

THE CHINS

By

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*Inspired by Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project
Conducted by Shauna Lo*

For NaiZhong Liu and Xiaoxv Shang

CHARACTERS

May Chin, 63, F

With some slight Chinese accent, A funny and quirky person with a short bob haircut has an open, outgoing, and sort of blunt personality. She is talkative and interested in the family history

Tom Chin, 69, M

The oldest in the group; as the 老大 (Big Brother), has the biggest say/weight among them, big storyteller.

Donna Chin, 64, F

Great memory. She remembers a lot of details from the past, hard worker, and strong work ethic thanks to the handwork she had done as a kid. She is relatively more traditional.

Richard Chin, 67, M

The contrarian in the group, he is slightly bitter about the past, but in general grateful for it. He is not very talkative in the group.

Gep Chin, 65, M

He is the rather spoiled one. He gets what he wants and completes Toy Har's sentences.

Toy Har Chin, 65, F

She has a rather western mindset but practices a lot of Chinese traditions, ideologically he tends to be more western.

Waiter, 30s

SETTING

Over a long table full of food in a small Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, Boston. The restaurant is a bit crowded and noisy. The restaurant has four, five tables, most of them are small square tables pushed together. You can hear people chattering in different Chinese dialect mixed with English, the sound of oil sizzling in the wok from the kitchen

TIME

2008, Night of Chinese New Year, dinner time.

OTHER NOTES

The stage design should be as minimalistic as possible. A small intimate audience would be ideal for productions.

SCENE 1: The Holiday

(Richard, Get and Toy Har are at a long table made from 3 square tables pushed together, looking through the menu. Donna is going around the table pouring tea for everyone. The middle two seats are empty
Tom and May enter)

TOM

Hi, reservation for the Chins, table for 6.

MAY

Have the others arrived yet?

WAITER

Yes, they have been waiting for you.

TOM

Oh god, I hope their **chin** music wasn't too much of a trouble.

(Looking at the waiter expect him to laugh at his joke)
(Awkward silence)

TOM (CONT'D)

Get it **chin** music, the noise, cuz we are the **Chins** like our last names are **Chin**? (still waiting for that laugh)

(Awkward silence)

MAY

Oh, Tom, that was a bad one and you know it. Keep your **chin** up and just let it go.

(Waiter laugh)

WAITER

(Awkwardly) I'm sorry, follow me, your table is this way.

Seeing Tom and May entering the restaurant, Richard stands up to greet them, others follow

MAY

(Takes off her jacket and scarf)

I'm so sorry, we totally forgot how bad traffic is in Chinatown on New Year's, you would think the shops would be closed today.

TOM

(Takes May's jacket and scarf. Hangs it on the coat hanger at the corner of the room)

If they are closed where would we be having dinner? I am sure they understand. So have you guys order anything yet? Been waiting for this for a while.

RICHARD

Not yet, waiting for you, you are the oldest, you should make the call.

TOM

Ha, who still does that.

(Tom takes over the menu Gep handed to him and sits in the center seat, reading it through.)

DONNA

It's been a while since the last time we had dinner all together, right?

MAY

You don't say, last year Richard went back to China with his wife, the year before that you had to go for your grand nephew's wedding. Yep and Toy har never close the shop on Thanksgivings.

(Tom calls for the waiter and orders food as the others gaze at May)

GEP

You know back then the laundromat never closed on Thanksgiving.

TOY HAR

Right, they celebrated New Year's, all the things, Moon Festival. They were into all those traditions—the special foods. I mean, they always prepared all that stuff.

GEP

Ha, right I would make a fuss about it and dad would finally buy a tree.

TOY HAR

Same with the turkey.

MAY

I honestly think getting that turkey and cooking it is the only reason why mom wanted to celebrate Thanksgiving. God if it wasn't for Gussie, hell I wouldn't even know about Christmas, at church she would make sure we somehow will get a second present.

(Sipping tea)

MAY (CONT'D)

She was such an incredible woman. Sunday picnic with her at Franklin Park, her eggs sandwich. And her gift shop next to the laundromat, we would sleepover at her place. Oh, oh, and all the birthday parties there, imagine holding them in the laundromat.

SCENE 2: The laundromat

TOM

The laundromat at around your birthday is like a sauna, it's terrible, hot and humid.

RICHARD

The counter in the front was fin back at the laundry, especially close to the drying room. And in-between them the little area where you can eat and watch TV.

TOM

And helping out on the works, I would do the ironing from time to time, with the electric irons.

TOY HAR

(Gesturing Gep)

We started when we were 10. We started young, as long as we can reach that ironing table, we were put to work.

