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Life in a Chinese laundry

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When John Jung stretches his memory across the years and the miles, it takes him to a place far away yet still close to every chamber of his heart.

There is the sound of trolley cars along the wide avenue of Mulberry Street in Macon. There is the revolving door at the old Lanier Hotel and the alley behind Christ Church. His father planted a vegetable garden there, and Jung played in the small courtyard with his brother and sisters.

There is the Bibb Theater, where his father once took him to see a Tex Ritter cowboy movie. And there is the quaint old ballpark, Luther Williams Field, where he watched his first baseball game.

At the foot of Coleman Hill, there is the Whittle School, where he once finished third in the county spelling bee. Down on Cherry Street, his mind's eye takes him inside the Kress Five & Dime store. There were two water fountains. One was marked "White," the other "Colored." He was never quite sure which one he was supposed to use.

From his office in the psychology department at California State

University in Long Beach, where he is now professor emeritus, Macon is a tether to his past.

He was born here and lived in Macon until he was 14 years old. It helped shape him in so many ways, a mental scrapbook filled with joy and pain.

It poured the footing and provided the backdrop for a memoir he calls "Southern Fried Rice."

From 1928 to 1952, the Jungs were the only Chinese family living in Macon. "A minority of one," he said. It was not an easy life, but he had nothing to measure it against.

His family was weighted down by long hours of work and the emptiness of cultural isolation. They never ate in a restaurant. They never owned a car. It was difficult to socialize and make friends.

"As Chinese, we were neither fish nor fowl," he said. "We were just different from everyone else, and we learned to live with that."

They operated the Sam Lee Hand Chinese Laundry at 519 Mulberry St., near the old Lanier Hotel, where a new parking deck has been built. He lived upstairs above the laundry with his father, mother, two sisters and brother.

It was called "Sam Lee" because it sounded like "Family." In the laundry, where the steam circled and heat stuck to their bones like static cling, they used fans to push the air around. Even at night, in the tiny two-room apartment above, the heat was oppressive, almost suffocating.

"Hell itself couldn't be much hotter than a Chinese laundry in Georgia during August," he said.

It was not the only kind of heat that leaned against their skin. The Jungs were often ostracized and misunderstood in the segregated South, which was intolerant and suspicious of foreigners, too.

"I was isolated from other people, but I wasn't lonely," he said. "I was content to be an observer."

Many of those observations provided the foundation for his book. It began as a tribute to his mother, who died in 1997. Her name was Quan Shee, but her American name was Grace.

"I wanted to write about all she went through and how she dealt with it," he said. "It was a way for me to honor her."

His first working title was "Amazing Grace." But the reaction from other scholars was that he needed to broaden his story to be more autobiographical.

His wife, Phyllis, suggested the title, "Southern Fried Rice," and he tacked on the subtitle: "Life in a Chinese Laundry in the Deep South." (A few copies are available locally at Golden Bough Bookstore on Cotton Avenue.)

Last weekend, Jung was the keynote speaker at the inaugural gala for Who's Who in Asian American Communities in Georgia. More than 500 people attended the black-tie event at the Omni Hotel at CNN Center in Atlanta. He was invited by Sachi Koto, a former news anchor for CNN who now has her own public relations firm. He called his speech "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in a Chinese Laundry."

I was interested in Jung's stories but we also talked about immigration, a hot-button issue these days. His father, Kwok Fui, was an illegal immigrant when he came to the United States in the 1920s. He was among the thousands of Chinese men who came with false documents and became known as "paper sons."

In 1882, Congress passed a law called the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers into the country. But the Chinese took advantage of a loophole to circumvent the law. Chinese men who lived in the United States prior to 1882 were allowed to return to China to marry and

start a family, then bring their sons back with them to the United States.

By claiming more sons than they actually had, they were able to sell the immigration papers to younger Chinese men who were not related to them.

During the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, which marked its 100th anniversary last month, many of the U.S. immigration papers were destroyed, making the law difficult to monitor and enforce.

Jung's mother often told her children about how their father purchased false papers in order to come to America.

"I was torn between feelings of shame for being 'illegal' and fear that someday my parents would be apprehended and deported," he said. As a child, he said he was unaware of all the social and political implications of being illegal aliens.

"But it bothered me," he said, "I thought my father had this deep, dark secret."

In a sense, the Jungs were bystanders when the law was repealed in 1943. It came after a visit by Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, the first lady of China, during her historic trip to the United States.

As the only Chinese family in Macon, the Jungs were invited to meet with her in June 1943 when she arrived here to receive an honorary doctorat from Wesleyan College, where she had started her college education.

Her maiden name was Mei-Ling Soong, and her family had lived in Macon during the early 1900s while her two older sisters attended Wesleyan.

Jung doesn't remember much about that sultry summer day when he met Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. He was only 6 years old.

(But he reflects on the irony of a college in Macon awarding her an honorary doctorate. In September 1910, the Bibb Board of Education denied Mei-Ling Soong admission to Gresham High School because she was considered an "alien." Gresham was an all-girls school in Macon. The board cited a policy that students must be "naturalized and of the Caucasian race.")

It was during her 1943 visit to the United States that Madame Chiang Kai-Shek met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to rally support and aid for the World War II effort against the Japanese. Her visit also brought significant attention to the U.S. immigration policy toward China and greatly contributed to FDR's decision to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Jung's parents eventually became U.S. citizens. His family moved from Macon to San Francisco in 1952.

But he has never forgotten the days he spent here.

A few years ago, while writing and researching his book, he and his wife came for a visit. The memories embraced him.

Although he and his family often were the objects of racial ridicule, taunting and curiosity, he realized one cannot change the past by refusing to acknowledge it.

Looking back, he chooses to remember there were happy times, too.

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