

# *Liang May Seen*

## AND THE EARLY CHINESE COMMUNITY IN MINNEAPOLIS

*Sarah Refo Mason*



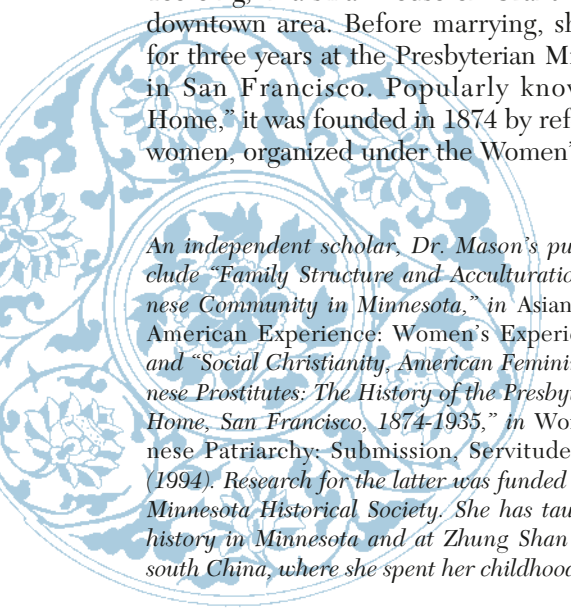
*Liang May Seen and her son,  
Howard Woo, about 1910*

With the revival of the women's movement and the rise of the civil rights and antiwar campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s, students throughout the United States began to call for new perspectives in interpreting and writing American history. They advocated less emphasis on elites and more on the everyday lives of workers and families, including the roles women played in the dynamics of immigration and assimilation. In response, a new generation of historians has

reexamined the melting pot ideology and its assumptions of an assimilated national destiny.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on these perspectives, this history of a Chinese-American family in Minneapolis also focuses on women in the community, especially one of their leaders. Liang May Seen, the first Chinese woman to settle in the city, was instrumental in developing a prosperous and nurturing environment for Chinese Americans. As the number of women in the community grew, she urged them to organize their social activities within the programs of Westminster Presbyterian Church, which had established a mission for Chinese men in the early 1880s. The account of Liang May Seen's and her peers' interactions with Caucasian members of a historic Minneapolis church is one of the countless unrecorded stories that comprise the city's richly diverse history of growth and change.<sup>2</sup>

Liang May Seen, born in about 1871 in Kaiping District in south China's Guangdong Province, arrived in Minneapolis on a summer day in 1892. She settled with her new husband, Woo Yee Sing, in a small house on Grant Street in the downtown area. Before marrying, she had lived for three years at the Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco. Popularly known as "The Home," it was founded in 1874 by reform-minded women, organized under the Women's Occidental



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Board of Foreign Missions. The center was a refuge for Chinese women and girls imported from Guangdong Province for the profitable trade in prostitutes and *mui tsai* (young girls sold by their parents into domestic servitude) in the city's Chinese-American community during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Liang May Seen's destitute family had sold her to a San Francisco-based procurer in 1885, when she was 14 years old. Although he had promised the mother that her daughter would marry a rich Chinese merchant in San Francisco, she was instead resold to a brothel owner who forced her to provide sexual services to his wealthy clientele in Chinatown.<sup>3</sup>

On July 21, 1889, Liang May Seen found the opportunity to send a message to the Presbyterian Mission Home, describing her plan to escape the brothel and seek refuge. She planned to slip away after singing at a merchants' banquet in a well-known Chinatown restaurant late that evening. She asked for help in reaching the home, specifying an intersection near the restaurant as a meeting place. In response, Margaret Culbertson, the home's superintendent, arranged for a horse and carriage. She proceeded to the designated spot, accompanied by an assistant and a police officer. After waiting several hours, the rescuers saw Liang approach the intersection. They quickly helped her into the carriage and brought her to the mission home, where she remained until 1892.<sup>4</sup>

Protestant missionary women in the United States had crusaded against prostitution as early as the 1830s, describing prostitutes as women fallen into a life of sin. Soon after the Civil War, these middle-class reformers in eastern and midwestern cities began to emphasize, instead, the socioeconomic causes of prostitution, predating the Social Gospel movement by several decades. The efforts of the San Francisco women to create an alternative environment for Chinese prostitutes during the early 1870s as an "expression of Christian compassion" clearly reflected this changing point

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Alice Kessler, "Social History," in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 165.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Bushnell, *The History of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1907-1937* (Minneapolis: Lund Press, 1938), 5, 76-78. Because archival and published sources on women in Minneapolis's early Chinese community are scarce, this article is based on more than a decade of oral history interviewing. Following traditional practice, Chinese family names herein precede the given name, which usually has two elements. Women do not take their husband's name.