MAY

Right, I was really competitive then, I wanted to do what my older siblings did –

(looks around)

MAY (CONT'D)

my older brothers did. And of course I burnt myself, with the loose handle of the iron, and when you flip your wrist like this. I remember going around with a thick scab covered with a bandage for months. It was just awful to get it healed. That was by far the worst burn that I've ever had in my life. Look I still have the scar here.

(Showing her wrist)

TOM

(Says as he mimes it)

And I would, sort through the customer's socks, I would have a needle with heavy thread and the customer's socks would be tied together with that needle and thread. Some laundries used big safety pins. But we were practical. We didn't know whether we needed big safety pins or small ones. Also, if you tied together socks as well as handkerchiefs with a needle—actually it wasn't thread, it was string—and you were a good tyer of knots, that batch would remain pretty much intact. Forgot about that!

DONNA

It's less work than the shirts.

TOM

Yea, they were sometimes smelly, but a shirt, you get, in the early days, ten cents for a shirt, when you probably got... I can't remember... let's say five cents for a pair of socks. And, two pair of socks don't equal the amount of time to do one

shirt. Or let's say even if it were... four pairs of socks for a dime, instead of a dime for a shirt.

DONNA

That's it, but I had to do the shirts. There were like three ironing tables in a row --

(Gesturing the three square table that makes the dinner table)

TOM

(Interrupting, pointing at Donna)

--Those traditional ones, On top, heavy canvas cloth which constituted the ironing surface and underneath were old blankets and they would help to absorb the steam and moisture and would provide a nice smooth surface to iron.

(Taps on the two square tables on the side, Richard and Gap who sits at two ends of the table pulls them on the side, separating the three tables to equal distance)

And kinda like the ironing boards now where you've got a soft surface underneath

(Donna and Toy Har tilts the tables in front of them towards them/upstage to show the bottom a bit and tabs on it)

which would absorb the steam and moisture and a smooth cloth surface on top to provide a platform for clothes to be ironed.

DONNA (CONT'D)

And the front machines do the collars and cuffs on this machine. So you put a basket of laundry here.

(Gesturing to the front/downstage)

The second machine does the front of the shirt.

(Gesturing to the middle/the tables)

The two back machines do the back of the shirt and the two sides of the shirt and then the sleeves

(Gesturing to the back/upstage)

--because it's an upright machine that has two things where you throw the sleeves on. So the sleeves are pressed from the inside out. And the back ones are easier because it's really a smaller

machine and there isn't anything to do whereas the front machine you have to actually dress this machine

(Gesturing to the front/downstage again)

because it has a little neck here. And then it has a strap to hold the front of the shirt down because the front of the shirt is open so you have to hold it with a strap before you press it. So you actually have to put your hand and arm all the way in the machine and pull it up. So if you are not tall enough, you will get burned. Whereas here you can just flip the shirt on

(Gesturing to the back/upstage, again)

and if you're not tall enough it floats onto the machine so it's not so bad. And when you're doing the front machine

(Gesturing to the front/downstage once again)

you have to have enough strength because you actually have to pull the collars and the cuffs straight before you put them on for pressing.

(Table restore and choreography ends)

TOM

And the socks you just send them to the wet wash, they were mostly Chinese owned too, and they were pretty competitive. They would get pick up at around 8:00. Then these people will get them delivered around

MAY

One or two in the morning, you would hear them when you're sleeping.

TOM

They would take these good size baskets, probably about three feet by four feet in width and probably about three feet high on their back

MAY

They had the keys, god we really trusted them, and they just drop them off --

TOM

(Interrupting)

-- On to the floors.

(They laugh)

DONNA

Dad had to do deliveries, we always had a station wagon.

TOM

There is the funeral director, one of few charge customers, who would bring his shirts down. In fact, at one time he was probably about a block away and then he moved up to Bunker Hill Street which is the other side of town. Often, after he moved up to Bunker Hill Street, we would deliver his laundry to his house! I don't know how that came about but I guess... all I can seem to remember is he suddenly discovered he didn't have any shirts and he probably talked to dad and said "gee, could you drop them off? Or have one of the kids drop them off!" And then it got to be a routine.

DONNA

Now that I remember sometimes cousins will help.

RICHARD

You thought about how it would be like if they didn't open a laundromat, and did something else?

MAY

Like what? Restaurant? They didn't want to do a restaurant. You know, they felt that a restaurant would tie them down a full seven days a week whereas a laundry, even though it was most seven days a week and many nights, they did have some free time. And it was something they felt they could control and wrap their hands around. Mom wanted to do something else, she always felt that she could always have done better but there was no way to do it because of their limited education, limited English.

