



*The Bancroft Library*

University of California • Berkeley









Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Isabel Wong-Vargas

BUSINESS, FAMILY, AND PERSONAL PHILANTHROPY IN PERU, CHINA,  
AND THE UNITED STATES

With an Introduction by  
Humberto Urtiaga

Interviews Conducted by  
Harriet Nathan  
in 1989

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Isabel Wong-Vargas dated December 5, 1993. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, 486 Library, University of California, Berkeley 94720, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user. The legal agreement with Isabel Wong-Vargas requires that she be notified of the request and allowed thirty days in which to respond.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Isabel Wong-Vargas, "Business, Family, and Personal Philanthropy in Peru, China, and the United States," an oral history conducted in 1989 by Harriet Nathan, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993.

Copy no. 1





Isabel Wong-Vargas, 1990.



Cataloging information

WONG-VARGAS, Isabel (b. 1922)

Entrepreneur

Business, Family, and Personal Philanthropy in Peru, China, and the United States, 1993, xiii, 328 pp.

Family and earliest years in Peru and China; WWII in China and Hong Kong; arranged marriage and life in husband's family; learning real estate; post-war Hong Kong import-export business; second marriage, and return to Peru, 1951; grocery store, laundry, Chinese restaurant business in Peru; home base in Berkeley since 1966, and links to Peru and China; building and operating La Caleta Restaurant, Lima, Peru, and hazards and successes of operating as a businesswoman; thoughts on women friends, mentors, religion, divorce, children, higher education in the U.S., philanthropy, volunteer work, diplomacy; comparisons of Chinese, Peruvian, and American cultures; study of interior design, business administration, real estate law.

Introduction by Humberto Urutiaga, Consul General of Peru, San Francisco.

Interviewed 1989 by Harriet Nathan. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



The Regional Oral History Office, on behalf of future researchers, wishes to thank the following individuals whose contributions made possible this oral history of Isabel Wong-Vargas.

Martha and Paul Hertelendy

Dr. Michael Sam-Vargas

Ines and Bernard G. Fraenkel

Isabel Sam-Vargas

Alan S. Gevins

Susana and Jean Gatellier



TABLE OF CONTENTS--Isabel Wong-Vargas

INTRODUCTION-by Humberto Urutiaga	i
English translation	iv
INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Harriet Nathan	vii
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	xi
I FAMILY AND EARLY MEMORIES: PERU AND CHINA	1
Mother and Her Family	1
Father and His Family	2
Father Flees to Peru	2
Living with Grandmother	3
Trip to Lima	5
Abduction	6
Father's Plan	7
Summoning Ah Sham	8
Lies, and a Substitute	9
Boat to China	10
Wanting to Go to Peru, but Staying in China	11
Family Businesses	12
Ah Sham, Rumors, and a Gold Watch	13
Five Nephews to Peru	14
Aunties in the Same House	15
School: Discipline and Memorizing	16
Long Eyelashes	17
Working in the Rice Fields	18
Fever	18
Wanting to be a Doctor	20
Modern Teacher	20
Liking to Sew and Create	21
Susana, Rosalia, Ah Sham	23
II WORLD WAR II	25
Red Sky Over Canton	25
Walking to Sei Wuey and Back	26
Escape to Hong Kong	27
Mr. Woo's Son	28
Rebecca, and Chi Yung Middle School	29
A Laundry in Kowloon	32
The Best Time to Study	33
More English at St. Mary's High School	34
The Japanese Army in Hong Kong	35
Writing to Father about Medical School	37
Planning to Leave Hong Kong	38
Hiding from the Japanese Soldiers	40
Walking to Canton	42
Selling Children and Throwing Clothes Away	43
Along the Road	45

	Waiting for the Boat to Canton	46
	Looking After Rebecca	49
	Letters, and Hiding in the Hills	50
III	HOPING TO STUDY IN CHUNGKING, BUT MARRYING CHANG	52
	Writing to Sam Po Wuan	52
	Floods on the Road to Chungking	53
	Persuading Uncle, and Visiting Mr. Lai in Canton	54
	Uncle's Letter to Sam Po Wuan	56
	Mr. Lai's Marriage Plan	57
	The Bridge	58
	Meeting the Changs	60
	University Across the Bridge, and an Engagement	62
	A Long Fever	64
	"Bury Her or Marry Her"	65
	Marrying the Chinese Way	66
	Living at the Changs' House	67
	The Promise Not to Sell Family Property	69
	Death Ceremonies and a Vision	70
	First Wife's Son and His Behavior	72
	The Japanese Lady	73
IV	MRS. WONG, AND GETTING STARTED IN REAL ESTATE	76
	A Doctor Who Knew Real Estate	76
	Caring for Martha and Needing Income	77
	Defending Ah Sham	79
	Wanting to Die	80
	Miss Lin's Story	81
	Buying Wood to Sell	83
	Stopping the Sale of Father-in-Law's Property	84
	Beginning to Learn about Real Estate	86
	Borrowing Money and Paying Back	87
	Children's Illnesses	89
	Husband's Violence	90
	Real Estate Deals in the Tea House	91
	The Bomb that Fell into the Kitchen	94
	War's End (1945)	96
	Becoming Amah's Godchild	97
V	POST-WAR HONG KONG AND THE IMPORT-EXPORT BUSINESS	100
	Husband in Hong Kong	100
	Renting an Apartment for Father	101
	Father's Family in Peru	102
	Decision to Divorce	103
	Gonsalo Ng Family, and an Import Business	104
	Saving Susana	106
	Advice about Divorce	108
	Son's Death, and Change of Religion	109
	Advice, and Final Decision	110
	Deaths, and a Children's Nurse	112
	Buying and Selling Real Estate	113



	Shanghai People Fleeing the Communists	117
	Apartment House Living in Hong Kong	119
	Miss Leong and Number Four Cousin	119
	Letters from Mr. Sam	123
	Meeting Mr. Sam	124
	Mr. Sam's Daughter	125
	Rebecca's Ways	126
	Amah's Opinion, and a Secret Engagement	128
	Sam's Stories	129
	Marriage on Paper	130
	Plane Tickets for Peru	131
VI	LIVING AND WORKING IN PERU	135
	Family Apartment in Lima	135
	Wanting to Learn Spanish	137
	The Hacienda, and the Children's Education	137
	Bringing Sam to Peru, and Marriage in a Lima Church (1951)	138
	Grocery Store	140
	Empty Boxes and a Cash Register	142
	Learning to Run a Grocery Store	144
	Ines, First Baby in Peru	148
	Father's Chalet	149
	Lima Schools	151
	Helping Susana Study in the United States	152
	Business: A License for Meat, and a Cinema	153
VII	BUILDING BUSINESSES: THE RESTAURANT AND OTHERS	155
	Three Floors, Three Shops	155
	The License and the Oven	156
	A Cook, a Godfather, and Three Waiters	159
	Opening the Laundry and Sewing on Collars	161
	Offending the Cook, and Finding a New One	162
	Seeing What is Happening in the Restaurant	163
	Checks and Savings Accounts	164
	Where the Children Slept	165
	Waiters on Strike	166
	Trying to Buy, and Having to Sell	167
	Matchmaking for Susana	170
	Sam's Bank Account and the Grocery Store	171
	Ten Soles for the Cashier, and Susy's Early Birth	173
	The Architecture Exam	174
VIII	FAMILY LIVES AND RESPONSIBILITIES	175
	Susana's Offer	175
	Martha's Music and Ambitions	176
	To Study in the United States	177
	Banderos	178
	Martha at UC Berkeley	179
	Bringing Ana Maria to Peru	180
	Family in China, and Eighteen Sacks of Gifts (1961)	181
	Going to Macao	182

	Distributing Gifts in Canton	183
	Sewing Machines	185
	Sam and the Check Stubs	185
	China: Procedures, Zones, and Permits	187
	Meeting Ana Maria	188
	Getting Out of Canton	189
	Ana Maria Learns About her Father	192
	Theft from the Office Drawer	195
	Separation and Divorce	199
	Buying Land	201
	Studying Interior Design	201
	Winning the Prize, and Decorating the Country Club	203
IX	DEVELOPING LA CALETA, AND SELLING THE CHINESE RESTAURANT	206
	Planning for La Caleta	206
	Mr. Chu's Chinese Restaurant	207
	Down Payment for a Contractor	208
	Building a Seafood Restaurant	210
	A Nightclub, and a Drive-In	211
	Lotus Park-in, the Coffee Shop	214
	Opening a Seafood Restaurant: La Caleta	216
	Purchasing: How and Why	217
	Expanding into the Big Salon (1974-1975)	220
	Visas, and the American Consul	221
	A Berkeley Wedding	224
	Helping a Family from Chepén	225
	Buying the Property and Arranging to Sell the Chinese Restaurant (1965)	226
	Lawyer's Proposal	228
	Helping the Cook to buy the Restaurant	229
	More on the Keom Family	231
X	HOME BASE IN BERKELEY (1966) AND LINKS TO LIMA	232
	Houses in Berkeley	232
	The Wedding, and Living Arrangements	233
	Illness, Worry, and Prayer	234
	Rebellion	236
	Children's Nature and Education	237
	Managing La Caleta to Stay Longer in Berkeley	239
	Working as a Secretary in San Francisco	241
	La Caleta and the Ownership Scheme	243
	The Contract, and La Barca Restaurant	244
	Power of Attorney	247
	Buying Back the Name of La Caleta	248
	An Apartment in Lima	250
	Supporting the <i>Asilo</i>	251
	Some Personal Ambitions	254
	Land and Money Tied Up in Lima	257
XI	FAMILY: TRAVEL, EDUCATION, BUSINESS	260
	Pilgrimage to China (1982)	260

Paying for College	262
Languages	263
Seeking Ah Sham's Tomb (1983)	265
Meeting People	267
Purchasing a Restaurant--Almost (1984)	268
Business in China	269
Sharing with the Children	270
Business Problems	271
Interior Design in America	272
What the Restaurant Business Requires	273
A Restaurant, and Real Estate	275
A Small Paris Apartment, and Other Property	279
Honorary Consul for Peru	280
Stolen Blenders	284
The Dedication	285
Singing as a Performer	286
Discrimination	288
XII SUMMING UP	291
Records, and Real Age	291
Four Mothers	292
Message for the Children	293
Relationship with Father, and with Friends	294
Pleasures in Helping	295
The Chinese Way, and the Peruvian Way	296
The American Way: Freedom for the Children	300
Real Estate: Canton, Hong Kong, Peru, and the U.S.	302
Memories and Survival	304
Michael's Scrapbook	307
Benefits for Cultural Center in Ica: Berkeley, then Lima	308
Volunteering in the U.S.	309
Advantages of A Restaurant	311
Memories from China	312
Peru: Wishes for the Future, and Present Legal Realities	313
China: The Future and the Present	317
The United States and Learning	317
TAPE GUIDE	320
APPENDIX--Sample of Chinese writing and English Translation	322
INDEX	326



## INTRODUCTION--by Humberto Urtiaga

Conoci a la senora Isabel Wong Vargas un dia de diciembre de 1984, en ocasion de una comida en el Restaurant La Caleta, breves dias antes de venir a San Francisco California como Consul General del Peru.

Pocas veces he sentido el impacto de una personalidad femenina como cuando conoci a mi querida amiga Isabel. Ese fue la partida de una gran y profunda amistad que a medida de los anos ha ido reforzandose a traves del contacto que hemos tenido tanto en el Consulado, donde ella es un miembro mas como Consul Honoraria, es asi que en el trato diario llegue a conocerla y sobretodo su gran valor moral y fortaleza fisica.

Mi amiga Isabel nacio en la ciudad de Chepen rica zona arrocera del Norte del Peru. Su padre de nacionalidad China fue uno de los tantos inmigrantes que dejaron el imperio chino para labrarse un futuro en el Peru. El senor Wong, es quiza una excepcion en la gran corriente migratoria china, ya que pertencia a la clase media y la verdadera razon de dejar china fue por sus actividades politicas a favor de Sun Yen Tse.

En nuestro pais se dedico a la agricultura y logro con su esfuerzo propio labrarse una posicion social y economica que expresa la generosidad del Peru para los extranjeros. Establecido en nuestro pais se caso con una peruana y el producto de esa union fue Isabel Won Vargas.

Pareceria que Isabelita estaba destinada a confrontar los escollos que presenta la vida. Al año y medio, pierde a su madre y papa Wong se embarca con esa nina hacia la China con el fin de educar a su hija de acuerdo a las tradiciones de su

## CONSULADO GENERAL DEL PERU

pais y dejarla al cuidado de su familia.

En China empieza una vida azarosa que se expresa al principio por la desconfianza y el maltrato que recibe de parte de sus mismos familiares ya que en China tambien existia la discriminacion racial: Isabelita por el hecho de ser producto de dos razas era muchas veces considerada "barbara extranjera". Hay que pensar tambien que en esos anos China atravezaba por momentos muy dificiles. A pesar de ello Isabel crecio en un medio casi hostil, se educó y cuando tenia aspiraciones de proseguir estudios superiores se produjo la invasion de China por el Japon.

Como tantas personas Isabel Wong sufrio en carne propia la tragedia de la guerra pero con un coraje extraordinario esta mujer logro trasladarse desde Canton a Hong Kong en esta ciudad el destino interviene a favor de Isabel ya que es acogida por su madrina quien no solamente le brindo carino sino que la inicia en el mundo de los negocios en inversiones.

Como era costumbre en esa epoca, Isabel contrae matrimonio a edad temprana. en 1950 decide regresar a su patria a donde llega con dos bebes y muchos deseos de progresar. En su patria no solo la familia crece sino que los negocios de Isabel Wong son bendecidos por el exito.

Pero no quiero enfatizar en el aspecto material sino en la gran riqueza espiritual que Isabel posee, quien sabe por todos los sufrimientos que paso ella tiene una inmensa riqueza moral que le ha permitido cursar todas las tormentas y ha logrado crear una magnifica familia sino que esta rodeada de tantos y buenos amigos de los cuales yo me precio de ser uno de ellos.

Con su bondad y don de gente ha logrado hacerse de un prestigio en el Peru pais de origen, quien reconvenciendo sus bue

## CONSULADO GENERAL DEL PERU

nos oficios la ha nombrado Consul Honoraria del Peru en San Francisco.

De esta manera Isabel a parte de ser una buena madre, mujer de empresa como Consul Honoraria del Peru en California sigue prestigiando al Peru.

February 27, 1992

Humberto Urtiaga  
Consul General of Peru

## INTRODUCTION--by Humberto Urtiaga (English translation)

I met Mrs. Isabel Wong Vargas one December day in 1984, at a dinner at her Restaurant La Caleta, a few days before coming to San Francisco, California as Consul General of Peru.

I have felt the impact of a feminine personality such as when I met my dear friend Isabel only a few times in my life. That was the beginning of a great and profound friendship that through the years, has been reinforced through the contact that we have had in the Consulate, where she is a member as Honorary Consul. It was through this daily contact that I was able to know her person and above all, her great moral values and her physical fortitude.

My friend Isabel was born in the city of Chepen, a rich rice-growing region in the north of Peru. Her father, of chinese nationality, was one of the many immigrants who left the chinese empire to work towards a future in Peru. Since he was a member of the middle class, Mr. Wong was perhaps an exception to the great chinese migratory current; his real reason for leaving China was due to his political activities in favor of Sun Yat Tsen.

In our country, he dedicated himself to agriculture and with his own hard work, was able to obtain a favorable social and economic position, an expression of Peru's openness and generosity towards settlers from other lands. Once established, he married a Peruvian and Isabel Wong Vargas was the product of that union.



It would seem that Isabelita was destined to confront all the tests that are presented by life. At one and one-half years old, she lost her mother and her father took her to China, in order to her in accordance with traditions of that country, and left her in the care of his family.

In China, she began a harsh life which began with the distrust and adverse treatment on the part of her own family, since racial discrimination also existed in China: since she was the product of two races, Isabelita was often considered a "barbarian from abroad". It must also be remembered that at that time, China was also going through very difficult moments. Despite this treatment and the fact that Isabel grew up in an almost hostile environment, she educated herself; when she wanted to pursue a further education, China became invaded by Japan.

As did many people, Isabel suffered the tragedy of war first hand; however, with extraordinary courage, this woman was able to travel from Canton to Hong Kong. In this city, destiny intervened in Isabel's favor since she was welcomed by her godmother, who not only gave her love and care, but who also started her in the world of business and investments.

As was the custom during that period, Isabel was married at a very early age. In 1950, she decided to return to her country of birth, where she arrived with two babies and a great willingness to move ahead. Once there, her family grew and her business endeavors were blessed with success.



