

## Discoveries Terrible and Magnificent

By Ali Wong

I was born in San Francisco April 19, 1982. While I lived in a neighborhood and went to school composed of predominantly wealthy white communities, I spent all of my summers and Friday nights at Donaldina Cameron House.

Donaldina Cameron and other female white missionaries founded Cameron House in the late 1800s as a rescue home for Chinese prostitutes and abused wives. Rescued women learned how to sew, cook, speak English and read in order to become more self-sufficient.

My father, Adolphus Wong, started attending the Cameron House youth program in the late 1940s, when it was just beginning. Dick Whitman, a pastor from Chinatown's YMCA, founded the first co-ed youth program of its kind at Cameron House. With the repeals and strategies to manipulate the Chinese Exclusion Act, more Chinese immigrants came through Angel Island to work in San Francisco Chinatown. Chinatown was transforming from a bachelor society to a community of families with American-born Chinese children who needed a space for recreation.

Most parents in Chinatown were always too busy trying to survive and did not have time for their children. As they did not have the luxury of recreation in their own childhoods, they found little need to provide creative outlets for their children.

My paternal grandfather, Chow Kee Wong, came to the U.S. by himself through Angel Island when he was only 6 years old. Like many other Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s, he lived in a crowded, prison-like atmosphere while being processed at the immigration station. He worked as a houseboy for a wealthy white family and lived in their garage with room and board as his pay. In his teens, he worked in Asian grocery markets and then became a cook. My paternal grandmother, Buu Chi Wong, came to the U.S. when she was 16 years old as Chow Kee Wong's picture bride. She immediately felt pressure to contribute to the family income, and quickly learned how to sew in the garment industry. She worked in a sewing factory located in between her apartment and Cameron House.

My father always told me stories about living in a one-room apartment with a cement floor and no running water. His parents made and saved money to the best of their abilities and spent little to no time with their children. My father and his two older sisters fished for the roots and stems of vegetables grocery markets threw out into garbage cans. The three of them, along with many other youth in Chinatown, sent themselves to the Cameron House youth program in order to assimilate into American culture.

Leaders at Cameron House conducted communication sessions concerning sex education, spirituality, morals and dating. These were taboo topics that needed to be addressed but were never discussed in the home. They held etiquette lessons to teach Chinese-American kids what to do when there were two forks at a table setting. Every year, the youth of Cameron House constructed booths, games and prizes for the annual Carnival fundraiser.

While many Chinese-American youth were discouraged from playing basketball in school because of discrimination, Cameron House gave them the opportunity and space to play on a team. It helped Chinese-American youth, such as my father, grow as creative leaders and service-oriented human beings.

I grew up attending the summer ventures and Friday night program at Cameron House. But unlike my father's generation, my family and most of the other kids' families were not from Chinatown. As Chinatown families grew wealthier, they wanted to own homes outside of Chinatown. Parents sent their kids to Cameron House to retain Chinese-American identity.

Cameron House is saturated with images that resonate its history. Black-and-white pictures of Chinese seamstresses, subtitled murals, blocked-up hiding tunnels and rooms named after the missionaries all speak to the origins of Cameron House. I feel fortunate to have grown up with an awareness and appreciation for Chinese-American history. From Cameron House, I also got the chance to perform and have role models with a great sense of humor.

Sometime during my second year of college, I heard or read that Dick Whitman, the former pastor at Cameron House, had sexually molested a group of male youth at Cameron House during the 1950s. This discovery was completely terrible and darkened my preconceived history of Cameron House. I worried that my father had been one of the victims, but he was not. The victims did not speak out until they were adults, and Dick

Whitman was asked to leave. However, the incident galvanized the community to take more control of their program. Chinatown members began to take over outsiders missionaries' paternalistic leadership, and found out that they could take care of their own on their own.

I am using film to use my consciousness about the intersection of my life with the history of Cameron House. For the Ethnocommunications course, I am making a documentary about the history of the youth program at Cameron House. It will serve as an archival and educational tool for building youth programs.

Even though I am half-Vietnamese, I never grew up with any Vietnamese culture. Our house was always filled with Chinese art, Chinese food, Chinese people, Chinese music and the idea that the Lunar New Year equaled Chinese New Year's. My father was and still is a Chinese superiorist.

My mother was born and raised in Hue, Vietnam. Her father, Thi Ngyuen, bribed the government to let her study in the United States in 1960. When I interviewed my mother for a high school oral history project, she revealed that she had taught Vietnamese to American soldiers. This was a horrible discovery. I was disgusted that my mother taught those soldiers to say "hurry up" to My Lai victims, "how much" to prostitutes and "stop" to her people who were fighting for their independence.

However, it became a wonderful discovery because it helped me understand my mother's lack of pride in Vietnamese culture. Most Vietnamese people came to the U.S. after the fall of Saigon, in 1975. My mother came alone in 1960, when there were hardly any Vietnamese people in the U.S., and especially where she went to college: the Midwest. Nuns at Duchesne college taught her that in order to survive and assimilate in America, she had to forget her Vietnamese culture.

I decided my junior year of college to study abroad in Hanoi, Vietnam in order to learn Vietnamese. Through the language, I wanted to gain access to the Vietnamese-American community, my mother's history and my own identity. When I talked to all of my relatives in Vietnam, I discovered that my maternal grandfather, Thi Nguyen, was very wealthy because he was a collaborator with the French. He worked for the French post office, and my mother always bragged that he wrote beautiful French. This was a terrible discovery. To be Vietnamese and have collaborated with the colonialist French regime is like being the Condoleeza Rice, Ward Connerly, Colin Powell or Clarence Thomas of the Black community.

However, it helped me further understand how deep my mother had internalized the inferiority of her culture. When I think of her father's job with the enemy and her job with the enemy, I do not take it personal when she discourages my curiosity of Vietnamese culture. I accept the intersection of history with her life and therefore mine, and realize that I have to learn Vietnamese culture on my own.

I express important intersections of history with my life through playwriting and performance art. In my writing, I have addressed Chinese superiority, Asian fetish, Proposition 54, coming out to Asian-American families, the desexualization of Asian-American males and the model minority myth. By creating complex characters and relationships through dialogue, I have the power to portray Asian Americans as multi-dimensional human beings. I feel very fortunate to produce my plays through Lapu the Coyote that Cares Theater Company, the longest running Asian-American theater group in the universe. Through performance, we collectively show that we have a unique sense of humor and creativity.