TOM

Dad had to do it by himself before mom comes.

MAY

They were apart for 12 years, because of the exclusion act.

SCENE 3: The Food

(Waiter comes with food, Kung Pao chicken, Roasted Pork belly, Smoked Chicken, Fish, might have been a bit too much for them to eat. Oh and definitely don't forget the salted fish)

MAY

(Looks at Tom, then looks at the salted fish, looks back)

Oh, no you didn't.

(Tom uses a chopstick to get some salted fish for May)

MAY

It's just like the old-time there is always rice and salt fish at the dinner table. I don't even know they sell them here.

TOM

I didn't though. They would sell them too.

MAY

Oh, yea, and the chicken, the small bits of keen that you find in the dishes.

TOM

Yes, they would buy a chicken on the weekend --

MAY

(Interrupting)

--And it would last for days,

TOM (CONT'D)

Yea when you are in a big family, you don't get much each time, unless it was --

MAY

(Interrupting)

— —Your birthday! Then you would get the drumsticks

TOM (CONT'D)

I was wondering if you are in a small family then you could have chicken drumstick every week.

(All laughs)

RICHARD

We would sometimes go to Chinatown just for the food.— —

MAY

(Interrupting)

— —The roast pork and crispy pork

RICHARD (CONT'D)

And we would buy groceries there ever now and then, cuz that is where you will find all the Chinese stuff.

MAY

Sometime we'd go to the chicken place and buy a live chicken. Mother would refuse to have anyone else kill and feather—or defeather—her chicken. So, we'd come home on the T [subway] with a squawking chicken. The train was elevated above street level in Roxbury around Dudley Street—it would just curve and twist around buildings—and sometimes the bag would tip over and you'd hear this chicken go "squawk squawk squawk!" And we would go, "Oh my God, who belongs to that bag!" And finally one of us would go over there and stand it upright. At home she would kill and feather the chicken and I had to help her. And that is I think I got over my fear of blood and anything else and got to really appreciate anatomy. So if it wasn't killing live keens I wouldn't have been here today.

DONNA

And, I would have helped to cook, I didn't even have to learn! You grow up in China, 6 years old you start cooking! I would make lunch boxes when we were kids for school.

SCENE 4: The People

MAY

Man remember those kids at school they were mean. We were the only Asians. There were blacks, there were a lot of Jewish kids, and some Irish kids I remember, and some German kids but I remember being the only Asian kid and I still remember being taunted. I still do. You know, with the imitation of brushing your teeth.

TOM

Yea, that one was weird.

MAY

They used to go like this (*motions as if brushing teeth with finger*) because apparently, if you read the old books, Chinese people didn't have toothbrushes and they often used salt. Dad explained to me that they often used salt in China because they couldn't afford a toothbrush to clean their teeth.

TOM

Not just with fingers!

MAY

Right, right. With a cloth.

RICHARD

Hmmm, isn't that strange? Well, there was a time before toothbrushes for everybody, when they probably did that, with a cloth or something.

(*All Laugh*)

DONNA

Yea and there is the Chinese man.

TOM

And Sometimes I encountered some people that I didn't know and they would go through the... you know, trying to speak Chinese, making fun of you and stuff like that

MAY

Not all of them are bad tho. I still remember, my fifth-grade teacher—I was still in braids at the time—and this kid, you know, when the teacher called a parent out of the room... Apparently, there was a lot of buzzing going on and this kid just yanked my braids and starting making fun of me again and I guess when the teacher came back in she demanded to know what was all the hubbub and why weren't we studying. And everybody turned around and looked at me. So I stood up and told her exactly why. Of course, I broke out into tears. I still remember that like it was yesterday. And she gave us a huge lecture about racism. Mrs. Clifford. I'll never forget her as long as I live. It really made an incredible impression on me. And from that time on it seemed like I could not let things bother me that much.

GEP

Yea being the only Chinese family in the neighborhood and school was hard.

TOY HAR

Yea, I didn't date in high school at all. It wasn't until I got to college that I said, "Oh! Chinese men!"

DONNA

(Agreeing) They exist.

TOY HAR

Yeah, they exist!

SCENE 5: The Journey

GEP

Growing up in an environment like that as interesting you know, I feel like I grew up very American—my thinking, my outlook, my perspective. I have to say I'm more American than Chinese.

TOY HAR

We know the tradition cuz mom and dad kept up the Chinese traditions.

GEP

But as far as my thinking goes, I'm not Chinese at all. It's just the way I grew up—my surroundings, school, and friends. You just pick that up. Your family kind of fades into the background after a while. You speak less and less Chinese. After my parents died, I practically speak no Chinese except to my sister-in-law and then it's become a struggle because you've lost so much of it.

