

Gold Mountain

When I was a child sixty years ago, "Gold Mountain" was a household word in Tai-shan County, the least productive district in the entire Guangdong Province of southern China. But ironically it was financially the richest, because more than half its population of 1 million received U.S. dollars for their daily living expenses.

"My husband goes to Gold Mountain," women use to brag proudly. Gold Mountain, of course, meant the United States of America, where husbands worked long days and nights in restaurants and laundries to enable their families back home to build huge and lofty houses and hire maidservants to show that they were well off. When U.S. dollars were cut off during the Japanese invasion just before World War II, much of the population died helplessly from starvation.

The following incident is still deeply rooted in my memory: In my village sixty years ago, a poor woman, whose husband went abroad and never returned or sent money home, sold her only teenage daughter for the sum of \$10 to a Gold Mountain wife. Within a short time the girl ran away with some money and returned to her mother. The next day her mistress raised a posse of women, all dressed in their Sunday best, with gold bracelets, gold earrings, and gold rings set with precious stones, to retrieve the girl. What displays of wealth! As a six-year-old boy, seeing the way they came and hearing their voices, I was awed and frightened. The smell of perfume that wafted from their beautiful dresses made the farm wives envious with startling eyes.

However, there was one thing that farm wives never understood: the lives of grass widows, women who were divorced or separated from their husbands. Some liked living as grass widows and some did not. Some would not swap their husbands for all the gold in the United States.

There was a story told among the Chinese laundry men here in these United States of America about a father-and-son team that entered the country illegally. After spending some long years here, the father retired and returned to the motherland to enjoy his last days on the soil where he was born. One day as the old man was chatting with the country folk under the shaded trees, his grandson called to him to come to supper. Just as he sat down at the table and was ready to be served, the boy's mother grumbled at him, "You old pig, why didn't you bring along your son? Why just come back by yourself?" Taking this to heart the old man did his best to persuade his son to return home. When the son finally returned, the old man said sourly to his daughter-in-law, "My daughter-in-law, I now hand back your husband to you. You can now satiate your upper mouth as well as your lower mouth. Let us, if you don't mind, share poverty together." The young woman retorted bitterly, "Father-in-law, I wouldn't trade my husband for all the American dollars in the world."

Yes, to live as a grass widow is unhealthy, you got to know that. It is unfair, you got to realize it. I don't blame that woman one bit for her complaint.

The myth of Gold Mountain, no matter what perspective you take, is still alive today. It has its attractions, you know. Some of the early American-born Chinese, taking advantage of their circumstances, would travel to-and-fro between the two countries every few years so that they could report having some sons and daughters by the time they came back to the United States. One of my villagers, who claimed to be American-born, sold papers for eight nonexistent sons

besides his own two sons produced by his concubine, when his big fat wife produced only two daughters!

As you see, the "paper" trade was a very lucrative business, and one could accumulate a small fortune very quickly if one did not mind a bad reputation. A certain Mr. Lee sold a paper daughter for \$10,000, which she paid back by whoring on Oxford Street in Boston. On the right side of the whorehouse was a Chinese Confucian school and on its left a missionary church operated by a few aged American ladies who were helped to Sunday School by a Chinese laundry man. When the ladies disapproved of his marrying the young white girl who assisted him at his laundry, he left for San Francisco and in 1937 became president of the powerful Hip Sing Tong.

Frequent visitors to the one-woman whorehouse used to stand on line Sunday mornings from the second floor down to the sidewalk, each patiently awaiting his turn. One day a youth was waiting on line, while his father was on his way to the same spot. "Hey, your son is in there," somebody called to warn him. "I am going to give him moral instruction," the father jokingly replied and went on his way.

One of the richest men in New York's Chinatown made a fortune by putting his concubine into this business. When his first cousin came from Boston for a visit and tried to share her bed with her, she refused. "No, you are my husband's cousin. It can't be done," she said, and would not give in. "It is a disgrace. A disgrace to our ancestors," my friend said. "And she invited me to join her picnic party at Coney Island, bringing with her some homemade pastries. I wouldn't dare to eat them. Those dicks—she washes them with her own hands after each transaction!" He made a face and I laughed to my heart's content.

But not all Gold Mountain men arrive in the United States to live forever a lonely existence separated from their families back home. There is the story of a young man in the

early 1930s who returned home at the first opportunity. A former classmate of mine in China, he won \$2,000 one night playing fan-tan in a gambling house in New York's Chinatown.¹ Anxious to be reunited with his wife from whom he had parted about a year before, he demanded the "son of native" paper that was in his father's safekeeping.

"You have not paid the paper son money yet. Why are you in such a hurry to go back home?" his father scolded. But his love for his young wife overcame his duties as a son. When his father refused a second and third time to turn over the paper, a fight broke out between the two. The father, being neither as strong nor as tall as the son, naturally lost. He was terribly beaten, with nose bloodied, head injured, and shirt torn to shreds.

The son finally ran off to the San Francisco Immigration House to report the loss of this paper in the 1906 earthquake and obtained a new one there. He returned to China and never again entertained the thought of leaving. The father, meanwhile, sent the torn and bloodstained shirt to his own wife of thirty years, still living in China, cried abandonment by their son, and brought her over instead by purchasing a paper daughter's contract for her. Upon retirement he sold his laundry in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn and bought a small boat so that he and his wife could enjoy their golden years in travel!

¹ Fan-tan is a game in which the dealer, or banker, divides a pile of flat beads or beans into fours and players bet on what number will be left at the end of the count. It is played on a rectangle the size of a ping-pong table. A square is drawn in the center, and the lower right-hand corner is "1," the upper right "2," the upper left "3," and the lower left "4." A bet placed on any one of the four corners wins one to three. A bet placed between any two corners wins one to one. To play, the dealer takes a handful of flat beads and places them on the table, covering them with a lid. The players then place their bets. After all bets are placed, the dealer lifts the lid with a flat bamboo stick and removes four beads at a time, until the last remaining beads number 1, 2, 3, or 4. That is the winning number and corner. Since the game is played on four corners of a square, the slang expression for playing fan-tan is "to attack the square city."