I wish to emphasize not the material but the spiritual richness that Isabel possesses. Perhaps it is because of all of her suffering that she has an immense moral affluence which has allowed her to cross all the storms and has enabled her to create a wonderful family. She is also surrounded by many good friends, of which I am proud to be one.

Through her kindness and abilities with people, she has been able to obtain prestige and recognition in her country of origin, which has rewarded her by naming her Honorary Consul in San Francisco. In this manner, in addition to being a good mother and a businesswoman, Isabel continues to bring prominence to Peru as its Honorary Consul in California.

February 27, 1992.

Humberto Urtiaga  
Consul General of Peru



## INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Harriet Nathan

From the earliest years of the University of California, the lands and people of the Pacific Rim have claimed the attention of those looking to the future of the state and nation. In prescient speeches more than a century ago Arthur Rodgers, Regent and alumnus, addressed the importance of the Pacific Rim for the University and California as a whole. He urged that Californians develop links of commerce throughout the area, and learn in a systematic way about the culture and the people who live there.

Isabel Wong-Vargas is a woman of the Pacific Rim, uniquely qualified to observe and interpret life in pre- and post-revolution China, in Peru, and in the United States. Born in Peru of a Peruvian mother and a Chinese father, she lived for years in both countries where she gave birth to her children, and devoted herself to their support and education. To support them, she taught herself to succeed in business; to educate them, she found the best local schools, and when they were ready for higher education she discovered ways to help the five adult children to come to the United States where they earned degrees in undergraduate and graduate studies. The circumstances of her life that forced a fight for survival, also revealed to her the need for and finally the rewards of education. Along the way she also developed a commitment to helping other people that is as natural to her as breathing.

With roots in three countries and a lifetime divided among them, she has experienced minority status in each one. She recalls that after her father forcibly brought her as a small child from Peru to China and left her there with members of his family, she was sent away from the table to eat alone, and endured other marks of disfavor, unkindness, and neglect because she "looked different," not truly Chinese.

When Mrs. Wong-Vargas returned to Peru as an adult, she set herself the task of learning to speak correct Spanish; she wanted to avoid mispronunciations common among some of the resident Chinese people, errors that often made them the subject of ridicule. It is a measure of her success in Peru both as a business person and a philanthropist that she was named honorary consul for Peru in San Francisco, a post she has held through several changes of national administration. She mentioned a friend's reminder that such a distinction was unusual for a Peruvian who was a woman, a Chinese and a divorcee.

Asked if she had experienced discrimination in the United States, she said "No"; in this country and elsewhere, "I never feel inferior." To avoid even this appearance of boasting, she observed that while some

immigrants try to learn the language of the new country and to accommodate to its culture, circumstances are not the same for all and people cannot respond equally. As she said, some are "lucky"; others are not.

After some years of acquaintance, when Isabel Wong-Vargas would occasionally relate some of her memories and perceptions, the interviewer joined family members in discussions of the value of an oral history memoir as a way to capture and preserve the experiences of her life. The discussion also turned to options for funding; under the leadership of daughter Martha Hertelendy and her husband Paul, the children stepped forward to support their mother's memoir.

Isabel Wong-Vargas has poise and dignity that mirror her quiet confidence and mask the shyness she feels at times. Her style is warm and gracious, with a smile that lights her dark eyes; her voice is low-pitched, and her presence is handsome and stylish. Meeting her, one might assume that her life has been marked by ease and comfort, protected from the world's harshness. However, as the interviews progressed and her story unfolded, it became clear that her confidence arose from the ability to survive severe hardships, and to recognize with gratitude the women she called her "mothers," who helped her after her own mother's death when Isabel was one year old.

Planning and research for the interviews took place during 1988, when the interviewer consulted with family members; looked into some of the ways newcomers have earned a living in this country; and also inquired into the status of women in pre-revolution China. An earlier visit to Peru had provided the interviewer with first-hand experience of the operation of Mrs. Wong-Vargas's famed Lima restaurant, "La Caleta," a favorite gathering place for political and business leaders. At home, she made available collections of pictures, clippings, and documents, mostly in Spanish, revealing aspects of her life in Peru, and began to reveal the range of her personal philanthropy there. Other materials dealt with the earlier life in China and her efforts to aid family members during subsequent visits. The interviewer then provided a suggested outline of topics for discussion.

The interviews took place in her pleasant house on Piedmont Avenue in Berkeley, in a small, well-lighted breakfast room overlooking the garden and pool. Eight of the eleven tape-recorded interviews began at 9:00 or 9:30 a.m., and three at 1:30 or 2:30 p.m. The sessions typically lasted over two hours each. All were conducted in 1989; two in March, three in April, three in May, two in July and one in August.

Mrs. Wong-Vargas spoke easily and with eloquence in English. Apparently she was even more at ease in Spanish and Chinese. When she

answered an occasional phone call, the Spanish flowed easily. At other times her written Chinese would appear in notes and picture captions. Even when she was quite young, her Chinese calligraphy was recognized as very good. In fact, her facility in at least three languages was noteworthy because none of the three could be called her mother tongue in the usual sense. As a tiny child in Peru she knew some Spanish, but she did not use it during the China years when she needed to learn a new language. By the time she returned to Peru as an adult, she had to relearn Spanish. When she had a chance to study English in China she did so, and improved her grasp of the language in the United States.

After the taped interviews were transcribed, they were lightly edited, heads and subheads were added, and two lists of queries prepared. One focused on details of Peruvian and Chinese contexts and terms; the other had to do with transliterating Chinese names and terms in a consistent manner. Since Isabel Wong-Vargas's years in China occurred mostly before and during World War II, her pronunciation and spelling for the most part do not reflect the changes made by the communist regime. Some of the list and queries traveled in her flight bags, and came back to Berkeley when she came home, or when her daughter Ines Fraenkel did so. In addition, Martha Hertelendy provided consultation on problems associated with Chinese terms. These and other examples of family support were most welcome, and deeply appreciated.

The timetable for the interviews went smoothly, but timing of the review of the transcribed manuscript ran into conflict with Isabel Wong-Vargas's demanding schedule. When not out of the country for weeks or months at a time, she was often occupied with responsibilities that included philanthropies, professional tasks, family interests, or her work as an honorary consul. During this post-interview period, she also sold her Berkeley house and moved into an Emeryville penthouse with a panoramic view of the central and northern areas of San Francisco Bay. Consultations and her final review and approval of the manuscript took place in that setting.

During the course of her wide-ranging memoir, she reflected on life in China during World War II, on differences in business practices and in family life in her three countries, as well as what was expected of women in each one. She also compared systems of education, a theme that appeared again and again in her memoir. Whenever she could attend school or college, she did so, always continuing to teach herself. In this combination of her own devising she learned languages, the real estate business in China, Hong Kong and the United States, restaurant development and management, interior design, sewing and art, music and singing. She was able to view her life in the context of each time and country, and to hold fast to her own standards of personal integrity. When it was time to complete a graduation project at the Miraflores College of Interior Design, she wrote a dedication to her children. She

urged them to remember that "...in the course of a lifetime, it is never too late to learn."

With the completion of Isabel Wong-Vargas's memoir, it is appropriate and a pleasure to thank those whose interest and support have been essential. Her children and their families have provided not only financial support, but also documents, background information, and suggestions. They have solved numerous problems of language including reconciling the spelling of Chinese words and names, translated Spanish into English, conveyed messages back and forth, and helped in numerous other ways including transportation of transcripts and corrections. This family circle includes Martha and Paul Hertelendy, Dr. Michael Sam Vargas, Ines M. Vargas Fraenkel, and Bernard G. Fraenkel, Isabel (Lita) Sam-Vargas and Dr. Alan S. Gevins, Susana Sam-Vargas Gatellier and Jean Gatellier.

It is also a pleasure to thank the Honorable Humberto Urtiaga, Consul General of Peru in San Francisco, for his courtesy in writing the Introduction to the oral history memoir of Isabel Wong-Vargas.

Harriet Nathan  
Interviewer/Editor

June 1993  
Regional History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

**Name:** MARIA ISABEL WONG-VARGAS

**Date of Birth:** May 16, 1922

**Birthplace:** Chepen, Peru

**Father's Full Name:** Jorge Wong Shung - deceased  
**Birthplace:** Canton, China

**Mother's Full Name:** Jesus Vargas-Burgos - deceased  
**Birthplace:** Cajamarca, Peru

**Spouse:** Pablo Sam - deceased  
**Birthplace:** San Pedro, Peru

**Children:**

Martha Hertelendy

**Education:** M.A. Education, San Francisco State University  
1968

B.A. Political Science, University of California, Berkeley 1965

Michael Sam Vargas, M.D. (Mexico)

**Education:** Ph.D. Sociology, Harvard University 1980

M.D. Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara, MEXICO  
1991

Ines Vargas Fraenkel

**Education:** J.D., Hastings College of the Law, San  
Francisco 1982

Isabel Sam-Vargas

**Education:** M.S. Industrial Engineering, Stanford  
University 1982

Susana Gatellier

**Education:** M.A. International Development, Harvard  
University 1982

**Raised:** Canton, China

**Present Community:** Berkeley/San Francisco Bay Area, California

**Education:**

Certificate in Business Administration,  
IPAE Instituto Peruano de Administracion de Empresas  
(Peruvian Institute of Business Administration), Lima,  
Peru - 1981

**Education (cont'd.):**

Bachelor of Arts, Interior Design, Miraflores College of Interior Design, Lima, Peru - 1964

**Occupation(s):**

1991 - Present: Honorary Consul of Peru,  
Consulate General of Peru, San Francisco, California  
1982-1991 Honorary Vice Consul of Peru  
1962 - Present: Owner/General Manager, LA CALETA Restaurant, Lima, Peru  
  
1962 - Present: President/Director, LIMA-PANAMERICANA, INC., Lima, Peru  
  
1962 - Present: President/Director, LIN-FA, INC., Lima, Peru  
  
1981 - Present: Limited Partner, GABBIANO'S Restaurant, (formerly Ferry Plaza Restaurant) San Francisco, California  
  
1980 - 1988: President/Director, LOTUS ENTERPRISES, INC., Berkeley, California

**Areas of Expertise:**

Business Entrepreneur, Restaurant Management, Investments, Interior Design, Fundraising.

**Other Interests or Activities:**

Fundraising, Volunteer Work, Travel, Cooking, Walking, Singing, Swimming, Music, Theater, Sewing, Learning.

**Organizations In Which You Are Active:**

Member, Consular Corps of San Francisco  
Member, Ladies' Consular Corps of San Francisco  
Member, Lions Club of San Francisco, Chinatown Branch  
Member, World Trade Center, San Francisco  
Member, Chinese Cultural Center  
Member, Peruvian Aid Center  
Member, International HOST Committee of San Francisco  
Life Member, International Institute of the East Bay  
Life Member, ON LOK Senior Services, San Francisco  
Member, Sierra Club  
Member, World Affairs Council  
Fundraiser/Volunteer, Self-Help for the Elderly, San Francisco

**Organizations In Which You Are Active (Cont'd.):**

Fundraiser/Volunteer, Project HOPE  
Fundraiser/Volunteer, VIDA (international development)  
Fundraiser/Volunteer, Asilo de los Ancianos Desamparados  
(Asylum for Elderly), Chosica, Peru  
Fundraiser, Police Officers' Children, Lima, Peru  
Fundraiser, Home for Children of Health Ministry Employees,  
Lima, Peru



I FAMILY AND EARLY MEMORIES: PERU AND CHINA

[Interview 1: March 13, 1989]##<sup>1</sup>

Mother and Her Family

Nathan: Would you like to begin with your earliest memories, perhaps what you knew about your parents' families?

Wong-Vargas: My mother died very young. Later on they told me, so I knew. Her father was Spanish, and her mother was Peruvian. Her mother was from Cajamarca, Peru. My mother had two sisters and a brother. There were four of them, but unfortunately the young brother died, one sister died, and the other sister died later on; I met her. Her name is Aurora, my aunt.

Nathan: What was your mother's name?

Wong-Vargas: Jesus Vargas. They always used both names: Vargas, and then her mother's name, Burgos. So her name was Jesus Vargas-Burgos. Later on she married my father, so they added "of" Wong--de Wong. I was told that my mother didn't want to marry my father, because she was young. My father was about fourteen years older than she was, but my grandmother liked my father, so--anyway, they married. My mother and my grandmother lived in Chepén at that time, which is where my father met them.

---

<sup>1</sup>This symbol (##) indicates a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes, see page 320.

Father and His Family

Wong-Vargas: My father was one of five brothers and two sisters, and he was number five brother. I never met the number one uncle because he died very young. I met number two uncle and numbers three and four, and my father was number five. My father's father was born in China. He was wealthy, with a lot of land--rice fields, rice mills, etc., and also lichee fruit. My father was the youngest son, and he was a little bit like a *revolucionario*, because at that time the political situation was really different.

Nathan: What part of China was this?

Wong-Vargas: Canton city in Guangdong Province. My father was born in the village of Mausan.

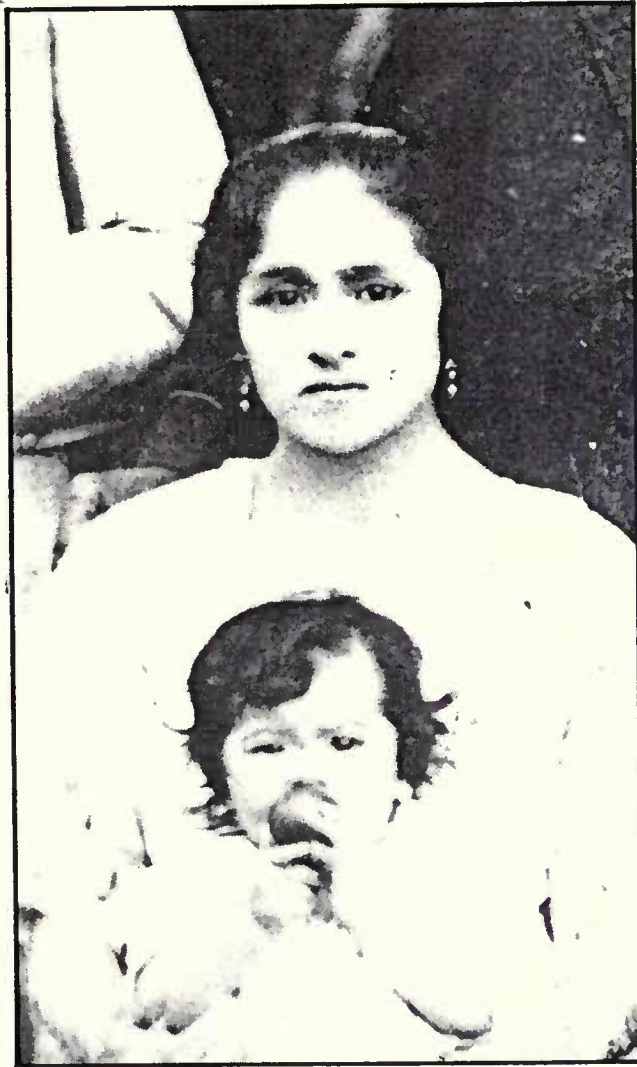
At that time the wealthy women had bound feet, very small. If they were poor women, their feet were not bound because they had to work. My second auntie--my second uncle's wife--and my third and fourth uncles' wives all had very tiny feet. But my father's wife was different; she had big feet because she was poor and had to work. It didn't matter to my father, because he liked something natural and healthy. He married her, and the other aunties looked down on her because she was from a poor family. This was his first wife.

Father Flees to Peru

Wong-Vargas: He cut his pigtail, because that was a symbol of revolution. Not only he, but a lot of young men were *revolucionarios*, so they cut their pigtails. The government chased them to kill them, of course, at that time. They had to go somewhere. All my uncles were so concerned about their brother that they kept telling him, "Go somewhere." He wondered where, and then he met a friend and told his brothers he was going to Peru. They said, "All right, Peru. Where's Peru? Anyway, go."

So my father left China and went to Peru. He was twenty- some years old.

Nathan: How did he get the money to go to Peru?



Jesus Vargas-Burgos, mother, and Isabel  
Wong-Vargas, about one year old





Wong-Vargas: Because my grandfather was wealthy. He had a lot of land, and money was no problem. My father even took some money to Peru. At that time a lot of Chinese wanted to go to Peru because they were poor and wanted to work as coolies. But my father was different; he was chased, so he had to go. He went to Peru with money to invest. So when he got there, right away he bought the Hacienda Lurifico, very close to Chepén; it was part of Chepén. He made a lot of friends, and then he met my mother. I don't know how, but anyway he fell in love with her and forgot about the other wife in China.