<sup>3</sup> Augusta Starr, "The Front Seat," transcript of 1958 talk, p. 3, catalogued as "Reminiscences of Early Minneapolis," Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; Howard Woo, interview by the author, St. Paul, Oct. 9, 1981, tape in MHS; Margaret Culbertson, entry in *Register of Inmates*, July 21, 1889, p. 121, Cameron House, San Francisco; Margaret Culbertson, "Report of Chinese Mission Home," in Women's Occidental Board of Foreign Missions (WOBFM), *Statistical Report* (San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1890), 41-42. Although Culbertson did not name her, she indicated that the individual was 18. Liang was the only 18-year-old to enter the home in 1889.

<sup>4</sup> Culbertson, in *Register of Inmates*, July 21, 1889, p. 121.





*Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, about 1898*

of view. During its first 20 years, the Presbyterian Mission Home provided refuge for nearly 400 women and girls, while also gaining support from the women's organizations of dozens of Presbyterian churches throughout the Midwest and Northeast, including Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis.<sup>5</sup>

Margaret Culbertson, a native of upstate New York, had served as superintendent of the mission home since 1878, building a program that provided a middle-class Christian atmosphere and prepared the residents for marriage or work in a Christian setting after their departure. At the home, Liang May Seen found a well-established

daily schedule of schoolwork, household tasks, and religious activities. After breakfast and chores, the residents gathered for morning worship, followed each weekday by classes in English, Cantonese, and mathematics. In the afternoon they worked on sewing and knitting projects and then gathered for hymn singing in Cantonese. On Sundays, all of the residents attended the Chinese Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, accompanied by a policeman for their protection. Liang May Seen apparently adapted well to this environment. Like many of the residents, she learned to speak English, mastered basic arithmetic, practiced sewing and other household skills, and converted to Christianity during her three-year stay.<sup>6</sup>

In the predominantly male Chinese-American community of the late nineteenth century, word of the mission home and its female residents quickly spread, especially to young men who had converted to Christianity. Many went to the home seeking Christian wives, some from as far as Chicago and Philadelphia. Woo Yee Sing, the first Chinese immigrant to settle permanently in Minneapolis, was typical of those men, most of whom had become small merchants or laundry operators in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Woo Yee Sing had left his home in Guangdong's Kaiping District at the age of 18 to seek work in the *Gum Shan*, or Gold Mountain, as the Chinese called California. Reaching San Francisco in the early 1880s, when anti-Chinese violence was at a peak, he, like many other Chinese immigrants, fled to the Midwest, hoping to find a more hospitable environment.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after arriving in Minneapolis, Woo opened a hand laundry at Thirteenth Street and Nicollet Avenue, in the neighborhood of Westminster Presbyterian Church. He solicited business for his laundry in the fashionable Lowry Hill district and became well known for his colorful horse-drawn delivery wagon. Many of his upper-

<sup>5</sup> David W. Noble, *The Progressive Mind: 1890–1917* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1981), 81–82; Rosemary S. Keller, "Lay Women in the Protestant Tradition," in *Women and Religion in America*, ed. Rosemary R. Reuther and Rosemary S. Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 1:242–43; Lorna E. Logan, interview by author, San Francisco, Mar. 22–23, 1990, tape in author's possession. Unless otherwise specified, all tapes are in author's possession.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Robbins, "Secretary's Report," and F. C. N. Phillips, "Journal," included in untitled report by Robbins, both in WOBFM, *Annual Report* (San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1878), 8, 21, 75; Logan interview, Mar. 22–23, 1990; Howard Woo, interview by author, Minneapolis, Oct. 30, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Yung, "The Social Awakening of Chinese American Women as Reported in *Chung Sai Yat*, 1900–1911," in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives 1988* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1988), 81; Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 159; H. Woo interview, Oct. 9, 1981; Lorna E. Logan, interviews by author, San Francisco, Oct. 9, 1991, Mar. 22–23, 1990; Bushnell, *Westminster Presbyterian Church*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> H. Woo interview, Oct. 9, 1981; Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 42–47.



