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Earth Passages: Journeys Through Childhood

Lora Jo Foo*

INTRODUCTION

A native of San Francisco, Lora Jo Foo was born and raised in the Chinatown community where, at the age of eleven, she began working as a garment worker in a sweatshop. After college, she went back to a garment factory — this time as a union organizer. Later, as a hotel worker, she was a leader in the 1980 citywide strike of 6000 San Francisco hotel workers.

As an attorney for the Asian Law Caucus, Ms. Foo successfully litigated *Anna Chan v. Moviestar*, the first California case to hold a garment manufacturer responsible for the wages of its subcontractor's employees, and *Cuadra v. Labor Commissioner*, which ensures that when workers utilize the administrative process to recover unpaid wages, they receive one hundred percent of those wages, undiminished by the agency's arbitrary method of calculation. In 1999, she led a statewide coalition of garment worker advocates in passing the California Garment Accountability Bill, which holds retailers and apparel firms strictly liable for the minimum wage and overtime violations of their contractors.

Ms. Foo is also the co-founder of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, of which she was its National Chair from 1996 to 1998, as well as Sweatshop Watch, and was its Board President from 1995 to 2004. She has also served as the National Coordinator of the AFL-CIO's Voting Rights Protection Program, and as the Organizing Director for the California Faculty Association.

In 2002, she wrote *Asian American Women: Issues, Concerns and Responsive Human and Civil Rights Advocacy*.¹ Recently, she published *Earth Passages: Journeys Through Childhood*,² a memoir and book of color nature photography, some of which is reprinted here.

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1. LORA JO FOO, *ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND RESPONSIVE HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS ADVOCACY*, (Ford Foundation 2002).

2. LORA JO FOO, *EARTH PASSAGES: JOURNEYS THROUGH CHILDHOOD*, (Lora Jo Foo 2008).

GIRL-CHILD SLAVE

Over the years, my mother says to me, "Don't be his girl-child slave."

In the Chinese movies I saw with my mother, sometimes a mother dies and the girl-child is sold to another family as their slave. She becomes the docile servant of the young misses or the plaything of their fathers and brothers. I knew those movies were of old China, of a faraway place and a time long gone, and that girl-child slaves did not exist in America.

So I resist as best I can each time my father says to me "fetch me my slippers," "get me the newspaper," "peel me an orange," or "come here and help me pull out my white hairs." I hate that the most. Standing behind my father, smelling his greasy hair and pulling out his white strands, as if each strand pulled would slow his aging.

Sometimes, he sends me out to buy dim sum for him. I smell the delicious shrimp dumplings that he pops into his mouth while I watch and swallow only the saliva that fills mine. Sometimes he brings steaks home and fills the house with the wonderful aroma of frying meat. Dinner for us sisters comes later when our mother returns from the sewing factory to cook us rice, a dish of vegetables, dried fish so salty we could only eat a few bites, and a can of Campbell's vegetable soup diluted with five cans of water to feed seven mouths.

I didn't want to become his girl-child slave. But I couldn't always stand up to my father.

THE BASEMENT OF CAMERON HOUSE

At the turn of the 20th century, girls were stolen from their homes in China, brought to the brothels of San Francisco's Chinatown, and forced into prostitution. Donaldina Cameron, a white woman missionary, raided the brothels to rescue the slave girls, taking them into tunnels underneath Chinatown that led into the basement of Cameron House, a three story red brick building on Sacramento and Powell Streets. Cameron House became the home for these girls. As a teenager, I learned about Cameron House from my sisters Betty and Dorothy. By then, there were no more brothels and girl-child prostitutes. But in my psyche the basement of Cameron House remained a refuge, a safe haven for girl-child slaves.



THE BANK ACCOUNT

My father is waiting for me. I'd just come home from school and no one else is home. "We're going to the bank," he says, "get your savings book, I need the money." Over the years, my father would give me his change, a nickel here, a dime and quarter there, and I carefully would put them into a bank account. I think, *this is my money. He gave it to me.* But I'm not sure. *Maybe it isn't my money. After all, he had earned it somewhere.* I'm scared and don't want to go anywhere with him.

"Go on, get your account book," my father barks at me as he disappears down the hallway into his bedroom.

