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Wong Family: Nancy Wong (Elder)

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NANCY WONG

Nancy Wong was born in Ung Hong Village, Toy San District, China, to a restaurant owner and housewife. During her early childhood, she felt like a sheltered child who did not know much about anything. But soon her sheltered life changed. When Nancy was seven, her mother left for the United States, leaving Nancy and her brother Donald behind with their grandmother. What a traumatic time that was, but at least she was with family. When she was nine years old, her grandmother sent her to school.

But more change was on the way. When Nancy was 15, her mother returned to China, bringing back from the United States three daughters and four sons. The family constellation comprised of herself, her brother and their grandmother suddenly more than tripled, going from just three to eleven persons! And, more significant to her own station in the family, caring for her young siblings became Nancy's duty. Caring for her sisters and brothers was a lot of responsibility, a burden for a young girl who was but a young teenager! Reflecting on the period, Nancy believes this is when, in her own mind, her adulthood really commenced.

By the age of 18, Nancy was married. For the first time, the people in her village began to treat her like an adult. Villagers did not consider a female to be an adult until her marriage. In her culture, men were regarded more highly than women. Females were acknowledged in the village and had status only through their connections to men—and especially, through marriage.

Prior to her marriage, however, a special event that had nothing to do with childcare or family had made Nancy feel like an adult, regardless of what some in her village may have thought. At age 16, she completed the highest level of education her village had to offer. She felt fortunate to be given the opportunity to be educated, because her family did not have much money. She was especially proud of the times when the schoolmaster acknowledged her with different awards at school for academic achievement, citizenship, and for being the most patient and diligent.

The school setting and its classes were particularly important for her because her busy family didn't have much time for teaching her or for offering advice. What she didn't learn in school, she had to learn on her own.

Nancy's nuclear family had begun to emigrate to the United States when her father left China in 1908 in search of a prosperous life. After a few years, he went back to China, married, fathered two children and then left for the United States again in 1915. Seven years later, Nancy's mother joined him in America, leaving behind her two oldest children, Nancy and Donald. Nancy, who married in 1932 to a man who himself soon thereafter returned to United States, finally came to America in November 1946 as a wife and the mother of an adolescent daughter. The newly reunited family lived first in Oakland, where two sons were born, and moved a few years later Lodi, California. Nancy came to Stockton in 1968 and she has been part of the community here ever since.

To her regret, although life in the U.S. has its advantages, Nancy finds it difficult to communicate with her American-born sons and grandchildren. She does not speak English fluently, and she suspects that they don't understand the nuances of her Chinese.

As a result of this barrier, sometimes she fears that her two sons are fading out of her life. At times, however, now grown and with families of their own, they do ask her about stories that would link them to their ancestors and the family's home village. She is always happy to try to share stories of their heritage. However, she feels that they cannot relate to her experiences because of the language barrier and cannot grasp the subtle meanings of what she tells them. She has shown them pictures and told them about the family values and history, but she doesn't want to push it on them; she only responds when they ask.

In 1982, she returned to China and went to visit her old house in the village where she grew up. It was a memorable occasion for her. She took photographs so she could show her children where she spent her childhood. Then finally, a few years later, Nancy donated the old house to a local villager. It was time to let go of the house—because her new life, one that has given her a great deal of happiness—is here, in America.

Interviewer: Rann Chun
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