Woo Yee Sing in front his laundry, about 1895. The business stayed at this Nicollet Avenue address until 1913.

middle-class customers were members of Westminster. In 1882, as increasing numbers of Chinese men settled in the city to work in laundries, church elders, following the model of Protestant missions on the West Coast, established English-language lessons as an incentive to involve the immigrants in church activities. Woo Yee Sing was one of the first to attend English classes at Westminster's Chinese Sunday School. He was converted to Christianity early in his career in Minneapolis by J. Hyde Monroe, a church elder.<sup>9</sup>

considered suitable for marriage after they had separated themselves from the brothel. Since most of the young men seeking wives at the home were also from the peasant class, they viewed the residents as respectable young women.<sup>11</sup>

Arriving in San Francisco in the summer of 1892, Woo Yee Sing evidently impressed Margaret Culbertson, who introduced him to Liang May Seen, an attractive young woman of about 21 years. As was the home's practice, a staff member contacted Woo's pastor at Westminster Presby-

<sup>9</sup> H. Woo interview, Oct. 9, 1981; Bushnell, *Westminster Presbyterian Church*, 76–77; Daniel Liestman, “To Win Redeemed Souls from Heathen Darkness: Protestant Response to the Chinese of the Pacific Northwest in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (May 1993): 179–201.

<sup>10</sup> H. Woo interview, Oct. 9, 1981. Although the 1885 Minnesota census counted only 33 Chinese in Hennepin Co. (see manuscript census schedules, microfilm copy, MHS), *Davison's Minneapolis Directory*, 1885–86, p. 860–61 listed 14 Chinese laundries. Members of the Chinese community point out that each laundry employed at least five or six men.

<sup>11</sup> Gail Hershatter, “Prostitution and the Market in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai,” in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia B. Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 258–59; Lorna E. Logan, interview by author, San Francisco, Apr. 23, 1991; Sue Gronewold, *Beautiful Merchandise: Prostitution in China, 1860–1936* (New York: Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, 1982), 50.





*Woo Yee Sing and an employee behind the counter at the Canton Restaurant*

terian Church in order to confirm his Christian faith and his reliability. Liang May Seen apparently was also pleased with Woo Yee Sing and accepted his offer of marriage. They were wed at the mission home on July 21, 1892, by Rev. I. M. Condit, a pastor of San Francisco's Chinese Presbyterian Church; Superintendent Culbertson served as witness. The date was the third anniversary of Liang's escape.<sup>12</sup>

After her departure to begin a new life in Minneapolis, Liang May Seen remained in close contact with the missionary women and her Chinese friends in San Francisco. When Culbertson fell ill in 1893, her assistant, Donaldina Cameron, continued to maintain ties with the home's former residents who had married and moved to other areas. After Cameron became superintendent in 1899, she invited Liang May Seen to visit the home and her friends in San Francisco, which she and her husband did several times.<sup>13</sup>

In 1906, after years of childless marriage, the couple returned to San Francisco to complete the adoption of a young boy, Howard, with Cameron's help. Cameron also frequently visited the Woo family when in Minneapolis searching out traffickers in Chinese women or meeting with women's missionary organizations that might contribute to the support of the home. During these visits, the superintendent often pointed out that Liang May Seen had been an exemplary student and praised her as a serious homemaker who kept a meticulous house and sewed most her family's clothes.

Minneapolis was not exempt from the racial discrimination Chinese Americans experienced in employment, housing, organizational membership, school, and other areas of social and economic life throughout the United States. The Woo family, like others, en-

<sup>12</sup> Culbertson, in *Register of Inmates*, July 21, 1892, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Here and below, see Howard Woo, interview by author, Minneapolis, May 20, 1991.



*Liang May Seen and Woo Yee Sing, wedding portrait, 1892*



*Honeymoon portrait, taken when Liang and Woo visited the Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893*