Nathan: In the meantime did he learn Spanish?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I think he learned fast, because he was a clever man--clever and a businessman. He married my mother, and then I was born. As far as I know, I was an only child. I don't remember that my mother had another child before me who died, no.

Nathan: Do you remember your mother?

Wong-Vargas: Not at all. She died when I was just over one year old. But I was told that she was tall, with green eyes; she was very beautiful, and my father was very jealous. I think that's why she died, because he didn't let her out. He locked the door and she could not get out. My grandmother and my aunts had to go to the window when they wanted to talk to her. He never let her out, my auntie Aurora told me later on. I think human beings locked up like that are sad, and little by little they get sick and die.

#### Living with Grandmother

Wong-Vargas: Cajamarca is very famous in Peru for its natural hot springs. A lot of people like to go to Cajamarca when they get sick in order to have that kind of bath. My mother was very ill, so my father and my grandmother took her to Cajamarca. They thought she would be cured in that town, but unfortunately she was too ill and she died, so they buried her in Cajamarca.

I was just over a year old, and my grandmother took care of me. I thought she was my mother at the beginning. Of course she had no baby's milk, but I remember she just wanted me not to cry. They told me later on, of course. I remember we lived very close to Chepén with my grandmother and my aunt Aurora. Aurora married a man whose last name was Ahumada.

She has three daughters and three sons, and we lived at her house.

Nathan: Did you feel that people were kind to you?

Wong-Vargas: At that time, yes. Everybody tried, maybe because I was without my mother. Also at that time my other aunt, who died young, left one daughter, Ines. She was very nice.

Nathan: When you were in Lurifico, what was it like?

Wong-Vargas: It was a very small village. Chepén is a little bit bigger, like a small city. Lurifico is mostly close to farms, so it's the people who work the farms who live there. My auntie's house was big. I remember it as being huge, but with no facilities. I think the floor was cement. I remember right inside the entrance there was a bed for me and my cousin, Ines, and my grandmother. So they gave us a corner. On the right-hand side I remember my beautiful trunk, maybe one metro (approximately 30 x 60 inches) long and forty or fifty centímetros wide. I always like to play there, and my grandmother always used to tell me, "That's yours, because everything belonged to your mother, and she left it for you. When you grow older, it will all belong to you." So I always remembered that. My father took my trunk from Auntie Aurora's house after he left me in China. My cousin Celinda told me recently.

My cousin Ines was very kind and nice to me. She was maybe eight to ten years older. I was five years old, and she was much taller than I. Ines is my father's goddaughter. I think at her first communion she called him her godfather. They loved me very much, my grandmother especially. My grandmother was always afraid that my father, someday, would take me to China or somewhere, or to live with him. Of course she would not like that, and she always used to scare me. She said, "Don't go so close to your father, because the Chinese kill people and eat them." I was so scared. In her own way, she didn't want me to leave her, so she did not want me to be so close to my father.

Once in a while my father would come to visit us, and always brought some fruit. I was always a little bit scared, and then I ran away because I thought somehow maybe he was going to kill me. [laughs] That's what my grandmother told me. And also she always told me that the *diablo* always had a lot of gold in his mouth. So whenever I saw somebody with gold in their mouth, I thought they were the devil. When you are small, you believe and remember things like that.



Mrs. Melchora Burgos, maternal  
grandmother of Isabel Wong-Vargas,  
1940.



My cousin Ines went to Chepén to school, and I always followed her. I met some girls there. And I remember a cousin, Alberto; I didn't know he was a cousin at that time, but later on I learned he was. He was very nice, Alberto Wong. He died a few years ago. According to my auntie, Alberto once in a while came to visit us also.

### Trip to Lima

Wong-Vargas: In 1931, close to Christmas, my father said, "Let's go to Lima." At that time going to Lima was like going from Peru to the United States--"Ahh, Lima." From Chepén to Lima at that time was very difficult. It was not like now, with the Pan-American highway. I think you had to drive to Pacasmayo and then take some old boat to Callao, and then the tramcar to Lima. I remember the trip a little bit.

Nathan: Did you have a car?

Wong-Vargas: My father had a black car. I remember he took the three of us--my grandmother, cousin Ines, and I. He drove very close to the ocean, because they had no highways like now. We had to push, because the car was not working [laughs], but we got to Pacasmayo and went on the boat to Callao, and then to Lima. I don't remember how long it took, but it was a small boat. When we got to Lima we lived in my father's friend's house. His daughter is still alive in Peru. It was a big house with a garden, and my grandmother, my cousin Ines, and I were three of us in a room. I remember he had two girls about Ines' age. They talked and played with Ines. I still remember something of that trip, even though so many years have passed.

The next day my father took us shopping with a gentleman, last name Chang, his friend.

Nathan: Were you speaking Spanish all this time?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. No Chinese at all. Not even one word.

So they took me shopping, and I remember my father bought me a little doll. I thought it was so big, but I think it was small like this [demonstrates]. And then he bought something for my cousin Ines. We were very happy that night.

Abduction

Wong-Vargas: The next day my father said, "Let's go shopping again." We did, again with Mr. Chang. In Lima there is a *plazuela* that they call Plaza Italia. It is a kind of a square, and on one side is a school called Corazon de Jesus (Sacred Heart), a boarding school for girls only. We went in, and I didn't know it was a school. But my cousin Ines was shaking her head, because this was not shopping. On the right hand side was a small window with information, and on the front side it was all wood with doors that you could open and close. We looked around there, and all of a sudden [gestures]--

Nathan: They grabbed you?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. A man grabbed me from behind, pulled me through one of the doors, and covered my mouth to keep me from screaming. [voice trembling]

Nathan: Was your grandmother with you?

Wong-Vargas: Outside, at the information corner. The door closed, and I could only hear that she and Ines were crying and calling my name, like I was dying, you know, because I was screaming. My grandmother used to call me Chabelita--little Chabel (little Isabel). She cried and called me. Little by little I couldn't hear their voices any more because I was being taken further and further away to the second floor. [very emotional] Now that I am older, I think my father was very cruel. He shouldn't have done that. I was too young.

The man left me on the second floor. There were a few women there. In Chepén there were no stairs, never; I had never even seen one. I tried to escape to go find my grandmother, and I fell because I didn't even know how to go down the stairs. So I couldn't even walk, but wasn't very hurt. In a few days I was okay, but I cried every day.

Nathan: Did anybody explain to you what was happening?

Wong-Vargas: No. And then I thought they were going to kill me, because I remembered what my grandmother had told me. I hadn't seen my father since that first day, only girls older than I. They came to play and looked at me very strangely because I kept crying. They were bigger than I; I was the smallest there. I remember that after about a week Mr. Chang came to visit me

and gave me a lot of fruit. But the girls--whoosh, they took everything away.

Every week he would bring me a basket of fruit, and maybe the girls would leave me one thing--one orange or one banana. I slept in the same room with a girl named Rosa, who was much bigger than I. (She was very beautiful. I wonder where she is now?) I wasn't even studying, just living there. Then I would go to classes with the girls, and I didn't even know what they were studying because I was much younger than they were.

### Father's Plan

Wong-Vargas: My father's idea was for me to stay there a couple of months and then take me to China. Later on I knew that. He didn't want me to study in Lima, no. So approximately two months later he came, and of course I saw him. He said, "I had to take your grandmother home, because I want you to study in Lima." He lied to me and said, "Now, I know you don't like to stay here, so I will take you back to your grandmother again. What would you like to buy for her?" I was so happy. Finally I could see my grandmother and Ines. I remembered that Ines was learning to skate, so I said I wanted to buy her some skates. My grandmother always used a very long, black veil, so I wanted to buy that for her. Those were the two things I had in mind, so my father said we would go buy them tomorrow. He bought them.

That day I was so happy. At school they had a dog, always in chains, and we weren't supposed to get close to him. I was so happy that I went to hug the dog, and he bit me. I still have the scar on my right arm. Then I must have passed out, and later on I remember the doctor came. I remember the smell of soap [carbolic]. I still have a very strong memory (*profundo de hondo*) of that.

I had to wait maybe less than a month, then, to go see my grandmother. My father came and said that now was the time to go. I was very happy with the things we had bought. We took a huge boat, much bigger than the one that came to Lima, and my stepmother, Augusta, and Susana were along.

After my mother died, my father wanted to marry another Peruvian lady. Her name was also Rosa. She was a very beautiful lady. I had seen her at the time I was still in

Lurifico. My father one time brought her with him to visit us--my auntie, my grandmother, and everybody. So I remember her quite clearly. I suppose she's still alive. I'd like to see her. I don't think Rosa liked my father that much, and she had another boyfriend. Finally she was going to marry another man, and my father was very upset.

My third uncle went to Peru; he was the only one who went to Peru to visit my father. He went two times, one time when he met my mother, and the second time when he met Rosa. He told me later on, "I met your mother. She was a very nice lady." But he didn't like Rosa, the second one.

### Summoning Ah Sham

Wong-Vargas: My father said, "Okay, Rosa's going to marry someone else. Then bring my first wife to Peru." He asked my uncle to bring my Ah Sham--that's what I call her; it means auntie, it means mother. Because in China, when a woman has a few children who keep dying, they don't want the next child to call her "mother." They call her "Ah Sham" instead, because, in the Chinese way, they think, "Maybe I can't have children who call me mother, so just call me 'Ah Sham'," which means mother also.

So my father wanted Ah Sham to come to Peru. My third uncle said okay and went back to China. He was supposed to bring Ah Sham to Peru. She was at that time less than thirty years old; she was young. Since she was poor, as I said earlier, nobody liked her. My father always remembered her and sent her things like little gold souvenirs, a Peruvian wool blanket, etc.

Nathan: Did he send her money, too?

Wong-Vargas: No, no money, because we had a lot of land there. Also, everybody had to share; they always divided.

##

Wong-Vargas: She was supposed to have some land, but they never gave it to her. Oh, yes, Ah Sham is the person I really admire. Someday I would like to write something about her.

Nathan: Can you tell me a little more about her?



Wong-Vargas: They never gave her anything at all since my father left China. So my third uncle thought that if she went to Peru, she would tell him that she had nothing and had never received anything from Peru. If she wanted a small case of matches, she had to ask, "May I have this?" Yes, really. I was there at the time, and of course later on, so I believe her.

### Lies, and a Substitute

Wong-Vargas: My uncles, especially number three, thought she would tell my father everything. So they lied to her. My uncle said, "You are very old; you cannot go to Peru," less than thirty years old. "You would have to be young, less than twenty; otherwise, Peru cannot let you into the country." My Ah Sham never went to school, so she didn't know how to read and write, and she was poor, so she believed him.

She said, "In that case, I have a cousin who is less than twenty years old who has just been sold to somebody else as a domestic worker." When you are poor in China, you are sold to somebody who is rich. I used to know the name of this rich person, because Ah Sham always used to mention the name when I was in China. She said, "Let me go talk to her, and maybe I can buy her back and then send her to Peru to marry my husband." Can you imagine? The Chinese way was like that at that time. But also she was very, very generous. She was not like others. My third auntie was very jealous. All of them were, but the third one was terribly jealous.

So Ah Sham went to talk to her cousin's father first. Of course he would say yes. My Ah Sham promised to pay back the money little by little, and they said okay. So Ah Sham bought her cousin back. She was not a second cousin, but maybe a third cousin. But in China they are close--the same last name, Kcon.

Nobody gave Ah Sham money, so this is how she got the money to buy back her cousin. In China there is a lot of sickness, like malnutrition and stomach upset, that they call *san chuck*. Ah Sham knew how to cure it with a white paper--something we call *ten sam*--that is very thin, like a little match cord (wick). You soak it with oil, light it up, and burn the right spot. She knew how to find the spots and where to burn them, and then she would cure. That sickness,

then, would not go further. It's very interesting. She wanted to teach me, but I was scared, and I didn't want to learn. That was my mistake. I should have learned something.

So she earned some money from that healing, and with that money, she told me later, she bought her cousin back. Ah Sham also had one gold bracelet, a pair of earrings, and a ring. She gave them all to her cousin, and also some clothing: underwear and other things. And she said, "You go to Peru and marry my husband, and then three years later come back and bring my husband back." Of course, at that time the cousin said yes, and so she sent her. (That's the one who is my stepmother Augusta.) So my number three uncle sent her to Peru. My father didn't like her at all, but then Rosa was getting married, and he thought, "Well--."

### Boat to China

Wong-Vargas: When we went to the boat in Peru, my stepmother Augusta had a daughter with her; that's Susana, my stepsister. She was just a baby, about two years old.

The four of us went to the boat, my stepmother carrying Susana. When we were on the boat, I remember I stayed with my father, because the only one I knew was him. So I slept in the same bed with him, and my stepmother slept with her daughter in the same big room on the boat.

I asked my father why we hadn't arrived yet, because it had been a long time, and he said it was because there was something wrong with the boat, that we were still in Lima. But I said no, I could see we were moving. Later on he said, "You were very clever when you were young." Then we were suddenly moving like we were really going.

He had my stepmother talk to me. My stepmother said, "Oh, why don't we go to China? China is very close, and when you get to China you can buy more things for your grandmother." I thought, "Well--" and she said, "Because I would like to go there shopping for things that we don't have here." So I said all right, but how long would it be? She said, "Oh, not very long," so we would go there. Otherwise I would have cried, you know. When I said all right, they were a little bit relieved, I think.

But it wasn't very long before Susana got sick--a cough. That kind of cough was contagious, so the ship wanted her to go to a hospital on the boat. This was in a separate room up on a higher deck. But my stepmother was frightened, and she wanted me to go with her. I had to go with her, and my father could not say anything; so I had to accompany her and Susana up there. I remember thinking at the time, "Why should I go when I am not sick?" My stepmother was mean; she didn't want me to be down there with my father or to have any fun. Upstairs everything was locked, and I couldn't get out. I always looked out the window, and I could see kids playing around and swimming. I was so upset. I kept saying, "Why me? I'm not sick."

Anyway, we landed at so many places, but I remember London. At that time I think the trip took over a month on that kind of boat. I remember London because my father mentioned it later (of course, at that time I didn't know it was London). Then we arrived at Hong Kong, and then Canton. We were in Canton about two weeks at some house. My father's family all lived in the village in Mausan. Or maybe he rented the house, but it was for a very short time. From there we went to Mausan, to the village, for two weeks or twenty days--something less than a month. My father wanted to go back to Peru; he had to go back to Peru. In other words, he only came to take us to China.

Susana's mother was carrying another baby, so she could not go back; she stayed there. I remember that month in China was my sixth birthday. So when I left Peru I was about five. It was April in China, but May here in Peru. I was born in Peru in May, but in China somehow it was April.

#### Wanting to Go to Peru, but Staying in China

Wong-Vargas: At that time there was a lot of lichee fruit, beautiful, delicious fruit, and I loved it. I remember quite well that I wanted to go with my father, and he said, "If you go to Peru there won't be any lichee." I said I liked lichee, and he said, "Why don't you stay a little bit longer, and then I'll come back and take you back." You know, as a child you just believe it.

My father's family--well, it belonged to my father, too--had a huge, beautiful lichee farm. I don't know how

many hundreds of trees--so many. Of course, later on the Communists took over the whole thing.

Nathan: Your father never really told you what--

Wong-Vargas: No, no. He just left me there with my stepmother. I remember my father saying, "That Ah Sham, never be close to her; don't go with her, because she's a very bad person. She steals things and is very bad. Don't go close to her." I remembered that, but she was not living with us; she was living in Mausan, and we were living in Kung Wuo City.

### Family Businesses

Wong-Vargas: My uncles and my father had a huge store selling things like rice, oil, liquor, and beans, but no meat. It was also wholesale, a huge business. The name of the store was Si Fung, which meant "always prosperous," or something like that, and "always full."

We also had the rice mill there, so it was like a block--huge. My uncles always worked together. They never divided, so it belonged to the four of them--second uncle, third uncle, fourth uncle, and my father. But they never gave anything to my Ah Sham, never. Later on I learned they were, oh, so mean.

So my father told me not to get close to Ah Sham. She was living in Mausan, because we had a house there. She lived there all by herself, and the rest--second, third, fourth aunties--lived at Si Fung in Kung Wuo City. And me, too. Si Fung was here [demonstrates], and we lived on the other side. It was quite nice.

Nathan: After your Ah Sham gave her jewelry to the cousin, then did she get any more property?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Little by little she saved something, and she bought another set. Later on she gave it to me. Oh, she was so nice.

Ah Sham, Rumors, and a Gold Watch

Wong-Vargas: When my father went back to China with me, of course he wanted to talk with Ah Sham. But the cousin, my stepmother Augusta, was so jealous that she didn't want him to speak with her cousin. Without Ah Sham she never would have gone to Peru and never married him. It's a long story. My second uncle had two wives. One is the one with small feet because she was rich, and the second one was poor. She is still alive; she is in Peru. My third uncle had only one wife, because the wife was very jealous. The fourth uncle also had only one wife.