Desperate and terrified, I move slowly towards the front door. I reach for the chain and silently, very slowly, slide it out of its slot and lower it, one link at a time. The metallic sound of the chain echoes loudly in my ears, competing with the sound of my pounding heart. I lower each link until the chain dangles free. My hands still trembling, I reach for the door handle and that is when I hear his muffled laughter behind me. He is so close that I feel his breath on the back of my neck and smell the grease he uses on his hair. "Trying to sneak out, are you?" his laugh is saying to me. Maybe he grabs my hands or pushes against the door. I don't remember. The rest is like a dream.

"Come on," he says, and in silence we walk down Grant Avenue to the Bank of America on Sacramento Street. My father cleans out my bank account, all \$35 worth. *Has the teller seen this before, I wonder, a father robbing his daughter?* In silence, we walk back down Grant and up Pacific Avenue to our apartment.

THE SEWING FACTORY I

Before we sisters started working with my mother, I'd come to the sewing factory on a Sunday and find her alone. The only sound in the factory came from her machine. She sat hunched over it, sewing, while the other women spent their Sundays with their families.

The summer before entering junior high school, I went to work in the sewing factory with my mom. That summer I joined my sisters Betty and Dorothy, who had started working there the year before. Six days a week I sat at that sewing machine from 9 in the morning until 10 at night.

At age 11, I was so small you couldn't see me sitting behind the industrial sewing machine. When I first sat down to sew and my feet pushed the pedal, the needle raced up and down so fast and the feeder pulled my cloth in so quickly that I lost control and ended up sewing what looked like jagged peaks. Eventually, I learned how to control the speed of the machine by controlling the pressure I put on the foot pedal.

Our sewing factory was kitty corner to the Ping Yuen where we lived. It was in a building that was once a residential hotel. The walls between the rooms on the second floor had been torn down and made into two large, airy rooms with light streaming through the large windows on sunny days and florescent lights adding more brightness on cloudy days. Rows and rows of sewing machines, each operated by a Chinese woman, lined the rooms.

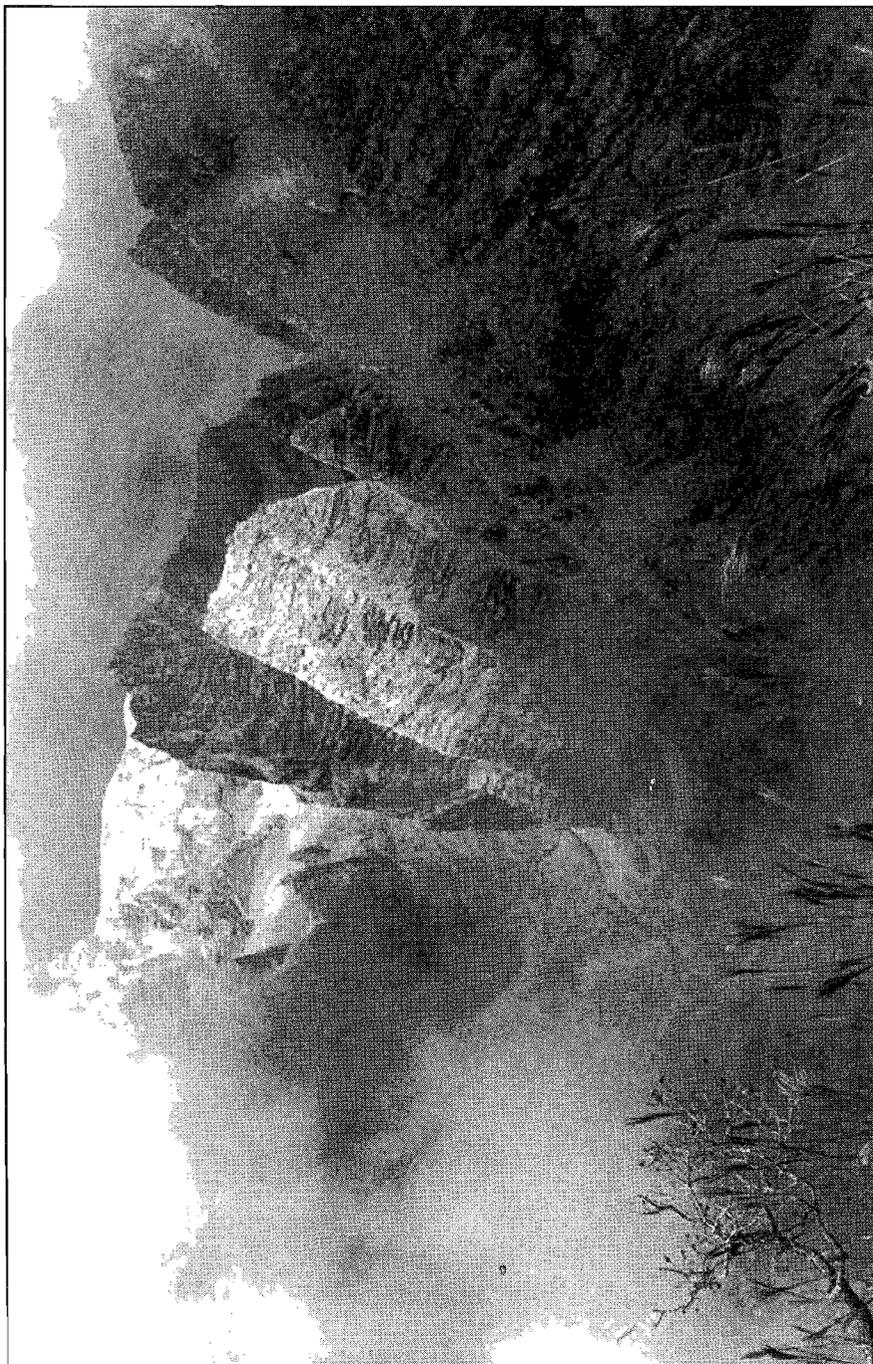
Once a week a white man from the designer's firm would come and inspect the garments and speak to the boss. He'd walk down the aisle of sewing machines and stop in front of mine to ask "What are you going to be when you grow up?" And I'd always pipe up with "a doctor!" When he asked my sister Dorothy, she just glared at him.