TOM

They kept the traditions around because they thought that at some point in time we would all go back to China. Mom had these two big trunks—steamship trunks—that she would fill with things and those were the trunks that we were going to use to bring the whole family back to China.

MAY

And I still remember splitting up one egg into four different portions because we couldn't have any more than one egg between us—all the kids—because we had to save money to go back to China.

TOM

We had discussions and my mother and father always said, "well, we'll go back and if you want to come back to the U.S., " ultimately you could do so. But you know, go back, learn Chinese, get steeped in the culture... There was a certain amount

of—how should I say it—a certain amount of feeling that the U.S. was not the best place in the world.

DONNA

And they wanted to be back at their roots eventually. I went back to China a few times and the first time, '83. Go before Dad died. He's old fashioned. His parents are very important for him. Anyway, the important thing you want to go back to look at their grave.

TOM

They had gone through the depression and they found that making a living was not the easiest thing for Chinese because of the limitation on job possibilities. In fact, my mother would often cite the fact that so-and-so was an MIT graduate and even he can't find a job in the White people's world.

MAY

We had a better time. We didn't encounter much prejudice, but then again, my parents weren't activists like some of the people are today.

TOM

They respected the customers, respected the neighborhood and tried to be good citizens. That's not to say that there wasn't some hostility tossed our way at times. So I think that tempered by the social and economic situation that they encountered and knowing how things were back in China, they felt their kids probably should learn the language, learn Chinese, have a taste of what the Chinese environment was, and possibly have a choice as to whether to stay or to go back, go back to the U.S. and maybe return to China.

RICHARD

My mother left just China just before the communists came and a lot of her relatives were in China and she was able to support her family through the laundry. I think they were very grateful that they had a business that they could work.

TOY HAR

My father always wrote and sent money. He always sent money back to his father. And they kept in touch.

TOM

I mean, that's typical of the dialogue that we saw in China where people sent money back and built these big buildings for when they would return to China. So I think that that type of mentality was widespread. It wasn't just restricted. That was just the way the times were. Chinese at the time—of course, also, depending on where you were, there were restrictions on buying real estate and plus the economic requirements to be able to buy real estate.

MAY

I was in grade nine, when we moved to a house across from Laundromat, before that we would live in the back of it.

TOM

There's the inability to become a citizen. You know, my father was one of the first ones to become naturalized when that opportunity came about in the early 1940s. So there was a lot of outward restrictions that would cause the feeling that hey, families should at some point in time return. And of course, there were a number of families that did pack up and go back to China. You know, Simi Wong... his family went back to China. Amy Guen's family—Billy and Frank Chin, Amy—they're siblings—they went back to China. But they went back because their mother passed away and their father sent them back so that his first wife would raise them. So there's a number of people who actually did take that step.

GEP

My grandfather ended his sojourn in America in the mid-to-late 1920s, returned to his village in China and started a new family with his third wife.

TOM

And there were those that never got to come.

GEP

My older brother was born in China—he was still back there.

MAY

My great uncle lived in Oxford Place with a group of men who lived together because their families never came over.

(Spotlight on the one speaking while they hold a piece of dated paper in their hand, Toy Har and Gep share the same spot)

TOM

But it wasn't easy for those who came too.

TOY HAR

Our grandfather came and I don't know if he was in any other cities, but he settled in Peabody and opened up the laundry.

GEP

He came by himself, he was a bachelor here.

TOY HAR

He had a family that was in China and he came to make his fortune

GEP

He came to America to make money at the "Gold Mountain"

TOM

My father started in San Francisco because there were relatives there and likewise he came to Boston because there were relatives here.

RICHARD

My father was living in China with my grandmother and when she died—when he was 12 years old—he came to Brockton to live with my grandfather. And then in 1949, my father returned to China and married my mother.

MAY

And because of the exclusion act, my mom and my dad were apart for 12 years. And then my mother came over as a single girl and she often told me that in order to pass the test, she wore braids so that she looked—it was probably close to eight years younger than she actually is.

DONNA

I was the first one in my family to come. It was 1948.

TOM

My family owned a laundromat called Edwin Chin Laundry at 34 Main Street in Charlestown.

MAY

Fang Lee Laundry at 158 Warren Street in Roxbury.

RICHARD

Jimmy's Laundry at 814 Main Street in Brockton.

DONNA

Toy Sun Laundry at 22A College Avenue in Somerville.

TOY HAR & GEP

Charlie Chin laundry which was located first at 51 Main Street in Peabody.

ALL

And this is our story.

(Blackout.)