The second wife of my second uncle was mean. She was exactly like my stepmother, and more or less the same age--maybe a little older. Both of them lied to my father.

My father bought me a watch that was supposed to be gold (I don't know, because I've never seen it again). He gave it to me, and when I got to Mausan I lost the watch. (I call the second wife of my second uncle Sai Pac. Pac means "aunt" or "uncle," and Sai means "small". Sai Pac told my father that she saw my Ah Sham's sister wearing my watch. That meant that my Ah Sham had stolen my watch and given it to her sister. Do you think if she had done that, she would let her wear it for everyone to see? I don't know how my father could have been so foolish as to believe that.

But he said, "Ah Sham stole your watch, so don't be close to her." Sai Pac also told my father that she saw my Ah Sham make love with somebody else. How could she have seen? Where? But my father believed that, too, and never wanted to speak to her again--never. He ignored her completely, and Ah Sham only cried, poor thing. Poor Ah Sham.

My Ah Sham gave birth to a girl, but she died, and then another girl who died. That was before my father left for Peru the first time. So she had no children. Everybody looked on her as a slave; she only worked. She said, "I'm going to work, so that will belong to my husband." That was the only thing; she didn't care what anybody said. Later on when I learned these things I was so upset, because she was so nice. She didn't even know how to read or write, so she had to go to a gentleman to write a letter for her.

You know who stole my watch? Sai Pac's son, my cousin. His name is David. He was the one. He stole my watch and

sold it to my third uncle's friend. It was a small village. My uncle told me later on, "I know it was not Ah Sham who stole the watch; it was David," Sai Pac's son.

### Five Nephews to Peru

Wong-Vargas: I told you my second uncle had two wives. One wife had one son, and the other wife had one son. Both sons went to Peru, because my father took them. I guess it was because my uncles all worked together in China, and everything was supposed to be divided in fourths. My father took all the nephews to Peru--my number two uncle's two sons, number three uncle's one son, and number four uncle's two sons. He took five of them to Peru and gave them shares, like in China.

Nathan: Do you know why he wanted to bring them to Peru?

Wong-Vargas: Maybe because he needed help. He was kind, and I think he promised my uncle, "I will help you." The uncles were too old, so he brought their sons. He wanted to unite the family and send the money to China. My father sent money to buy huge land. He thought everybody lived forever, and you need a lot, but it doesn't work that way.

I think in a different way. I like families to be united; but to live together, I don't believe in that, because everybody has different tastes and ways of living. I have five children, and I love all five of them. But I don't think I'd like to live with them. I'd like to live closer, yes. Together is difficult. Eating, for example--maybe I like to eat soup, and they like to eat rice or bread. You cannot live together [laughs].

That's what my father thought, but my second and third cousins (we also number the cousins) in Peru would not unite together. Little by little they were fighting, and finally they divided; each one had his own way to do it. At the beginning my father wanted everybody working with him--everything divided one-fourth, one-fourth--but it didn't work that way. My father's children were small, and the others said it was not fair to work for him. So they separated.

Nathan: Did you have time to play?

Wong-Vargas: Play? Never. The doll that my father bought me? I never saw it again. I think my stepmother hid it somewhere.

Nathan: Were they allowing you to go to school?

Wong-Vargas: No. They were very strict, and that's not like them. I have two cousins. One is much older--ten or twelve years older--and she was very mean. (She is still alive.) She had a few friends the same age, and they all came like they wanted to kill me or something. Oh, and I was so scared of cousin number four, my third uncle's daughter. Her name is Chen Go. I call her Sei Cache, which means "number four cousin." She was very mean. You could tell by looking at her face that she was mean, jealous; she looked like she wanted to kill me.

#### Aunties in the Same House

Wong-Vargas: I remember so many times, because I always cried. I was not living with Ah Sham; if I had been living with Ah Sham it would have been different. I was with number two, number three, number four, and my stepmother, and the other number two--all the aunties together in the same house.

Nathan: Were there any servants?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, they had servants. Number two uncle had only two sons, one from the first wife and one from the second wife. Number three uncle had two sons and two daughters. The oldest son was married a month and died, so the daughter-in-law was living with them. (She's still alive in Canton now. Tai Ka Sou, I call her). Tai Ka Sou was the first cousin's wife. The other son, my father took to Peru. So in China would be only Tai Ka Sou, the widow, and two cousins. The oldest cousin married, so she wasn't living there. But the second cousin--the number four cousin who was mean--lived with them.

As I said, fourth uncle had two sons. One is Alberto, who is very nice, and one is Juan. My father also took them to Peru. And my father, of course was there for a time. So we were mostly women there.

When we first arrived in Mausan [from Peru], Tai Ka Sou was there. In China, she was not supposed to marry again, the poor thing. Then she bought a daughter, my niece. Her name is Yuc Jou. She's in Canton, and we always correspond.

She is nice. Later they bought somebody to do housework, but Yuc Jou was bought to be a daughter, which is different. They treat her differently. Unfortunately, it's like that.

**School: Discipline and Memorizing**

Wong-Vargas: They treat me very strangely, because I'm different. You know, my mother was Peruvian. Here in the United States, maybe I look Chinese, but in China I am so different from them--like the color of my eyes. My cousin Sei Cache, the one who was mean, could go to school. I wanted to go to school, but they didn't allow me to. They said, "You know nothing; you wouldn't understand."

What kind of school did they have? Not like schools here. The teacher was a very old man whom we called Sam Kung who taught only Chinese--to read Chinese. He had big piece of wood, and if somebody talked--bam--he hit them. So everybody was quiet; nobody wanted to say anything because of the wood--bam. That person had to pick up the wood and bring it back to him. Now I know how they read in the university, but not at the elementary school.

He taught like this: You were taught to memorize the book, but you didn't know anything about the book. He explained it to you, of course. Maybe they do understand what they read, because they were much older than I and pure Chinese, but I don't think they understood, either, because it was so difficult.

I could not go to school, but my cousin liked to play, and she said, "Okay, you go with me and sit at my desk." So I went with her and sat there. I just listened, and I knew nothing about what the teacher was saying. But little by little I just learned how to memorize and write. Neither my uncles nor my cousin had books. Well, maybe my cousin did have books to write in. Any papers I could find, I tried to write, because I liked to write. My handwriting is supposed to be good, because I love to write.

Nathan: Calligraphy?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. So I learned from him for a couple of years, I think. Then one day my auntie came to school to find her daughter, and she was not there. "How come you are here?" So she found out. I asked her to please let me go there.



Nathan: Were there boys and girls at the school?

Wong-Vargas: Very few girls. They were mostly all boys. The girls were my cousin and one more, and myself, of course.

So they knew that I liked to study. My cousin said, "You can sit in my place, but you have to do things for me." So I had to help her with her clothing--everything she asked me to do, like her maid. I did it, because otherwise she wouldn't let me go with her.

### Long Eyelashes##

Wong-Vargas: My cousin, maybe she was mean because I looked different--the color of my eyes, and my eyelashes being very long. She said, "I should cut all your eyelashes." I said, "Why should you do that?" She said, "Because when they are long, it means you are lazy"--according to her. Another girl in the village, whom I also called cousin, held my neck, and Sei Cache cut all my eyelashes with scissors. I was so scared I couldn't move. Afterwards I couldn't see because of inflammation; it was all white, like an infection. I couldn't even open my eyes.

I didn't know what to do, but, really, God helped me. We make tea, and the tea leaves are always thrown away in a box or something. I went directly to the box there and picked up some tea leaves and put them on my eyes, just like cotton. It was such a relief. Then I washed my eyes with some tea that had been thrown away in a can.

Nathan: You understood to do that by yourself?

Wong-Vargas: God helped me, because I have no idea how I knew to do that. I felt so relieved that I kept doing it. Nobody told me how to do anything at all. I did this at least three times altogether, but not every day. Then my eyelashes were more or less all right again--they grew out a little bit. And again she cut my lashes. She did this two or three times. I was scared whenever I saw her. I thought, "What happens if she cuts my whole eye?" Oh, they were so mean.

I was living close to Mausan at the shop of my uncles in Kung Wuo City. The store was here [demonstrates], and we lived over here on the other side, and there was a little

bridge. We lived close to Mausan, but not in Mausan. Ah Sham lived in Mausan. Kung Wuo City was like a small city, where people go to shop and buy food. I only lived in Mausan a very short time.

### Working in the Rice Fields

Nathan: Did you ever work in the store?

Wong-Vargas: Not in the store, but in the rice fields, yes. I would go with my cousin, but she would only play around--just pretend that she was working. Sometimes we went every day, and sometimes not; it all depended on what they needed, because they had the different seasons. For example, in the rainy season all of a sudden they have to go to cut the rice. There are two seasons: wet and not wet. The rainy season is the wet season. You just hold a bunch of the plants and cut like this [demonstrates] with a knife, and then put them to one side. I followed the workers.

I worked, because I enjoyed doing it, but my cousins, no. They just went off with other girls. But I liked to do it, and I learned a lot. When it's wet there are some rice worms. They don't bite, but there are other black worms, leeches, that bite. You always have salt with you when you work during the rainy season. If you put the leeches in the salt, they die.

One time I got an infection, and it didn't go away. I didn't know what to do. Again, God helped me. I just put some dirt on it and rubbed it in, and little by little it was okay. It was so itchy, so the only way to treat it was with salt or with dirt.

### Fever

Nathan: Your instinct was right.

Wong-Vargas: God helped me, because nobody told me to do this or do that. They only told me things that would harm me, except when I was sick. A couple of times I had a very high fever. My

auntie said, "Don't give her anything. Just rest and drink water." I got hungry, you know?

There were lots of fruit trees--lichee, of course, and peaches--close to my room, and they said, "Don't eat those, because they will harm you. If you eat those, you will have a lot of spots on your face." So they gave me nothing to eat, and I was so hungry. Nobody even gave me water. I had to walk to get water. It's not like here, where you have so many things. Over there you have to find something that you can store water in; it was very difficult. So I had no choice, and I ate the fruit--if I died, I died; if there were spots on my face, what could I do? I was so hungry. I was scared my auntie would find out, so I threw the pits away. They might have punished me.

I was so hungry, and nobody really cared if I died, if I was still there or not. That's what it was like when I was small. Nobody came over to see me. Ah Sham was far away, and the others couldn't care less. Really, I am so surprised that I am still alive, because there were so many opportunities to get sick. You're sick? Go rest; that's it, even with fever.

One time I had a toothache, and there was no dentist. What did they do? There were people who collected teeth and wore them like a necklace. You would know those people were dentists, and you would call one. One time Ah Sham happened to come to visit, and this man came and--whoosh--just pulled the tooth out like that. No anesthesia or anything. Then he said, "Just bite something," like a little cloth. Ah Sham said, "Not that," because they gave me any old piece of cloth. I remember Ah Sham washed some white cloth and said, "You bite this. But don't move. Just hold it at least two hours." Otherwise, if I moved, again the blood would come. Since then, if my teeth hurt I never said anything, because they would just pull it out with nothing.

Oh, when you are sick over there, there are no doctors close by at all. If you want to go to a doctor, you have to walk at least an hour and a half to get to the hospital. Walk, or hire somebody to take you there if you are really sick. But you could die, because when you get there, it may be too late.

Wanting to be a Doctor

Wong-Vargas: When I was small, I said I would like to be a doctor, to come back and help them, so people wouldn't have to walk that far. That was my idea at that moment when I was sick. There was no doctor, and people died just like that. No, it was really primitive. It was quite long ago, but it's not that long. I suppose the villages everywhere didn't have that facility.

Since the Communists took over, they confiscated some land and made a very nice highway so you can drive a car. From Mausan you could go to Kung Wuo City. Before, no. You could only bicycle, because everybody had their land, and nobody dared to confiscate it, only the Communists. The Communists did a lot of things for China, like roads.

In my time they didn't allow a woman to study: "What for?" My uncle always said, "What for?" When they got to that age, they just got married; that was it. The boys, yes, they had to study because they had to do business. But since the Communists took over, they said everybody had to study. That's a very good way for a woman, especially in a village. Since the Communists took over, mostly everybody studies--man, woman, boy, girl; they are all the same.

Modern Teacher

Wong-Vargas: Later on I think the whole group hired a teacher to teach in Kung Wuo City. But this teacher was a little more up-to-date, not like the old man who threw his wood at the students. The old man taught from very old books, and it was very hard to understand. But the modern teacher, Mr. Lai, taught with new books that were easy to understand and easy to learn. He also taught some arithmetic. My cousin wanted to go to study there because it was like a school, not like the old man. Besides, the men could play ball--mostly for men; for women, maybe.

Very soon we were going to leave Kung Wuo City. I would never ask my uncle, because he was so much like a king; but I asked his wife, the jealous one--auntie number three--"Please, I would like to study with your daughter. I am good to her; whatever she asks me to do, I do it for her." She said, "Okay, you can go with Sei Cache." So I was able to go with her; they let me. Then I had my seat, and she had

her seat; but she always played anyway. You couldn't sit wherever you wanted to; you had your seat, and that was your seat.

### Liking to Sew and Create

Wong-Vargas: This time last year I went to Germany. I have a friend (her name is Alicia) who calls me "auntie" but was not my niece. She is just like my niece, just like my daughter, because she was living with me in Peru when she went to high school. She also came to visit me when she was attending college here. We get along very well. This time I went to visit her. Her daughter is only six years old. She can sew a skirt, she can cook. They live in Germany. Her mother works, and she learned that she would have to do things herself; she likes to sew. My niece also has a son older than her daughter.

I also liked to sew at that age. My auntie--the second wife of my second uncle--had a machine, and I always tried to sew. They never taught me how to do it, never. I'd sit there and watch how she did it, and when she left I tried to do it myself. I remember one time I broke her needle, and I didn't dare say I had done it. [laughs] She said, "Who--?" I was so scared, because I thought she would hit me. From then on I didn't want to do it anymore. But I loved to sew, and I still love to sew.

I also liked to do art things. Small cities in China, like Kung Wuo City, would have little events with another small city during the year. Sam Pac, the number three auntie, said she would take me there with her daughter--the one who was mean to me. Oh, I was so happy, because it was only once a year. I think it was perhaps July, because they had those kinds of art things, flowers, that you had to make beautiful; and then you carried it home, and you put some perfume, like roses, inside. It was kind of nice, and colorful. I was so happy to go with the girls that liked to wear that.

Then for some reason the wife of my second uncle exchanged words with this auntie; they both fought. Then Sai Pac, the second wife of my second uncle, said, "You cannot go." Because they both fought, they didn't let me go? I was crying because she didn't let me go with third auntie. You see, when they fought, I was just like a ball, here to there. I was always scared and didn't want them to fight, because

when they fought I was the one who suffered; you knew that. But then I was there just like a slave, not like a daughter, no.

So I said to myself, "Someday I have to be somebody." Also because I'm like that. I'd like to do something, be a doctor. "Someday I want to be somebody," because they say, "Oh no, they are foreigners; they are lazy, they are nothing." So I wanted to be somebody some day, and I wanted to show them that I was not like they thought I was. The foreign people, they are nice, they are good, but not like the Chinese.

So I couldn't go, and my cousin came back with those beautiful things. I said, "Please let me see," and she said, "No, that's mine." She wouldn't let me see it, and I was dying to see it. I wanted to see how it was made. One day she turned around and I saw it. It was so beautiful, with so many colors. I said, "Do you know how to do it?" She said, "Of course. I learned already." "May I--?" She said no, and I wasn't even to touch it.

One day she went out, and I went into her room and looked around. I like to learn, you know? I took apart the whole thing [laughs and gestures], and I remembered how. Then little by little I put it back.

Nathan: It was like a rosette?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. It was so beautiful. I still had another thing to learn, so I put some paper and cotton [twine] and did the same thing, but big like this [demonstrates]. I remembered how to do it, and I did the same thing and showed her. She said, "Where did you get this?" I said I did it myself. She was thinking, "How?" Because she didn't know that I took apart the whole thing and learned it. She thought maybe I had just looked at it and had learned. (But that was not it; I had to take the whole thing apart.)

I like to learn those things. When I see something, I like to try to do it, and I think I can do it. God gave that to me; it really is a gift, and thank God I can do it. Of course, she should have shown me, but she did not. The only way I could do it was to go in and look. Without asking is not good, but anyway, over there we didn't lock the door; the door had no lock at that time. And I knew that she was not there. [laughs] Otherwise I couldn't learn.

Nathan: Do you do any art now?