We sisters were never paid any wages. Rather, what my mother made on piece rates more than tripled because she was able to assemble three or four times as many garments in a day with us as her assembly line. With us helping out, she stopped working on Sundays.

THE SEWING FACTORY II

The summer when I was twelve, my church sent me to summer camp at The Bishop's Ranch in Healdsburg, California. For one wonderful week I played games like other children, went hiking and swimming in the Russian River, lay on the grass staring up at the wide expanse of blue sky and white clouds that lazily drifted by, gazed at the Big Dipper and stars at night, shared a cabin with three other girls, gossiped about boys, and had no responsibilities other than being a child. In discovering the outdoors, I felt like a caged bird set free.

The week ended all too quickly and there I was back in the sewing factory. Had our factory been windowless or had bars and drapes over the doors and windows like so many others, perhaps I wouldn't have been so miserable. Instead, our factory was up on the second floor with large windows facing an expanse of tree-lined parking lot. Through the open windows I could hear birds singing and the rustling of leaves in the wind, feel the occasional breeze, and imagine the sunshine on my skin. I had been proud of working alongside my mother, helping her pay the rent, putting food on the table. Now, I felt trapped. I yearned to be out in the sunshine, among the trees, under a blue sky and in the breeze.



THE PICKET LINE

“Mom,” I ask, “why don’t you sue your boss?”

One day as I was riding the bus home from school, I saw a picket line of Chinese women on Stockton Street. The women were in their forties and fifties — my mother’s age. They carried signs and were marching in front of the Margaret Rubel sewing shop trying to unionize their factory. I was exhilarated. Here were Asian immigrant women standing up for themselves. The next day I went into my high school cafeteria and tried to convince other students to come out and support these women. In my mind, the union became a safe haven, a haven for girl-child slaves and oppressed immigrant women.

Then I met Richard, a young law school graduate who was studying for the bar. I told him about the Chinatown sweatshops, about the 12-hour days, and child labor. I grew excited as we spoke and started planning how to get my mother and her co-workers to file suit against her sewing shop. “Whoa, let’s not get carried away,” said the lawyer-to-be, trying to dampen my enthusiasm. Undeterred, I tried convincing my mother to sue her boss anyway.

“What? The boss will hate me forever” responded my mom. My first attempt at labor organizing was a failure.