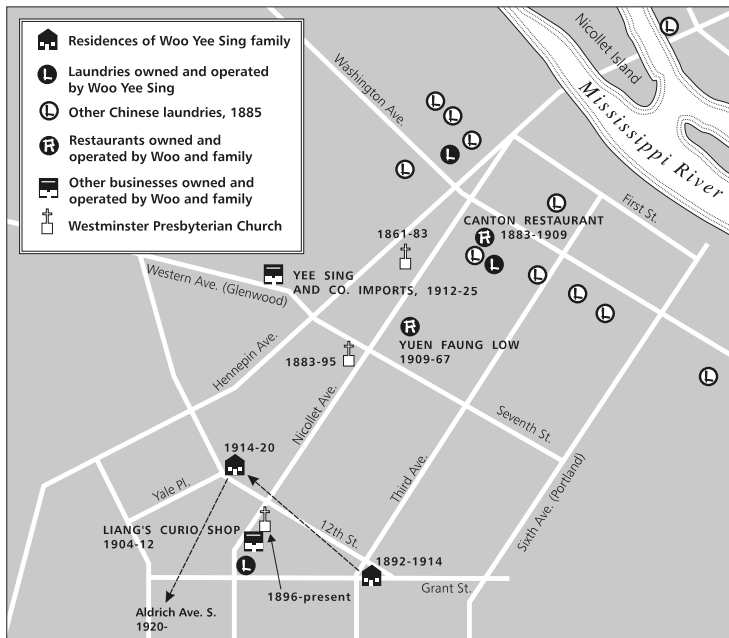
countered racism in many forms, from the racial taunts and name-calling their son faced at Emerson Elementary School and West High School to acts of violence, as when a small bomb was set off in the stairway leading to the brothers' restaurant in 1912. Nevertheless, Woo and Liang found that their adopted city provided a more hospitable climate than the West Coast. They settled into their house on Grant Street. Woo pursued his business interests, and the couple became active members of Westminster church, attending its English-language services every Sunday and participating in the congregation's social functions.<sup>14</sup>

Combining the business skill, energy, and perseverance of Woo Yee Sing, Woo Du Sing, and

Liang May Seen, the family prospered in numerous ventures. The brothers continued to run the laundry and restaurant. Liang's education in English, Cantonese, and mathematics enabled her to start a small business of her own, as well. In 1904 she opened a Chinese curio shop on Nicollet Avenue next to Westminster church, to which many of her female customers belonged. There, she sold Chinese dishes, vases, and other art objects until 1912, when her husband opened a larger import business, Yee Sing and Company, on Western Avenue. Meanwhile, in 1909 Yee Sing and Du Sing moved their Canton Restaurant to South Sixth Street, renaming it Yuen Faung Low (Exotic Fragrance from Afar). Popularly known over the

<sup>14</sup> Here and below, see Howard Woo, interviews by author, St. Paul, Oct. 9, Oct. 15, 1981, tapes in MHS; Minneapolis, Sept. 1, 1993, May 20, Oct. 30, 1991; Margaret Woo Chinn, interviews by author, St. Paul, Aug. 29, 1979 (notes only), May 27, 1982.






*Residences and businesses of Woo Yee Sing, Liang May Seen, and family, as well as other Chinese laundries in Minneapolis's downtown area, 1885–1967. Note also the three locations of Westminster Presbyterian Church.*

next half-century as John's Place, the downtown restaurant was famous for its Cantonese cuisine and elaborate decor.

Racially restrictive immigration laws, beginning in 1875 and worsening with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, severely limited the entry of Chinese people into the United States. While some Chinese men were allowed to enter as merchants, tourists, students, or teachers, it was exceptionally difficult for Chinese women to immigrate unless they could prove they were the wives or daughters of merchants. Only those merchants who could show that they owned property valued at \$1,000 or more were allowed to bring their wives and children into the country. Thus, it was well after the turn of the century before other women joined Liang May Seen in Minneapolis's Chinese-American community, which grew mostly through migration from the West Coast. In the meantime, Liang, adept in English and experienced in cross-cultural interaction from her years at the mission home and her curio business, became acquainted with several American women living in the near-downtown Lowry Hill area. These women, patrons of her husband's and her

*Yuen Faung Low, famous for its Cantonese food and mother-of-pearl-inlaid teak tables, about 1915*





own businesses, were also members of Westminster and its Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. Thus, the church became the nexus of Liang May Seen's social life during her first decades in Minneapolis.<sup>15</sup>

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, founded in 1871, was one of the earliest such groups in Minnesota. This organization accorded China and its missions prominent attention; in addition, society members sustained a special interest in the San Francisco home, regarding it as a "foreign mission" because it served the Chinese. Society members who befriended Liang May Seen during these early years included Charlotte O. Van Cleve, active in missionary work on a national level and an adviser to the Westminster group. Van Cleve frequently visited the home in San Francisco; in 1878 she had adopted a young girl as her "spiritual daughter," undertaking her support at the home and writing her encouraging letters. Eliza Wardell Baker was another early friend from the missionary society. Baker, a relative of the prominent Beatrice M. (Mrs. Thomas) Lowry, offered to help Liang May Seen improve her English skills, frequently inviting her to the Lowry family home for an afternoon of friendly conversation.<sup>16</sup>