Wong-Vargas: I love it, yes. I love to paint, but I didn't have time to learn. I can write in Chinese very well, and I think I can paint in Chinese better than I can in other ways, but I'd love to learn oil painting someday--the technique. I learned how to paint with charcoal and also how to paint in water color when I went to an interior design course. I had painting classes, flower arrangement classes. I really liked to learn so many things.

Nathan: I see. By this time in your story you were about ten?

Wong-Vargas: Yes.

Nathan: Were you aware of World War II?

Wong-Vargas: No, not yet. I had my own small war to survive. Mr. Lai, the teacher, was always much more concerned about me. I had a different face from the others. At that time my cousin, David--the one who stole my watch--was in Peru. He came back to get married in China, and he was very nice to me--well, better than the others and my cousins, who were so jealous. They would say to their mothers, "I don't know why David is so nice to Isabel," and blah, blah, blah. I don't know, perhaps it was because David lived in Peru. He saw so many Peruvians in Peru, and then he saw me there in China. Of course, it was a little bit sad, because I had no parents with me, and my stepmother went back to Peru, and she left Susana. That's why Susana was with me.

Susana, Rosalia, Ah Sham

Wong-Vargas: They liked Susana. Oh, they treated her like a princess, because her mother was still alive in Peru and could come back. But with me it was different. Chinese people are very racist. I had mixed blood, and was almost an orphan. Susana was nice to me, and I took care of her, too. She saw me suffer sometimes. They would give her something, like an egg, and they wouldn't give me any. I thought it was fine, as long as they gave it to Susana. Susana was okay. She would ask me sometimes if I would like some, but I would say, "No, I don't like eggs."

Another cousin, Rafael, came back to China from Peru to get married and took the wife, Rosalia, to Peru, and the daughter stayed in China. Her name is Rosalia, too. She lives in Sacramento right now. She is my second uncle's

granddaughter. They treated her okay. My second uncle treated her just like a princess also. Susana was a little bit older than Rosalia. They both followed me because I was older than they were. I always took care of them because they had mothers in Peru. Of course, my mother died, which was different.

Little by little I learned about Ah Sham, because I saw her a little more often. She came to visit, and I liked her. I said to myself, "How come they said she's like this and like that, but she's so nice?" She didn't sweet-talk people. She'd say, "That's wrong," or something like that. "You shouldn't do that." Or she'd say, "It's cold; you should put your coat on." You knew that she liked you, because she cared about you. I knew that when she said, "You should eat; otherwise you will die," that she wasn't sweet-talking but saying something that was really true. So I liked her because she was like that.

Little by little the people were talking about the Japanese coming and war starting. Then Ah Sham moved to live with us at that time, so I had more time with her. I liked it. She proceeded to work just like a slave. The second, third, and fourth aunties didn't work, and their feet were small, also. But Ah Sham did a lot of work, and she never complained. She always did whatever was asked of her: "You should do this" and "You should do that."

She loved Susana exactly as she loved me, exactly the same. Little by little she told me about Susana's mother, and then somebody else also told me. She said, "I gave Susana's mother a gold bracelet, and also earrings. Of course, I didn't have a chance to meet your mother, but I will give the jewelry to you." She said she would give it to me later, but to remember that it belonged to me. I said, "No, Ah Sham, it's yours." She said, "No, someday I'll give it to you. But Susana, no, because I already gave it to her mother." Susana would love her so much, because she would say what she felt, which means love.



## II WORLD WAR II

Red Sky Over Canton

Wong-Vargas: It was close to the Second World War, and all of a sudden one night it was like New Year's Eve, you know. I thought it was fireworks, but it was not; it was the war starting. You could see it; it was at Canton. The sky was red, and there was boom! boom! boom! I remember it quite well. People said, "Be careful, because it's the start of the war," and I didn't know what the war was. I wasn't scared at all.

Then my uncle number three said we had to escape because the Japanese were coming, and the only things they wanted were girls and food and money and things like that. My father's family was well known in that village, so we had to escape. My cousin David was still there with his wife, and other cousins were there, too.

[Interview 2: March 21, 1989]##

Nathan: You had said that you wanted to "be somebody," and that you were sort of aware of World War II?

Wong-Vargas: Let me start at the beginning, with the Japanese in Canton. We were in Kung Wuo City with my aunts and uncles and everybody, and then all of a sudden one night I saw all over what looked like fireworks. It was far away, of course, because it was in Canton where the Japanese had arrived. We were so far away, and yet we could see it. It looked like the sunset, but with the sounds of war. You could see and hear it from far away, hear cannons.

Walking to Sei Wuey and Back

Nathan: Did your family and friends talk about this?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, my uncles and aunts were so scared. We were all scared, but I was not as scared as they were, because they were all grown up. As I said, my uncle suggested that we had to move somewhere else--escape, because the Japanese at any time would be arriving in the city. We moved first to Siu Pow and then to Sei Wuey; we had to walk there.

My cousin David, who had come back from Peru to marry, was there with his wife, Flora; another cousin's wife, Rosalia, was there and her daughter, Rosalia also, my niece; and my second uncle's wife and his second wife. We all escaped. His first wife died in Siu Pow; she was old and sick.

Nathan: Did you have a place to go to?

Wong-Vargas: I think my uncle suggested we go visit some friends, but they were far away. We escaped with some food and some money. Of course, I didn't have anything; I just followed them. Susana, my younger sister--my stepmother's daughter who was sick on the boat--couldn't go because she was too young and they wouldn't allow it.

Nathan: How old were you?

Wong-Vargas: I was about ten or eleven.

Nathan: Still quite young.

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. Susana was about seven, so they said the youngest should stay home. So it was myself, my cousin's wife, and my uncle sent his wife. All together we went, but not everybody. Ah Sham did not go. She stayed to take care of the house and everything.

We got to Sei Wuey, and David Wong, his wife, and another cousin's wife suggested they go to Peru--from Sei Wuey to Hong Kong and then to Peru. I wanted to go, too. My nephew Alberto also went. I said, "How about me?" They really couldn't have cared less. Maybe they didn't want me to go back, because then I would tell my father how they had treated me. So they didn't let me go--only my nephew, Alberto, and the two cousins' wives. They went to Hong Kong, and then to Peru, but not me. I still don't know why. One

day I begged my second uncle to let me return home with his friend. He said, "Yes," and he taught me to use the grenade and the pistol in case of emergency.

I was so worried about my sister, Susana. I missed her so much, just like a mother worried about her daughter. Susana was back in Kung Wuo City. I like to go back and visit my sister. I don't remember how long we were in Sei Wuey; then we went back to Kung Wuo City. There were so many things that weren't there because they had been stolen and the house burned by someone or by the Japanese. During the war it was terrible, so it wasn't like before. The store, the rice mill, and everything were gone, and we just lived there where we used to fatten the pigs. There were still some rice fields, so my uncle had some business.

After we came back from our escape, my Ah Sham moved in to live with us, so I got a chance to know her a little bit better, as I said. She was a very nice lady who didn't know how to read or write, but she had a very good heart. She didn't speak with beautiful words, but she meant what she said, and she told you to do things because she loved you.

### Escape to Hong Kong

Wong-Vargas: Then my uncle said we had to leave again, somewhere. We escaped, again, to Hong Kong. We went with the second uncle. He took only me, Susana, my niece Rosalia (her mother had already left for Peru), and second uncle's second wife. We lived on the Kowloon side.

Nathan: Did the family have enough money to live in Kowloon?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. My uncle had money. He was wealthy from my grandfather's family. I think my third uncle took us, and the second uncle came later on.

Nathan: Did you expect that you would stay there?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, because they were scared of the war. Already the Japanese had taken over Canton. Maybe my uncles took some money out; I don't know.

Nathan: Did you see the Japanese soldiers?

Wong-Vargas: No. They were not yet in Hong Kong, only in Canton. In Hong Kong a friend of my third uncle, Woo Man Hin, had an apartment on the Kowloon side. He also had a home somewhere, but we stayed in his apartment. He gave us a room to live in. Susana, Rosalia, myself, and Sai Pac stayed together. The room was very, very small, and there were four of us in one room. I don't know where my uncle was staying, maybe in some other house, or he may have gone back.

### Mr. Woo's Son

Wong-Vargas: The reason my third uncle took me there was because he wanted me to marry. Mr. Woo had two daughters and three sons. One of them was maybe twenty years old. At that time in China you could marry when you were five years old--not be married, but given away and then married later. My uncle wanted Mr. Woo's son--I don't remember his name, but he was quite tall--to marry me in the future. I didn't know this; I was just a child.

I remember quite well when that boy came and looked at me and went "Ugh," or something like that, because my hair was cut like a boy's, not feminine at all. He didn't live there, but one sister-in-law and brother lived in that apartment.

I think our room was smaller than this room we're in [small breakfast room], and just one big bed for the four of us. We had a little stove to cook on. You didn't cook in the room, but you took it to the kitchen in the next room. Then when you were through, you washed the cooking equipment and put it back. So everything was in there. I don't know why we didn't rent a little bigger apartment during the war. His friend was very generous to give us a room for quite a long time.

Nathan: Was it crowded in Kowloon at that time?

Wong-Vargas: Very crowded, yes. But not as crowded as it is now. Our room was on the third floor, and across from us was another apartment, about from here to that chair [demonstrates]. I met another girl a few years older than my age, who was very nice and had pretty hair, and she used powder. Her name was Rebecca. She lived with her parents and brothers and sisters in that apartment. We met one day when I was crying, and she saw me and asked what happened to me. She was quite close,



Isabel Wong-Vargas, Hong Kong



and then she asked, "Are you a boy or are you a girl?"  
[laughs] Even if I'd had money, I wouldn't have used makeup,  
because I like to be natural.

We talked about how I had come from Mausan and other kid  
stuff, and she asked me to come and visit her. I said,  
"Thank you," but I didn't dare go to her house because I  
didn't think my auntie would allow it. So I just stayed  
there and talked with her.

One day Mr. Woo's son came and gave me his coat and  
demanded, "Hang up my coat." He treated me like a maid. I  
was very polite and hung up his coat. He was young and  
spoiled. Then one day he came with a girlfriend--maybe a  
school friend. Again he demanded that I hang up his coat, as  
if I were a maid. I was living there, and I hung up his  
coat, because it didn't matter. Later on my aunties told me  
that my uncle would like me to marry him. After that, no  
way. When I saw him, I just escaped; I didn't want to hang  
up his coat. And of course he didn't like me, to treat me  
like that.

But he was very polite to my friend Rebecca. He would  
say, "Hi," "Hello," and they would talk. She was older than  
I, maybe fourteen. I was only ten, and they were talking of  
marriage. But in China it was like that. Even at two years  
old, they say, "Okay, you marry her in the future." That's  
it. Sometimes even the girl has to live with them.

Nathan: In her prospective husband's house?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. In China they have so many cases like that.

Nathan: Still?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, no. After the Communists took over, never again. But at  
that time, yes. I think my uncle wanted to get rid of me.  
Or maybe he felt it was much better that way; I would live  
there and belong to the Woos, and he wouldn't have to worry  
about me.

#### Rebecca, and Chi Yung Middle School

Wong-Vargas: Rebecca asked what school I went to, and I said none; I had  
just come from Mausan. I told her I would like to go to

school, and she said she knew a very good school around there, the Chi Yung Middle School. They had elementary and high school.

Nathan: Could you go?

Wong-Vargas: I never went to elementary school. When I was smaller I learned how to read and write, and it was all together maybe three years. How could I go to high school? In China at that time, if you wanted to go to high school--starting with the eighth grade--you didn't have to have the background of the earlier grades. You had to read and write, and they gave you a subject for an exam. On the written exam you could write whatever you felt like.

I remember telling Rebecca that I would like to go to study, because I loved to study. She said she knew somebody who lived very close who was studying in the middle school. He was a boy who had almost finished high school, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. I said, "Oh, please," so we arranged to meet with this boy on the roof. Rebecca and I both had stairs from our apartments that led to the roof.

She introduced me to this boy, and he gave me the address of Chi Yung Middle School. I don't remember his name, but he was a little bit heavysset. I only saw him a couple of times. He explained to me that if I wanted to go, I had to go to such-and-such an address. The boys' section of the school was in a different location from the girls' section.

So I had the address, and I went with Rebecca. Rebecca was very nice, but she was very lazy. She didn't like to study; she always liked to be look nice and felt, "Why study?" She didn't have to study; her parents didn't force her to. Her father was working in a dockyard, maybe as a mechanic. Her brothers were younger than I. Her mother always liked to play mah jongg. So they didn't really care that much about children. Rebecca's older brother and her sister all married.

I asked her why she didn't study, too, and she said that she didn't like it. I think she had been to an elementary school, but she didn't want to continue. She asked me if I had been to elementary school, and I said yes. I never really had, but I knew how to read and write. I went with Rebecca--and didn't tell my aunt--to take the examination, and I had to write something. I had very good handwriting, and I passed.



Nathan: Is this with the brush and ink--calligraphy?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I passed, but I didn't have money. So I came back and told my auntie that I really wanted to study, and would she please ask my uncle. At that time third uncle had gone back, but second uncle was there, although not living with us. He came every day to visit us. It happened that a group of cousins in Peru sent some money on New Years to all the family. So they gave me ten Hong Kong dollars.

To go to this school, when they accepted you you had to pay an amount. I think it was about eight or ten dollars. So I paid, and I told my aunt and uncle I wanted to study. I don't know how my aunt talked my uncle into it, but he said, "Okay, for half a year." That was all right; I would work hard and study hard. But he didn't pay the deposit. I think it was very cheap, but maybe for that time it was a lot of money.

In the school there was a room with a lot of students, and I sat with Miss Lau Yin Ha. We are still friends; she is in Hong Kong. She was my first schoolmate in Middle School. We shared the same desk, with two chairs.

Of course, I didn't tell them my situation, nothing. I realized that I knew nothing, because just writing is nothing. They had a book about plants and animals, and I had never ever studied anything like that. Arithmetic: I knew only counting with an abacus. How to subtract: I knew how to do it on the abacus, but not how to write it. Lau Yin Ha, my friend, helped me, and I helped her with English because I already started learning English; they taught a second language. I had learned Spanish a long time ago.

Nathan: Did you remember your Spanish?

Wong-Vargas: No. But English came quickly. I had a very good memory at that time. My friend didn't know English at all, so I helped her with English homework, and she helped me with arithmetic. She helped me with so many things. I was afraid I would have to quit, because I knew so little, and it was so difficult. But little by little it was all right, and after the six months was over, I was so happy because I had very good marks. But nobody ever knew that I had never been to elementary school. Thank God I was able to study there.

In the eighth grade we had two classes, A and B. In class B, I was with my friend. In class A, I had so many

friends (some are still here in San Francisco), but we didn't see each other as often as we did in class A. Since I had gotten such good grades, I asked my uncle if I could continue studying another six months. My auntie talked with him, because I couldn't talk with him. He would have said, "Hey, quiet," and I wouldn't have been able to say it. But my auntie was his wife, so he had to listen, I think. I begged my auntie, so, okay, I was given another six months.

By then I knew so many things, because I had a very good memory; well, I still do, because I remember so many things. I just held my hand on my head like this [demonstrates] and I remembered right away. It was unbelievable.

Nathan: Did you have books also?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Books were not that expensive at that school. They would give them to you. I had a very good mind, so I didn't have to pay the next year. I had a scholarship; otherwise I could never have continued studying. My uncle would never pay for me, because he thought that was enough. He believed that girls shouldn't study. Men, yes; but women, why? They get married and have children, and that's it. It was not like it is now, and it was even worse for me because I had no mother and no parent with me. I always used to think, "Why don't I have my mother? Why is my father so far away?"

### A Laundry in Kowloon

Wong-Vargas: I was studying hard, and then we moved to Nathan Road in Kowloon after one year. I think we had stayed too long in the friend's house. We were still in Kowloon, and my uncle bought a kind of laundry. He hired somebody to run the business because he didn't know how. Inside there was a small room for my uncle, my aunt, and Rosalia, another one for Susana and me. Our room was about half the size of this room, just big enough for one single bed. It was all right, because we were small. I was about eleven or twelve.

Nathan: So you lived in this little apartment behind the laundry?

Wong-Vargas: My uncle loaned half of the laundry to the Shanghainese tailor, who had a crazy wife. Then he hired Suin Go, also from Mausan (but not a relative). He was the cashier and received the laundry. Some of the washing was done there by a hired woman, and the dry cleaning was taken somewhere else.

So there was always a lot of clothing hanging around the whole place, and ironing next door. We had a small patio that we could see from the kitchen, and there was a well where you could get water, but we never used it.

### The Best Time to Study

Wong-Vargas: We lived there, and my sister and I could continue studying at the same high school. Susana was at elementary section. I had to study very hard, and I knew that the best time to study was in the morning. They say that the best time of the year is the spring, and the best time to study is in the morning. You don't always realize it when you are young.

##

Wong-Vargas: The mind is fresh, everything is best in the morning. So I got up early in the morning. Sometimes I was so tired, because I also helped my auntie cook and do the washing; whatever I could do, I did it for her. I would always, always, take some cold water in a bucket and put it under my bed. Since I knew I would be too tired to get up early, I used this as an alarm clock. I had to get up sometimes at five o'clock in the morning to study for a test. So I put my hand in the water, and, brrr, it would wake me up. Then I would wash my face and get up and study. That's how I got up early. Otherwise, I was too tired to get up.

I studied and studied and studied, so I could always get a scholarship. I was three years in that Chinese high school. I jumped from first year to third, and I self-study. That's why my Chinese is so good.

Nathan: Was that Cantonese?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, Cantonese, and also English once a week. Afterwards I wanted to study more English. I don't know why, but I liked English very much at that time, and I changed to the American School. I knew that I had to buy more books little by little. My uncle didn't like to pay for anything.

I liked to write. I always liked to write in the school newsletter. They paid me some money to write stories. I once in a while liked to write short stories. I would ask my friend Rebecca, "What do you think about this?" She would say, "No, why not this and that?" Like kids, we'd say, "Does

he die later on?" "No, no, he will not die." So I'd write stories for the school newspaper.

Later on, I remember one time when three of us had our picture taken together. It was my friend Wong, another girl who sat on the other side--she was much taller and bigger than I, and maybe older--Lau Yin Ha, and I. I didn't know that each one had to pay, and I didn't have money. Wong said, "Now it's your turn; you have to pay." Of course, Miss Lau Yin Ha had money and could pay, but I couldn't pay. I said, "Why should I pay? I'm sorry, I don't have it." She said, "Then you shouldn't have taken your picture with us if you didn't have it." I felt so upset. They gave the picture to me, but I was so embarrassed that I tore it up. I said, "Why should I have it? Why should I need it for memory, anyway? I don't want to remember." I shouldn't have done that.

#### More English at St. Mary's High School

Wong-Vargas: I wanted to study more English, and I applied to another school in Kowloon, St. Mary's High School. I took a test and passed. They had English and Chinese. So I went there, and again I got good marks. I had no uniform, so I made it myself.

Nathan: Was this a Catholic school?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. It was American nuns. I was fourteen, and I could make a dress myself. I borrowed my friend's uniform, and I copied it exactly. Nobody taught me how to do it. I was never taught how to sew, but I made my daughter Martha's wedding dress. Not only one, I made eleven dresses for the bridesmaids and flower girls.

My uncle, of course, did not pay for anything. He never even bought me a pair of shoes. I always had my auntie ask him. I always wore tennis shoes. At that time I never wore a pair of leather shoes because they were so expensive.

One time I had no books, because the English books were much more expensive than the Chinese books. I had another friend who sat on my same carpet. She was nice, but I don't remember her as clearly as I do Miss Lau Yin Ha, who taught me arithmetic and who was much nicer. Miss Lau Yin Ha was

all Chinese, and the other friend was half Chinese and maybe half Portuguese. But she loaned me her book, and I copied it, not the whole book, but the lesson that I needed for the next week. One day I forgot, or I didn't have time, and in class I pretended I was reading. Later on she would lend it to me.

The teacher's last name was Wong, I remember, and she said to me, "Now you read." So I had to read, but I didn't have the book. I couldn't tell her that I didn't have a book. Maybe she could have helped me and given me a book, but you feel embarrassed and you can't. I just cried, and she said, "You'll have to sit down." Everybody looked at me, and I was so embarrassed. I'll never forget that time. (My children have all kinds of books.)

Sometimes I didn't even have paper to write on, no notebook. I had to walk to school. It was five cents to ride the bus, but I had to walk because my uncle wouldn't give it to me. God help me, but I never took one cent from my uncle's desk. Nobody taught me not to. I only knew that it was not mine and I shouldn't. My uncle had a lot of money, but I never took any. I thank God, that's me.

Nathan: That was within you already?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and I knew that it wasn't my money, so why should I do that?

### The Japanese Army in Hong Kong

Wong-Vargas: I graduated, and then the Japanese came. It was about December 8. They didn't have a chance to give us our diplomas because the war started. On the radio they told us not to worry, because if we heard sounds it was because they were practicing--zzzzzzzzzooom.

Nathan: Had the sirens started?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. The English in Hong Kong and on the radio all said, "Don't worry, if you hear the sounds it's only practice." That morning, very early, my friend Rebecca came to see me. I told her I would like to visit my school mate. We were not living so close anymore; it was quite a few blocks. I think it was Sunday and she was free. She said, "Let's go see--." It was not her friend but my school friend, but she knew her

also. Then we heard the sounds--zzzzzzoooom. We thought it must be practicing. I told my auntie we were going out and I would be back, and she said okay, to go ahead. We walked to my school friend's house, where she lived on the third floor. It was a much nicer neighborhood. I lived in a mainly middle class neighborhood, but hers was upper middle class.

I always rang the bell when I got there and then went up, but this time I did ring the bell, but I didn't go up. I just walked with Rebecca out on the street so we could look up at the balcony. I saw so many Japanese up there on the third floor. The Japanese looked out because I had rung the bell. I thought, "Japanese," because they had already taken over Hong Kong. I said, "Let's go back; let's go home." So we started running, and the Japanese army was coming already. A lot of Japanese were marching in the streets. Oh, my God. I still remember.

Nathan: Were they all in uniform?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, the Japanese uniform.

Nathan: Did you see any Chinese soldiers?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, no, none. Not even English; nobody was there. Only the Japanese would walk on the street like that. Everybody was, of course, at home. So I said, "Ah, it's true, then, that they are already here." That was exactly at the time of Pearl Harbor. The Japanese had come in submarines so nobody would know they had come to Hong Kong. So they were very cunning. The English couldn't do anything. Maybe they said something on the radio, but I had already left home and was walking with my friend, so I didn't hear it.

So all around there were the Japanese. You cannot imagine how we ran. Then the Japanese surrounded the two of us. They put Rebecca and me in the middle of maybe six or seven soldiers. They called us something like "Miss," or "Señorita"--"Guneon, guneon, you are beautiful." Oh, my God. I didn't know what to do. It was a good thing a car was passing by. I think it was maybe a general or something, a very high Japanese official. So they all saluted, and we went, vrrrooom! Oh, we ran and ran, back to my house. Of course, my auntie was there asking, "Where have you been?" And so the war had started. My friend Rebecca said, "See you soon," and vrrrooom, she went home also.

We didn't know what to do. Susana was there, and everybody was so scared. The only person who was laughing

was the wife of the tailor. She was a little crazy. [laughs] She just thought it was fun, you know. She was a little bit overweight but also very crazy. The Japanese knew that nobody could get out, because if they saw you they would trap you and take you to wherever they wanted. And they could take everything they wanted, and you couldn't say no, because they would kill you. Oh, the Japanese were so cruel.

My uncle had to close the laundry, and we didn't know what to do.

### Writing to Father about Medical School

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to tell you that before this, when I had almost finished high school, I wrote to my father for the first time. I had never written to him before. I said I had almost finished high school and wanted to go to medical school. I would have loved to go to medical school, so that drove me to write. I was scared that if I wrote, my father and my uncle would fight. My father would say to my uncle, "Why don't you give my daughter this and that?"

So I wrote to him and said that the only thing I liked to do was study and that he didn't have to send me any money; he had only to send it directly to the university school. I just needed food to eat and books. He wrote back to me (this was before the war) and said, "I didn't know that." He sent me twenty or thirty dollars. It was enough to buy two coats--well, the coats were cheap--and shoes. Why did I buy two? I gave one to Rebecca. Susana and Rosalia had coats because my uncle always bought for them. But for me, they didn't really care. But it didn't really matter.

My father said, "I'm sending you this money so you can buy something that you need. When you get to school, let me know and I will write to your uncle and let him know that you should study. If you want to study, it's fine with me." I was so happy. But my uncle, oh, he almost hit me. He said, "Huh. You wrote to your father." Because I wanted to study.

Nathan: He was upset that you wrote?

Wong-Vargas: Very upset. He said I should not write. I said, "But I want to study in the future." Because he would never let me study, and I couldn't have a scholarship like that to go to medical school. Maybe later on, but to get there was the

first step. Oh, he said, "You." Like this, with the finger--always the Chinese [gesture this way]. I just kept quiet. I couldn't say anything. I just explained to him that I wanted to study, so that was why I wrote. I just said what was true, that I didn't have this and that.

The coats I bought for myself and my friend were light blue. She loved light blue, so I bought two of the same thing. And I took Susana and Rosalia to eat an ice cream, because they loved ice cream. I didn't have too much money, so I didn't have any ice cream. Susana said, "Why aren't you having any?" And I said I didn't like ice cream. I couldn't say that I didn't have enough money. They still remember. Of course, later on I told them it was because I didn't have enough money.

Back again to the war--

Nathan: Where was the medical school that you wanted to attend?

Wong-Vargas: In Hong Kong.

#### Planning to Leave Hong Kong

Wong-Vargas: My uncle and auntie were talking about going back to Mausan because we had our hacienda and our rice farm and everything there. The Japanese had taken it over already, but they don't take things like the Communists. The Japanese took over China, but individuals could have their land and everything but under the Japanese supervision.

The Japanese had taken over Hong Kong, so we would have to go back unless we went to Macao. Macao was so expensive, and it was not easy to get there. Macao was more expensive than Japan is right now, because everybody who had money went to Macao. There were no Japanese on Macao--no war, nothing. It was very close to Hong Kong. But we could not go there, so we had to go back to Mausan. I knew we were going to go away.

Then one day my uncle said, "You have the courage to write your father. Now what are you going to do?" He gave money to everybody--to Susana, to Rosalia, to Kong Chi Fun, who was the sister of my cousin David's wife, so she was kind



of a relative. She was very beautiful--very pale, very white for a Chinese. She was a couple of years older than I. Her situation was not very good, so she was not studying; she was working. Since she was my uncle's daughter-in-law's sister, he said she should go back to the village with us. I call her Fun Che, which means sister. You always call someone sister (Che) who is older out of respect.

So there were Fun Che, my auntie, Susana, Rosalia, and myself. My uncle gave them all money but me. Not even one cent. He said, "You, if you got lost, that is your problem. But if they got lost, they have some money." Susana was just nine or ten at the time. They put the money here [demonstrates]--sewed it in the seam of the jacket so nobody would know where it was. My uncle said, "I won't even give you one cent. Why don't you write your father? Your father will send it to you." Ohhh. By that time the mail had stopped, everything. You could write only from mainland China.

I also forgot to tell you about when I was almost finished with high school and my third uncle came to visit. He was the only one who always wanted me to marry; he wanted me to marry Mr. Woo's son. So he came to see me. He had another friend who was a chiropractor. His name was Sam Pac Teng, and he had a few sons. His wife died, and he had a second wife. One of his sons was an airplane pilot, so he was somewhere in China. Another son had gone to military school and had graduated, so he was in the military working with Chiang Kai-shek then in Chungking. There was no war there at that time.

I received a letter from Sam, the military son, and he said my uncle had sent him my picture. I don't know how my uncle got my picture; maybe my auntie helped him. He said his father was a very good friend of my third uncle and asked if, in the future, etc., etc.; and how it would be nice if I had time to write to him, and he would write to me: "Why don't we write to each other? Let's see how you think about different things that you study?" I said, "No way. I don't know what kind of person he is; I don't know him at all." I didn't want to answer, and I didn't answer, because I wanted to study. He wrote me quite a few letters, but I never answered.

Now, back to the war: I had to walk with my auntie back to Mausan. Rebecca asked me if she could go. I was so naive, you know, and I said, "Of course you can go with me." She wanted to bring her brother, too, who was about Susana's age, and I said, "Of course." I asked my auntie if they

could both go, and she said she couldn't see why not, but could they work? They would have to work, because we had a farm. Rebecca said yes.

Nathan: Were their parents willing?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, their parents were willing. Their parents didn't care about the children that much. If Rebecca didn't want to go to school, her parents said okay. Now they said okay because in Hong Kong there were problems; there was no food. So if somebody wanted to take them away, why not? My uncle didn't really care, because so many people were walking on the streets that you wouldn't know whether they were with us or not. This second uncle was not going with us; he was staying in Hong Kong to take care of the shop.

#### Hiding from the Japanese Soldiers

Wong-Vargas: We had to prepare some dry food to take with us, because we didn't know how long it would take to walk back to Canton from Hong Kong. At that time we had to stay inside the house and could not go out. My uncle said that if he heard some sound of the Japanese ringing the bell, he had to open it. If not, oh, a whole bunch of them might burn you or something. You had to open when they said, "Open the door," because they might think that you had guns. I was thinking, "I wonder what would happen if the Japanese came and I killed him? How could I kill him? I'd kill him and then jump into the well." I was already planning to do that. Of course, if I jumped in the well I would probably die anyway, but it was better than the Japanese taking me away.

I remember my auntie saying one night, "If the Japanese come, we have to hide here." We walked to a room that had so many clothes hanging around. Susana asked me where I was going to hide, and I said I would tell her later, because she would be scared and would cry. At that time the kids were no problem. The most important were teenagers. Susana would cry, so I would never tell her where. While we were talking, the tailor's crazy wife was snoring. We were scared and told her not to stay with us because maybe we would get caught because of her.

One night the Japanese did come, bap, bap, bap on the door. My uncle had to open. We all hid in that room with the clothes. I could hear the Japanese--bap, bap, bap, with

their boots. "Come in." They always held their arm like this [demonstrates] with a bayonet, and a knife also like this. And they always marched like this. Can you imagine if you were hiding there? They could kill you. Everybody would hear that stomp, stomp, stomp. My uncle said, "This is the room where we iron, and we hang the clothes there." They said, "Open the door."

You will not believe it, but at that moment a siren went off. When a siren went off, the Japanese all had to go, wherever they were. It was exactly like a movie. I knew I was going to die, because if they opened the door they were going to push back the clothes. And then all of a sudden, woooooo, the siren went off. So, stomp, stomp, stomp, they had to go. After that my uncle decided we better go back to Mausan, because there you could hide in so many places, but here there was only one room.

Of course, I took the new coat that I had bought.

[Interview 3: April 11, 1989]##

Nathan: Last time you were telling me about hiding in the laundry room when the soldiers came in, and you were saved by a siren.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Otherwise we might have been killed by them. We were very lucky, with God's help, because my uncle would have had to open the door if the soldier told him to. The soldier was always like this [demonstrates], "Open here, open there."

Nathan: Holding a gun?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. When the Japanese came into a house they always had a bayonet, and they could kill you with that. But in this case he left. My uncle decided to send us back to Mausan, because it was so dangerous in Hong Kong. There were Japanese wherever you turned. We were on the ground floor, and it was a very nice street, so they would come again.

We were my auntie, his second wife; myself; Susana; my niece Rosalia; and Kong Chi Fun, the sister of my cousin's wife. She belonged to Kong Chin, a village much before Mausan. My uncle stayed to sell the business. There was also my friend Rebecca and her brother, Au Robert. We were all going to walk together--ten days. Everybody carried something.

Walking to Canton

Wong-Vargas: I carried my coat that I bought, and I carried Susana. I forgot to tell you that about a year before the Japanese came to Hong Kong, Susana had something like a cyst on her foot. My uncle took her to the doctor because it was painful, and the doctor said it had to be removed. Now they call it a tumor, but at that time they just said we had to remove it because it was very dangerous. But my uncle said no, to just use some Chinese medicine. So the Chinese doctor put some Chinese medicine on it, and it was much cheaper, of course.

It became worse, and finally it opened. Oh, it was terrible. I was so upset, and I loved Susana so much. My uncle wrote to my father that I wanted to cut her leg--not that I wanted my uncle to call a doctor to have a small tumor removed from her foot. Then I wrote to my father, and he listened to my uncle and said, "You just follow whatever your uncle wants to do." Who was going to cut the leg or the foot? But my uncle did not want to remove the tumor.

I remember Susana was crying. The wound was open; you could see--ugh, it was terrible and painful. And no medicine. When he put the Chinese medicine on it, it got even worse. You had to remove the whole thing, or give penicillin or something. My uncle didn't want to do that. One day I was so upset, and when I'm upset, I'm very strong. In my room the window was like this [demonstrates] with six bars so that nobody could get in. I was so upset because Susana was crying in pain, do you know what I did? I didn't know what to do, and I held on to the bars and pulled them apart. I couldn't scream, because everybody would listen. So the bars were a little bent because of me, because I didn't know what to do.

Then my uncle called a doctor for her, but a modern type who could also cure with Chinese medicine. His last name was Wong. (We have two Wongs in China. One Wong is very complicated, written like the word "king"; that's my Wong. Another Wong is different, but pronounced the same.) He was from Canton, and his wife was a gynecologist, a very nice lady. He looked at Susana and said, "Let me see what I can do." He gave her some medicine, and it got much better. The other Chinese doctor wasn't even a doctor but just a man with Chinese herbs.

When we walked back to Canton, Susana could not walk, so I had to put her on my back. She could only limp, so I said I would help--sometimes, but not the whole trip. I carried everything that belonged to her. I remember thousands and thousands of people were walking, just like the movies. It took ten days to get to Canton.

Nathan: Did you carry your own food?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, everybody carried some food. I remember quite well that my uncle walked with us to a certain point, and then he went back to Kowloon. My auntie carried everything. She even carried her iron, and she gave it to me. I said okay.

Nathan: Did you have a cart or anything?

Wong-Vargas: No, just two sacks that you put on a pole--just like the Chinese carry in the country. My auntie gave me some things to carry, saying, "Why don't you carry for me, too?" So I carried for her, too. I remember she said, "Come over here," because she wanted to give it to me. So I left my two sacks there--I was going a little bit faster--and went back to her. Susana was there watching with my niece.

So I carried the iron, and when my uncle saw it, he said, "Why did you bring something like this back? Aaaargh," and he hit me, without knowing why. I can't explain it to you. I started crying, and it was embarrassing, of course. He said, "You even wanted to take this thing," and I couldn't even tell him it wasn't mine, it was his wife's. Because when something like this happened I would start crying. How could I explain it to him?

#### Selling Children and Throwing Clothes Away

Wong-Vargas: We walked with a whole group. You cannot imagine. There were older people, younger people, kids; there were blind people walking--of course, not by themselves, but with relatives. During those ten days a lot of things happened. Women gave birth to babies along the road. When nighttime came, we just slept on the road, no nothing.

Nathan: What did you do for water?

Wong-Vargas: We had to carry some water in a little jar, but you can find water everywhere. It wasn't like a desert; there were small

villages here and there. So the people had no problem that way; there were vegetables, chickens, and everything you would find in a village. If you had money, you could buy whatever you wanted. Some people sold their children because they could not carry them. When you walk a few days, you feel tired, and there's no food; if somebody wants to buy, you sell your child. Maybe in the future they would go back to see them.

So many people had to throw their clothing away. I had to throw my coat away, because it was so heavy. Everything you carried, little by little, got so heavy over ten days. When you are worrying about food, you don't care about other things. You cannot imagine what people left behind. Piles of clothing. One person would see another person throwing something away, and they threw theirs away, too. At that time I didn't know what a fur was, but I'm sure even furs were thrown away. Shoes--oh, so many things in the street. The people who lived in the villages probably picked them up.

I was considered very clever--well, not clever, but thoughtful. We also had to carry at least one or two blankets for Susana, because we had to sit or sleep on the ground. I always put a mark on my blanket, because it was mine. I put a mark on everybody's blanket. My blanket was not very heavy, and was a cream color. One morning it was gone. Where was it? We remembered a lady alongside us--everybody sleeps on the ground together--and thought she might have taken it. I was concerned for Susana because she was still sick and very weak, but for myself I didn't care.

I saw the lady, and I said to Rebecca that maybe she had my blanket, so we asked her. She said, "No, I don't." I said, "May I see it?" She said, "No," but I saw my blanket in her sack. I said that was mine, and she said "No." I asked her if she had her name on the blanket, and she said, "No, I don't." I said, "But I have, so may I see it, please?" Then she said, "Well, maybe I took it by mistake, and somebody must have taken mine."

Nathan: Did you talk to people who were walking with you?

Wong-Vargas: No, we didn't talk. Some were walking faster and got ahead of us, and we would have to rest because of Susana and my auntie. Then new people would come up.

Kong Chi Fun, whom I call Fun Che (*Che* is a polite form of "sister"), was a little slow when she walked. She had very delicate skin and was walking slow. You know what

happened? The Japanese took her. She was screaming. My auntie was up ahead, and I was calling her to come back. They didn't know I was a girl because my hair was cut like a boy and I put some dirt on my face. Nobody was interested in me. The soldiers were all around.

### Along the Road

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to say that when you walked in certain places, the soldiers would say, "Stop," and everybody stopped. Every little distance there were soldiers--not one, but a group of Japanese soldiers. They had to be there, because they had taken over Hong Kong and Kowloon and everywhere.

Nathan: So they were watching you the whole way?

Wong-Vargas: Some, in certain places. I put charcoal on my face, and I was wearing my auntie's clothes, so I looked like a bum. But not Fun Che; she looked like a girl. She didn't want to look like me. So they took her. Oh, we screamed, and then my auntie screamed. A few men who were walking also came back. Luckily it was only one soldier, so he got scared and let her go. We saved her. We said she would have to keep up with us in the group, because if she went slow then the Japanese would look at her. If you are with a group of people, they can't do that much.

Nathan: How did you know to make yourself look like a boy?

Wong-Vargas: When we escaped before, I cut my hair like a boy because I just knew that if the Japanese saw a girl he would take her away, so why should I not prepare? If you have a dirty face, who's going to take you? That was my own decision; nobody told me to do it. I wasn't like Fun Che; I didn't care whether people looked at me. That's why when I was in Kowloon, my uncle's friend who was supposed to marry me didn't even want to see me. Because I looked like a boy, but not dirty-faced. In China everywhere, especially at that time, a girl was supposed to be feminine. I was a tomboy [laughs].

After that, Fun Che stayed with us, but she couldn't walk so fast; she was delicate. Sometimes when we were walking we had to stop for the Japanese soldiers, and everybody had to squat down, and you couldn't move. One day everybody was like that, including me. We had to open our

sacks, because the security was looking for guns or something. It was such a long time, and I was so tired, and I didn't see anybody watching, so I got up. The Japanese was at my back, and baaaam, on my head with a gun. I fell down, no bones broken. I was lucky there was no blood. I said to myself, "Someday I'll kill you." I couldn't even see him, because he kept hitting from behind. That was the only time the Japanese hit me.

We kept walking, and we had to pass through a narrow place; only two or three could pass at a time. My friend Rebecca's brother, Robert, was carrying two things, and for some reason he couldn't walk. The Japanese held him and hit him with a heavy thing, three or four times, and almost killed him. His sister couldn't say anything. He was just a boy, maybe ten years old. His sister was crying, and afterwards we were able to help him. Other people who were walking helped him, too. His sister didn't get too close, because the Japanese would see her, because she didn't cut her hair; you know, she was a girl.

So we walked. Oh, so many things happened on the road. I saw so many people who fell. Some people were fighting. People were even dying, I don't know. People would cry and lie down and be dying. I just walked and saw these things. I remember one lady said, "Would you sell me this girl?" She wanted to buy Susana and Rosalia, because they liked kids about eleven years old. I said, "No." I was so mad. I remember Susana said, "Don't sell me." "I would never sell you; no, don't worry." So I carried her. Oh, a lot of things happened.

#### Waiting for the Boat to Canton

Nathan: Did you feel that the people who were walking with you knew where they were going?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. All of them were going to Canton, because it was the only way to go. But we were going on to Mausan. Maybe they were going to their own villages from Canton. The way we were going to Canton, we had to take a boat from some point because they didn't allow you to walk through the railroad. The railroad was no problem, but they wouldn't let you because the Japanese were using it. So we had to walk all around it, and then there was a small river we had to cross.



We needed the boat to cross the river, and we had maybe a month or two waiting there. Where were you going to stay? We stayed there. I don't remember what that place was called. When we got there, that was the last stop, and from there we got a boat to Canton. Rebecca was smart, too. "Let's look around and see where we can ask someone to help us find a place to sleep."

Before that, during the walking, it was very damp and I was concerned about Susana's leg. I saw something like a garage, very big, and the door was open. There were a lot of sacks of leaves. I went in there and took one or two and gave them Susana for a bed. All of a sudden the Japanese came and closed the door, and I saw a sign that said, "Whoever takes anything out of here will be killed." Oh, my God. I was so scared, because if they saw me they would kill me. So I covered the sacks with blankets, and early the next morning I left one of my very old blankets there, covering the sacks, because if they had seen them there would have been trouble. So I lost my blanket.

##

Nathan: So you left your blanket--

Wong-Vargas: Yes, my old blanket, because I didn't dare take it. They would have seen that the sacks belonged to that garage. Oh, my God. I was always thinking, and I always thought God helped me in so many ways, really, so many ways. I could get caught by the Japanese, and they would kill me. No, they would not kill me, they would--oh, I don't know what they would do, because they were terrible.

I forgot to tell you that in Hong Kong at that time, I saw from far away--I would have died if I had seen it up close--a girl raped by the Japanese and tied without any clothes onto a lamp post on the street. People said they killed her later on. Oh, the Japanese were so cruel and killed, just like that. Oh, my God.

So I was so scared--can't you imagine if they caught me? Oh, I was lucky.

I think the name of the place where we were waiting to get a boat was called Tung Koun. Rebecca and I walked across a small bridge, looking for a place for us to stay. I didn't know how long we would have to wait. People were saying, "Oh, you have to wait a month." My auntie told us, and we

thought, "Do we have to stay that long?" We walked around, and we saw a lady and a gentleman who had very nice faces. They were a young couple, maybe thirty years old.

I told Rebecca, "They seem like very nice people. Can we ask them where to stay?" So we explained to them that we were waiting to go to Canton and wondered where we could sleep. They were so kind and said we could come to their house. I said we were a group, not just two people, and they said it wouldn't matter for a couple of days. We said we didn't know how long it would be, but they said not to worry. They had a huge house--a village house--and we could stay on one side. Can you imagine? And they didn't charge anything.

Oh, we were so happy then. I told my aunt, and of course she was happy, and they took us to their place. We told them that we had been told that we would have to wait over a month or two months to get a boat to Canton. They said they knew that it did take time, but they knew somebody who might be able to make it faster, and they did. I don't recall how long we were there, but it was at least a week.

Nathan: Was your name on a list or anything like that?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, no. Whoever went first was somebody who pushed. People even fell into the river. No waiting list, no. Early in the morning you went there.

Nathan: This young couple helped you?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, so we didn't wait more than a week. We got to the boat, and we didn't have to pay. He even loaned us money. Oh, we were so grateful. I called the man "uncle", and we invited him to our village. They had been married over ten years, but they had no children. Later on I learned that they did have children. God helped them, too.

The boat was full of people, very low in the water and leaning. The Chinese didn't care if it sank. People just climbed in until no more would fit, and then it would sail. It's not like here, where you have a limit of people. I still remember how scared I was to get in there, but the whole group had to go. This gentleman took us to the boat--so nice. We really were lucky. When I was walking with Rebecca, I saw that he had a nice face, so that's why I asked for help. I didn't want to sit there waiting, like pretty Fun Che, who was older than I but didn't think about it.

Nathan: You were very young, so how could you tell by his face?

Wong-Vargas: You can tell a face. I can tell now if a person is mean. You can tell by looking at the eyes. There is something different in the look. If they are nice, they look at you, and you can tell. I could tell then, and God helped me, too. I also met so many bad people. I always know when people don't look into your eyes, but look down, that you have to be a little careful. Besides, I wasn't so young; I was already fifteen years old. I had been through so much, I was like a fifty- or sixty-year-old. I had seen so many things--my aunt, my cousins.

So I was lucky, and I'm sure that God helped me. He helped me to find nice people.

Nathan: How long was the boat ride?

Wong-Vargas: It was a river, so it wasn't that long. We didn't spend the night on the boat, or even lunch. Maybe it was a few hours or so. There was no place to sit down; well, you could sit on the floor.

When we got to Canton we walked first to Kong Chin, the big village that had a hospital and things like that. Fun Che lived there. Then we walked to Mausan, and from Mausan to Kung Wuo City where we lived. When we got there, I was okay, but Fun Che, who was so delicate, had blisters all over her feet. The poor thing. The rest of us had no serious troubles. Fun Che passed away three years ago. She died of cancer in Formosa, young; how sad.

#### Looking After Rebecca

Wong-Vargas: Rebecca was very lazy. She didn't want to work at anything. My third uncle said, "Why did you bring her here?" I thought maybe he was right, that I had no right to invite her. But I thought my father also had his share, you know, because the hacienda also belonged to my father. She was lazy. I think if she had been a hard worker my uncle would have liked it, because he didn't have to pay her.

My uncle said, "You better ask her to leave." Where? Back to Hong Kong? Her parents let her visit us, and I didn't know what to do. In the same village I had a friend, also a Wong. She was a teacher, and her name was Wong Chow Yut. Chow Yut means full moon, or July moon. She was very

dynamic, a very nice lady. She had taught me when I was young, and then I went away and came back, and she was still there. She and I were good friends. She suggested I go to another Wong, Wong Yut Kwai. (Her last name was not Wong, but her husband's was). I called her Yut Kwai Che (Che means sister).

I asked if my friend and her brother could come to her house, and I would bring some food for her. She said sure, she had a room. Robert was still very young, but Rebecca was just lazy. She was always pinning up her hair and things like that. So I took them there.

Now Ah Sham was living with us. She wasn't in Mausan anymore; she had moved to Kung Wuo City with us. Susana, Ah Sham, and I were in the same room, and I got to know her better. I asked how I could get food for Rebecca, and Ah Sham said, "Well, this also belongs to your father, you know. I don't see why not." We took some rice, some peanut oil--that was most important--then potatoes and such things, because we had a lot from our hacienda. We never asked auntie. Ah Sham always said, "You watch to see if someone comes." I would say, "Number three aunt is coming." [laughter] But the things we were taking belonged to my father, too. We would take food in canisters, bags--not every day, but once every week or ten days. They didn't work there at that house; they just fooled around. I worked, because I can't just sit around doing nothing.

### Letters, and Hiding in the Hills

Wong-Vargas: I told you my uncle wanted me to marry his friend's son, Sam. His Chinese name is Po Wuan. My father had sent my picture to him, and he wrote to me. Sam Po Wuan was with Chiang Kai-shek's group. He wrote me a couple of letters, but I never answered because I wanted to study. But when I got to the village, after I had graduated, I wondered what I could do, being so far away.

Kung Wuo City is quite distant from Mausan, and at that time cars could not get to Mausan or to Kung Wuo City; you had to walk. After the Communists took over, if you had a car you could get there. But there is no Kung Wuo City anymore, because the Communists made it all into rice fields. Mausan is still there.

When the Japanese came in a group, you could see them from far away, walking or on motorcycles with a side car. Motorcycles could get in but not cars, because it was a very narrow road. We had lookouts to let everybody know when they were coming. One would tell another, "The Japanese are coming," all down the line, so anyone could escape; but you couldn't call them Japanese, because they might hear you. Just like in the old times, we would call them *lo bak*--daikon radish: "*Lo bak* is coming." They called them *lo bak* because the Japanese liked to eat that vegetable. They even ate it raw.

Then we would have to escape and hide. Nearby we had some hills, and we would go there to hide.

Nathan: Would the village be empty, then?

Wong-Vargas: No, only girls went to hide, not kids or middle-aged people. I was a teenager at that time, so I always had to hide. You could see them from the hole. I was so scared, and I got so tired of escaping. It was just like in the movies; you could see them walking, tromp, tromp, tromp.

Nathan: How often would this happen?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, sometimes twice a day and sometimes not every day. You were always nervous, because any moment they could come. You were scared.



### III HOPING TO STUDY IN CHUNGKING, BUT MARRYING CHANG

Wong-Vargas: I said to myself that I'd like to go to Chungking, where Sam was. I felt bad about not writing him back before. I talked with Rebecca and asked her if she would like to go, and she said yes. I knew her like a sister. I always said, "Let's talk," because I couldn't even think about going without her. You had to have someone with you. Then she said, "Maybe I'd like to go see my parents in Hong Kong; so I'm not sure. But I'd like to go with you."

#### Writing to Sam Po Wuan

Wong-Vargas: In Chungking I could even write to my father, because it was free--not occupied by the Japanese. I wondered what to do, and I wrote to Sam Po Wuan. I said I would like to go there to study; I could work and study. He wrote me back and said sure, I could work and study and even write to my father. I was very happy. How could Sam write? Because you couldn't communicate by mail. He sent it with somebody, because you always could do it on the black market. (Sam Po Wuan belonged to another village, Soey Leak.) I was able to send my letter because Yut Gwai Che's husband knew people involved in the black market, and I gave it to him. I didn't have to pay anything.

I was so happy, but I wondered how I could go. Oh, my uncle was very happy. I asked my uncle, "Do you think I could go and study in Chungking?" Because I was scared of always having to run and hide from the Japanese. He said, "Oh, sure." Oh, he was very happy if I would go there, because he had sent my picture to Sam Po Wuan.

I asked how I could go, and he said that Yut Gwai Che's husband, who was a Wong, knew how to take people to

Chungking. You had to pay him, and maybe he paid the Japanese; I don't know. He was the one who took people in and out, like those who take Mexicans across the border from Tijuana to the United States. He is still alive. I saw him just a few years ago. He's an old man now. He is very nice. When I saw him this last time, I asked him if he remembered, and he said yes. My uncle called him and talked with him, and he said sure, he could take me there. I don't know what they talked about, but he said I could go with a group he was taking; he took not just me, but groups of two or three people. He specialized in that.

### Floods on the Road to Chungking

Wong-Vargas: Unfortunately--or fortunately; I don't know--where you crossed the border there was flooding, so we couldn't pass. His name was Hoy, and I called him Hoy Ko (*ko* means brother). Hoy Ko told my uncle we couldn't go. We had to wait until the roads dried; otherwise we couldn't get through. You couldn't use a boat, because this was the boundary between Japanese and Chinese authority. You had to walk through.

So he said to wait. It was still a very bad situation at Mausan, so I was still scared and thinking about leaving. Then I thought maybe I'd better go to Canton, because in Canton the Japanese were more civilized; they couldn't take you, just like that. In the village they could do whatever they wanted; they could kill you or whatever they wanted. If they wanted something, they just took it. Oh, in the village it was terrible.

I kept wondering how I could go to Canton. I thought, "If my third uncle says yes, no problem; he will take me there." But I didn't dare talk to my uncle; never. He would say, "What do you want? You're scared. You can't." So I had to talk with my auntie. My auntie would say no, because her daughter didn't like me.

How could I go? And then I thought of how my auntie had a friend (she has died, but she had a daughter who lives now in Hong Kong). We called her Seung Gan Yi (*yi* means auntie). She was tall, I remember, and very outgoing. She was Chinese, but outgoing. I don't think she was from the village, but she married somebody, and that's why she was there. She had the one daughter at that time.



Persuading Uncle, and Visiting Mr. Lai in Canton

Wong-Vargas: I talked with her. She liked me, because she was not a Chinese from the village; she was different. I said I was really scared there, because you never knew when you would have to run and hide, and the Japanese might grab you. I thought I would have to go to Canton and wait until the water subsided, and then I could go to Chungking. She said, "Why don't you go?" I asked how I could go, and I explained to her that I needed her to help me explain to my auntie, to get her to promise to talk to my uncle. She said sure, she could help me.

She talked with my auntie, and my auntie talked with my uncle. I think this is what happened, because nobody told me. It's just my intuition. I think my auntie promised her, because she was a good friend, and so she talked to my uncle; and of course my uncle listened to his wife. So my uncle said to me, "Do you feel uncomfortable here?" I said, "Oh, yes." "Okay, if you want, you can go. We'll get you to Canton." Oh, I was so happy.

I told you about Mr. Lai Teng Mien, who came to Kung Wuo City when I was still small. He had a school there and allowed me to go there, and I had my own seat. That teacher was living in Canton at that time, so my uncle--I don't know how--communicated with him and told him that he would like me to go to Canton to visit him for a while, until the water was dried up, and then I would go to Chungking. Maybe he said yes, and that's why my uncle said he could take me there.

Did I tell you that when I was still small and studying there, my uncle wanted me to marry Mr. Lai's brother? Mr. Lai had two brothers. One was in a village within walking distance of ours; we could walk there in a couple of hours. My uncle wanted me to marry him; this was when I was very small. He taught us, but not for very long, but I knew him. Mr. Lai was always very nice to me. He would call me "little sister," and then he would touch me [demonstrates].

So my uncle took me to Canton to Mr. Lai's house. Later I called him a monster; I hated him. He was married, and I think his wife was Chinese from Singapore--not like the other Chinese--different. He lived in a very, very small house on the second floor; one bedroom, small kitchen, small crude bathroom. A very poor situation. The name of the street was

Hoy Chui Road, I remember. The house was very old, and I think he rented the second floor. In front of the house was a beautiful chalet. They probably have torn down the old house now, but I haven't been back. I'd like to go back and see if it is still there.

The chalet in front was beautiful, but the house he lived in was so run-down that it needed to be torn down. The living room and dining room was narrow and long, maybe six feet by sixteen feet. At the window you could see the beautiful house in front. His younger brothers slept on the floor in a corner, and I slept on the floor in another corner of this room. Then he had his room with his wife and two kids, and the wife was expecting another baby. I remember he had a desk there.

##

Wong-Vargas: He said to call him Tai Ko (*tai* means "big," or "first," and *ko* means "brother"). I could have called him by his name, Teng Ko, but he said to call him "big brother;" so I called him Tai Ko, and he called me "little sister." My name is So Lan in Chinese, and he called me Lan Muey.

I was so happy. I told him I never had a brother, and now I had found a brother. He said, "I am your brother now. Don't worry, I will help you and protect you," and so many things. I believed him. I didn't like his face, but he seemed so nice, and nobody was so nice to me. His wife was very nice. I said to myself that I had to do something for them, because I know that my uncle never paid them anything. I helped them with the cleaning, and I asked his wife to let me wash things for her. Even if she didn't ask me, I did it. I cleaned the kitchen and the house, because I was eating there, and I felt bad doing nothing. I did everything for his wife, and she liked me.

Tai Ko had a friend who was a painter, and he painted my portrait. I wonder where my portrait is now? Tai Ko asked the painter to do it, and then he hung it on the wall in his little house. I liked my picture, because it was very nice. It was a very famous painter, but I don't remember his name.

Tai Ko's wife's name was Tai Sou, which means "first sister-in-law." She was nice to me. I also helped with the marketing. They both liked me.

Rebecca was still staying with my friend in Mausan. I told her I would be in Canton, so she could come there, but

she decided to go back to Hong Kong. I asked her if she could be in Canton for a couple of days until she took her train to Hong Kong. At that time Canton and Hong Kong could write to each other. She might have written to her parents, and they sent her money so she could go back to Hong Kong.

She came with her brother, so there were the three of us on the floor for just a couple of days or a week. The Lais said of course it was all right. We didn't have sleeping bags, just a thin mat and no blanket, but it was not cold at that time. Then Rebecca went on to Hong Kong with her brother.

#### Uncle's Letter to Sam Po Wuan

Wong-Vargas: I stayed on, because the water was still there at the border. Before long, Hoy Ko, the one who was supposed to take me, came to see me. He said he wanted to tell me that the water, little by little, was going down, and very soon he could take me to Chungking. "But," he said, "since you are a very good friend"--like a sister to his wife (they are still alive; they are very nice)--"I want to tell you one thing before I take you there. Your uncle wanted me to take you there, but you are not going to study."

My uncle had promised me I could study. He said, "Sure, you want to study? I can even sell the land, and I can send the money to you. You can study medicine; I know you like medicine." Can you imagine? He said that. I was so happy to go there to study. Hoy Ko said he wanted me to know, because we were friends and because his wife was like a sister to me; then he showed me the letter. He said he wasn't supposed to, but he wanted me to know before I went. He showed me my uncle's letter, in my uncle's handwriting. He had written to Sam Po Wuan and said, "Here's my niece, the one I sent you a picture of. During this difficult war situation, when she gets there, marry her and you just live with her. You don't have to have a celebration or anything like that; just marry her." That was it: "She is coming, so just marry her." Since it was during the war we didn't have to have invitations and so forth or tell people we were getting married. He didn't say anything about studying.

So when I saw that letter, Hoy Ko told me he wanted me to know that I was going there to marry this man, not to study. You can't imagine--I was so upset. Mrs. Lai was very

nice. Mr. Lai, whom I call the monster, was not home that day. I told Hoy Ko that I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know that man--whether he was short or tall, or what. I couldn't just marry him like that. He said he would just take me there but he could help not me; so I should think it over first.

Mrs. Lai said I should find somebody there in Canton, but I didn't know anybody. When I was studying, believe me, I never, never went out with any boys, not even one. I always studied, studied, studied, in order to get good marks, to get a scholarship. I knew nobody in Canton; I was all by myself. I didn't know what to do, and Mrs. Lai said, "Find somebody here." I asked where, and she said she knew a very nice family. The father was a teacher in Pad Kwai Chung Hoe (*chung ho* means "middle school," which is like high school). His name was Chang.

#### Mr. Lai's Marriage Plan

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to tell you something after Hoy Ko came to see me. Rebecca had already gone back to Hong Kong, so I was all by myself. One day I went shopping to the market for Mrs. Lai. When I came back, I heard Mr. and Mrs. Lai fighting, exchanging words. I was concerned, and I didn't want to go into the apartment. I had to just stay outside, and I didn't know what to do.

I heard them fighting, and then I heard her say, "I don't think she would like it; I don't think she would agree to marry you." I thought maybe they were talking about Rebecca, because she was very feminine and liked to flirt sometimes. When she had stayed there less than a week, she was flirting; that's the way she was. Mr. Lai had talked with her, and so I thought they were talking about my friend. Oh, I felt bad. And when I heard the wife saying, "I don't think she would marry you"--ohhhh.

Mrs. Lai said to her husband, "I know you like her, but I don't think she likes you," and I thought they must be talking about Rebecca. I never thought about myself. Then he said, "But don't forget, her father's in Peru." When I heard "Peru," I knew that was me. "Her father's in Peru, and he has money," because they were poor, you know, "so if I marry her, her father will send us money in the future," and so on. Then I knew it was me, and I felt so bad and upset.

His wife said, "But she will not marry you; she is not willing. She has already gone through high school, and she is young and pretty."

In China at that time--now, I don't know, but I don't think so--a man could marry two women at the same time, and they were called pen chai (*pen* means "equal," and *chai* means "wife.") If the first wife said yes, he could marry another woman that they would call equal wife.

So he wanted his wife to say yes, and he would marry me. Oh, I could kill him. She wouldn't say yes, and he said he knew how he would make me say yes. He meant maybe he would give me something to drink; I don't know. But he said, "I know how to make her marry me," or "She will have to marry me," or something like that. Maybe he meant he would give me some medicine to make me sleep, and then take advantage of me. Then later on he would say, "Well, you'll have to marry me," because in China at that time you had to be a virgin in order to get married.

Oh, it was terrible. When I heard all this I was so upset. That was after Hoy Ko came. I know that, because I was upset about Hoy Ko.

Nathan: You had two bad experiences in a row.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and I didn't know where to turn.

### The Bridge

Wong-Vargas: I thought I would go back to my village. Even if the Japanese came three or four times a day, I didn't care. I didn't care any more. I couldn't go to Chungking to marry somebody, and now Mr. Lai was so mean; and I thought he was my brother.

I walked off, and walked and walked on Hoy Chui Road. On the other side of Hoy Chui Road there was a bridge called Hoy Chui Kiu (*kiu* means "bridge"). It's still there. I wanted to die. I really did [very emotional]. I wanted to jump. Ninety-five percent of me wanted to jump. Why should I live? Where should I go? Then I remembered that Susana was still in Mausan, in Kung Wuo City, and my Ah Sham. I wondered what they would do if I died; nobody would help

them. Rosalia didn't need me, because my second uncle was her grandfather, so she had protection with them.

So I said, "No, I prefer to go back to my village, even if I have to escape three or four times a day." But I had been ready to die, and I wasn't afraid. Of course, when you are young, you are ready to die just like that. I'm sure, once in the water, that I would want to live at the last minute.

I walked back to Mr. Lai's house, and he was not there. The monster, how could he think of doing that to me? Of course, for money. I went inside, and Mrs. Lai was not friendly like before; she didn't want to speak to me. I understood. I told her I knew she was angry, and that I had heard everything her husband said. I like to be direct.

I said I never thought her husband thought that way about me, that I felt he was like a brother. "But please," I told her, "if you think the young girl was after your husband, if she is a good young girl, she would never take somebody's husband, never. For example, if she was a bad young girl, why would she take away your husband? First of all because he was rich, but your husband is poor. Or handsome? He is ugly. For love? Impossible, because he already has a wife." I told her, "Even for these three things, if I were a bad girl, I would never take your husband away. I'm not like that, but if you think I am bad, I still wouldn't take your husband. I would find somebody who was rich, right? So I wouldn't have to sit on the floor. Don't worry," I said, "I'm leaving."

She believed me, and she cried, too. She was very nice, and she said she understood. I said I didn't want to talk about it any more. She said, "But you're going to marry somebody you don't know; why don't you find somebody here? I know the Chang family, and they are nice people." He had three daughters and one son with his first wife. The second wife had two sons and one daughter. As I said, he was director of the Pad Kwai high school. His son was a university graduate and was a teacher also.

Mrs. Lai said, "Why don't I take you to this family, and maybe you will like his son. Someday you will have to marry anyway." I said, "I'm so young; I don't want to marry, I want to study." She said, "But what can you do? Are you going to marry somebody you've never met? Or are you going to live in a village where you have to escape all the time from the Japanese? That won't happen if you go to meet this

family." I said I wished I could work for the lady who lived in the beautiful house in front. I always noticed that she had maids who combed her hair. Her husband's brother was Minister of the Navy. Their last name was Chew--Chew Sin San (*san* means "Mister"). His brother was Chew something; he was very famous. The husband was also in the navy, but I don't know what he did; he was also very high up, and had a car and a chauffeur.

I told Mrs. Lai that I would like to work as a maid in that house. I could be her maid, and then I could study in the future, maybe, when the war was over. I didn't want to marry. I asked Mrs. Lai if she could talk to her, and she said no, she couldn't. Later on Mrs. Chew and I became friends (she's still alive). Her situation changed so much, and her husband died. It's a long story.

### Meeting the Changs

Wong-Vargas: I agreed to go to the Changs' house, and Mrs. Lai took me. It was quite a long walk on a small lane where a car couldn't go. Cheon Ton Street was the name of the road (*cheon* means "long"). Almost at the end of the lane you turned to the left, and the house was there. It was a big house with one floor. The second wife and first wife were both there, but Mr. Chang, the father, and his son were not there. The father's name was Seen Pac Chang [Chang Seen Pac]. You could tell by his face that he was very nice. I think he was close to fifty at that time. He was a typical Chinese honorable person.

He and his son Nim Yee had gone out. I met his first and second wives, and older cousins of the father. I told Mrs. Lai I wanted to go, because I didn't like big families. I had lived with my second, third, and fourth aunties, and when they fought I was like a ball back and forth. No, no, I didn't want any more big families.

So we left. As we were leaving, I saw these beautiful flowers, *lan--orchids*. (My name is also Lan; So Lan is my name. So means "very sophisticated, very clear. So Lan means "very soft-colored orchid," or something like that.) They had a lot of orchids in their little garden. You could see very nice furniture. As we went out, Mr. Chang and his son were coming back. So I met the father, a very nice man, and the son, whom I didn't like at all. He was young--about

ten years older than I; maybe twenty five. I didn't like him.

My grandmother, when I was little in Peru, always said *el diablo*, the devil's teeth were like fire, made of gold--zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Mr. Chang's son had all gold teeth. At that time it was the modern thing to do, and instead of using porcelain like they do now, they used all gold. It meant you had money, you know. But when I saw him smile, my God. I remembered *el diablo* that my grandmother had told me about. I said no; no way. I didn't like him. He was thin, tall, not ugly; but I didn't like him. No, never.

They gave us some tea, and we said goodby and so on, and then we left. I decided I'd better go back to my village. Then Mr. Lai came back from work. Mrs. Lai must have told him my decision. What could she do? Husband and wife would not divorce. I didn't even speak to him any more; I tried to avoid him. Since he could not have me, and he knew I didn't like Mr. Chang's son, this monster told my uncle. I don't know how, but he communicated with my number three uncle.

Nathan: Was this by phone?

Wong-Vargas: No, we had no phone. I think by letter or by mouth, because every day people went to the village. A few days later my uncle came to visit us. He said, "I know that Mrs. Lai introduced somebody to you." Oh, and the next day after our visit, Mr. Chang's son came to visit Mrs. Lai, because he liked me. Oh, I was young and I was not ugly. He brought some fruit to Mrs. Lai; you always bring something when you visit a person. He stayed for lunch, and Mrs. Lai said, "He likes you." I said, "But I don't like him. I want to go back to my village." I didn't even want to have lunch with him; I didn't like him at all.

No, I decided I had better go back to the village, because I wanted to study, and I was young--less than sixteen. Mean Mr. Lai said, "Oh, you don't like him? