigade that helped fleeing people with directions to reach a safe haven.

As the war encroached on the village of Chew Ging, my mother fled with her father-in-law, mother-in-law and other family members, my cousin included, to the safety of the new house that was fortunately completed in 1939. My cousin remembered one day he was walking to school and saw Japanese vehicles on the highway. He raced home and said that ended his formal schooling.

This was the same year that Bark Ging’s mother died. He could not return home, so he mourned her death from afar in Canada. Young See would then have directed her focus to the frail health of her father-in-law. When postal service was disrupted during the war, remittances were not getting through to Hong Kong. A scheme was devised to get money back to the villages and so my mother had to navigate the countryside back roads to receive the funds.

In 1941 the Japanese attacked Hong Kong and occupied the new house and other local residences. Even though they lived in trepidation, my father’s family was not mistreated. But it remains unknown if the Japanese occupation contributed to the failing health of Bark Ging’s father who died that same year.

The family mourned the loss of the family patriarch; in the custom of the time, the deceased’s body was prepared



1940 National Registration Regulation Certificate.

for burial in the house over several days before interment in the nearby hills where his grave remains today. My mother survived this dark period, but I don't think she ever recovered from those years.

Depression may have described the economy but did not begin to describe the mental state of many of the Chinese in either country.

Transitioning from the great depression to the war years in Canada, the National Registration Regulations of 1940 required everyone aged 16 and over to register with the federal government to document their available skills that might be useful for the war effort.

Ironically, even though the Chinese

did not have the right to vote, the certificate stated their Electoral District and Polling Division.

In 1941, "an estimated 20,141 Chinese Canadian families lived apart, with husbands in Canada and wives in China." It is amazing how resilient my parents were during this period.

Despite being separated from each other after their marriage in 1930, they faced significant challenges on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, yet what grounded their actions was helping their family survive through unprecedented hardships.

So, if that was life in the depression years, "Dirty Thirties" was an understatement for my parents – it would be more apt to call that period the "Terrible, Terrifying Thirties." It wasn't until 1949 that my parents were reunited in Edmonton, Alberta after 18 ½ years of separation.

References: available on request - rseditor@abgenealogy.ca

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The Wonderful English Language

The English language has some wonderfully anthropomorphic collective nouns for the various groups of animals.

- ◆ Herds of Cows, Flock of Chicken, School of Fish, Gaggle of Geese, A Pride of Lions

However, less widely known are:

- ◆ A Murder of Crows, An Exaltation of Doves, and presumably because they look so wise: A Congress of Owls

Now consider a group of Baboons. They are the loudest, most dangerous, most obnoxious, most viciously aggressive and intelligent of all primates. And what is the proper collective noun for a group of baboons?

Believe it or not it is a Parliament! YES! "A PARLIAMENT OF BABOONS" Who knew?