Other friends included Emma H. Paige, a teacher at Central High School and member of the missionary society, and her sister-in-law, Mabeth Hurd Paige, an active member of Westminster, prominent civic leader and suffragist, and one of the first women elected to the Minnesota legislature. The Woos lived only two blocks from the Paige family, having moved from their small house on Grant Street to a larger one at Twelfth Street and Yale Place in 1914. Liang May Seen and her young son frequently visited the Paige sisters, who also called at the Woo home, often asking Liang May Seen to tell them of her life in China.<sup>17</sup>

One of the first women from Kaiping District to join Liang May Seen as a permanent resident

of Minneapolis was the wife of another early settler, Wong Gee, who operated a hand laundry on Twenty-Second Street and Fourth Avenue. Wong Gee returned to his home in the early 1900s to bring his wife, later known as Minnie Wong, to Minneapolis. The two women, originally from the same district and speakers of the same dialect, became lifelong friends. After Minnie Wong's arrival, May Seen and Howard often took the Franklin Avenue streetcar to Fourth Avenue and walked the two blocks to the Wong home at the laundry. Visiting with them at least once a week was a welcome addition to Liang's Minneapolis routine.<sup>18</sup>

A few years later, in 1914, Woo Du Sing, Woo Yee Sing's younger brother and restaurant partner, brought his wife and two children to Minneapolis. (They had married in Kaiping in 1900.) The families of the two brothers shared the house on Twelfth Street for several years. Woo Du Sing's wife did not speak English (Westminster Chinese Sunday School did not provide English lessons for women at the time), and her feet were bound, making it difficult for her to walk. She rarely left the family home. Her daughter, Margaret Woo Chinn, described her mother's life in Minneapolis as rather lonely despite living among her extended family. She missed the daily contacts with other women she remembered from village life in Kaiping. Although she had a sister in Vancouver, British Columbia, and a brother in Edmonton, Alberta, she seldom spoke of them to her children, remaining faithful to the Chinese tradition of teaching her children about her husband's family rather than her own.<sup>19</sup>

In this situation, Liang May Seen became an important influence on her niece and nephews (a second son was born in Minneapolis), especially Margaret, who identified with her aunt and her more westernized ways. When Liang May Seen and Woo Yee Sing attended services each Sunday morning, they brought all of the children to church, where the youngsters attended the Amer-

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<sup>15</sup> H. Woo interviews, Oct. 9, 1981, May 20, 1991; Lucie Cheng Hirata, "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 5 (Autumn 1979):3-29; "Introduction," and Sarah R. Mason, "The Chinese," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981), 9, 532.

<sup>16</sup> E. V. Robbins, *Our Forty Years* (San Francisco: WOBFM, 1913), 8; Charles T. Thompson, *The History of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1857-1907* (Minneapolis: Review Publishing Co., 1907), 141-42; Bushnell, *Westminster Presbyterian Church*, 104; H. Woo interview, May 20, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Bushnell, *Westminster Presbyterian Church*, 104; Arvonne S. Fraser and Sue E. Holbert, "Women in the Minnesota Legislature," in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: MHS, 1977), 252-57; H. Woo interview, May 20, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> H. Woo interview, May 20, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Chinn interview, May 27, 1982; Mason, "The Chinese," 535. The name of Du Sing's wife has not been recorded. Family members called her "Auntie" or "Mother," as was traditional, and did not know her given name.



ican Sunday School. Liang also frequently took her niece to Westminster's social events, including the mother-and-daughter banquet and annual bazaar.<sup>20</sup>

Neither Woo Du Sing nor his wife were members of Westminster church, but Woo attended the Chinese Sunday School. Over the years he learned to read English well enough to keep up with daily news in Minneapolis, but speaking the language was more difficult. As the head cook in the family restaurant, where most of the younger cooks were from Kaiping, Du Sing rarely had the opportunity to practice his English, unlike his brother Yee Sing, the "front man" who talked to the customers.

Minneapolis's Chinese-American community, which grew slowly before 1900, increased rapidly thereafter, especially as more early settlers acquired merchant status, allowing them to bring their wives and families from Guangdong Province. Following passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, however, Chinese merchants were required to show that they were engaged in a specified annual volume of international trade, a requirement that substantially reduced the numbers qualified to bring their families into the United States. Nevertheless, the Chinese population of Minnesota reached an estimated 900 to 1,000 by the late 1920s, including more than 100 women.<sup>21</sup>

*Woo Du Sing in his brother's import store, Yee Sing and Company, on Western Avenue, 1920s*



As a result of this influx, the need for English classes for women grew. In 1920, after nearly 40 years of Chinese Sunday School and language lessons for men, Elder J. Hyde Monroe turned the program over to Lenore Cunnington, an active member of the congregation, and two assistants, Ella Holsted, a returned missionary from China, and her sister, Annette Holsted. While young men continued to attend the school, the largest number of pupils during the 1920s were recently arrived women, bringing with them their babies and young children.<sup>22</sup>

When Cunnington called on the women of the congregation to provide English tutoring and help the new arrivals resolve the many problems they faced in their new lives, Liang May Seen and Minnie Wong volunteered. These two women, both in their middle years and still fluent in the Kaiping dialect spoken by most of the immigrants, concentrated on getting acquainted with the newcomers and helping them adjust to life in an urban American community. With the leadership of Liang May Seen and Minnie Wong, the newly arrived women created their own organization within the church's structure, focused on meeting their needs. An important goal was to provide an environment in which Caucasian and Chinese women could meet and form supportive relationships that bridged cultural differences.<sup>23</sup>

Liang May Seen, especially, became a mentor. She urged the young women to participate in Westminster's social and religious activities as an important step in entering into the larger society and achieving social acceptance as Chinese Americans. (At this time, churches were one of the few places where women—Caucasian as well as Chinese—could exercise power.) At the same time, Woo Yee Sing, fellow restaurateur Kim Wah (popularly known as Walter C. James), and other integrationist leaders in Minneapolis's Chinese-American community were encouraging young men to join established service organizations such as the YMCA, Rotary Club, and other civic groups

<sup>20</sup> Here and below, see Chinn interviews, 1979, 1982; Mason, "The Chinese," 535.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah R. Mason, "Family Structure and Acculturation in the Chinese Community in Minnesota," in *The Chinese American Experience*, ed. Genny Lim (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America and Chinese Culture Foundation, 1984), 174; Mason, "The Chinese," 536.

<sup>22</sup> Bushnell, *Westminster Presbyterian Church*, 76–77; Mason, "The Chinese," 535–36; H. Woo interview, May 20, 1991; Lolita Young Woo, interview by author, Minneapolis, Oct. 30, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> H. Woo interviews, May 20, Oct. 30, 1991.

as a means to gain acceptance among Americans. (They also hoped to counter the influence of the *tong*—secret society—leaders moving into Minneapolis from the West and East Coasts, who often opposed interaction, fearing it would threaten their associations and illegal activities.) Except for the YMCA, however, civic organizations did not accept Chinese Americans until the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>24</sup>

Working together at the church, Lenore Cunningham and Liang May Seen became close friends during the 1920s. Cunningham and her husband, Henry, the first bassoonist in the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, often shared visits with May Seen and Howard at the Cunningham cabin on the Gunflint Trail in northern Minnesota or at their summer home in Frontenac. The Holsted sisters also became fond of Liang May Seen, inviting her and her son to their home. So, too, did Edda, Alice, and Anne Angst, sisters who also were associated with Westminster's Chinese Sunday School.<sup>25</sup>

The year 1920 was memorable for Liang May Seen aside from her increased involvement at church and the friendships she was developing through it. She and her husband purchased a home on Aldrich Avenue in south Minneapolis. Then, 28 years after Liang had arrived in town, another young woman from the Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco, Minnie Jun Soo, moved to Minneapolis with her husband, Frank Hin Chan. Chan was a protege of Walter James, who had grown up in Portland, Oregon, and owned successful restaurants in Chicago and Minneapolis. Frank Chan and Minnie Jun Soo first moved from San Francisco to Chicago to manage a restaurant owned by James, who later persuaded Chan to relocate in Minneapolis as the steward of his well-known Nankin Cafe, downtown on Seventh Street.<sup>26</sup>

Frank and Jun Chan, as she was known, and their son Warren Chan soon became close friends of Woo Yee Sing, Liang May Seen, and Howard Woo. The Chans joined Westminster church, and although less active than the Woos, they found a supportive network of friends there. Despite their age difference, Jun Chan and Liang May Seen developed a special bond based on their common experiences at the mission home and their shared

affection for Donaldina Cameron. The two women frequently visited each other and often talked on the telephone as well.<sup>27</sup>

"Auntie Jun," as she was called by the younger generation, also became a close friend of another Chinese American, Lolita Young. Young moved to Minneapolis from Portland, Oregon, where her family and Walter James's were friends, to work in a Chinese art and gift shop owned by the James family. Just out of business college and living independently for the first time, she was only a few years younger than Jun Chan. The two often participated together in activities at Westminster church. Young would soon become an intimate part of Liang May Seen's life, as well.

Woo Yee Sing died in 1925, at about 63 years of age. Liang May Seen, then 54, continued to live with her son on Aldrich Avenue. When Lolita Young and Howard Woo were married in 1931, the couple settled into the Woo family home, and the three women whose lives spanned two generations—Liang May Seen, Jun Chan, and Lolita Young Woo—continued to be close friends. Following the path Liang had blazed, the other two served as active advocates for women in the Chinese-American community.

Liang May Seen died in 1946, leaving a legacy of personal commitment and persistent work toward the goal of intercultural friendship. She lived to see the end in 1943 of immigration laws excluding the Chinese. Perhaps she would not have been surprised to witness the rejuvenation of the language classes to which she had devoted so much. In the late 1940s, when racial restrictions in the War Brides Act of 1945 were lifted, approximately 8,000 Chinese wives of servicemen were allowed to enter the United States, including a sizable number married to Chinese Americans from the Minneapolis—St. Paul area. In the fall of 1948, more than a dozen of these women asked L. Jane Wilson, superintendent of Westminster's Chinese Sunday School, to provide English-language classes for the newcomers. In response, Wilson and other volunteers from the congregation and the Chinese-American community began offering lessons on weekdays as well as Sunday afternoons,

<sup>24</sup> L. Woo interview; Mason, "The Chinese," 536; Howard Woo, telephone interview by author, Feb. 7, 1995, notes in author's possession.

<sup>25</sup> L. Jane Wilson, interview by author, St. Louis Park, Aug. 30, 1993; H. Woo interview, May 20, 1991; L. Woo interview.

<sup>26</sup> Warren W. Chan to author, Aug. 29, 1991; L. Woo interview.

<sup>27</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Chan to author; L. Woo interview.





*English-language class at Westminster Church, about 1948, including pupils and teachers. L. Jane Wilson is seated at left in the second row; Minnie Wong is two rows behind her.*

holding activities for their pupils' children during the sessions. Following in their friend's footsteps, both Lolita Young Woo and Jun Chan volunteered to help the war brides.<sup>28</sup>

Although there is little in the written record to document the life of Liang May Seen, her circle of friends kept her memory and accomplishments alive. In 1958, after her husband died, Jun Chan returned to San Francisco to be near friends from the mission home and her son, Warren, in Santa Barbara. She often telephoned Lolita Woo, however, lonely for her friends in Minneapolis and the women's organizations she had participated in at Westminster church. Jun Chan, Lolita Woo, their families, and others saw Liang May Seen as a positive force in the life of Minnesota's small Chinese-American community.<sup>29</sup>

A model for younger Chinese women, Liang May Seen was a consistently strong advocate for women from the turn of the century until the mid-1940s. She had reinforced the Christian and

middle-class ideals that she had learned at the Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco through participating in the life of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. To empower and provide meaningful activities for Chinese-American women, she encouraged them to create and become active in their own organizations, particularly inside the church.

Leading men in the Chinese-American business community in Minneapolis were eventually successful in joining all-male groups such as the YMCA, Rotary Club, and American Automobile Association, which had been particularly restrictive. In contrast, the women, with Liang May Seen's charismatic leadership, created a unique atmosphere of intimacy and cross-cultural sharing in the Westminster Chinese Sunday School, most notably during the 1920s. There, the friendship of Chinese and American women provided an opportunity to find partial liberation from the racism and sexism of the early twentieth century.

<sup>28</sup> Mason, "The Chinese," 538–39; L. Woo interview.

<sup>29</sup> L. Woo interview; Chan to author.

*All photographs are in the MHS collections; those on p. 223, 226–29, and 231 were donated by the Woo family. Map is by Jim Mason, drawn by Alan Ominsky.*



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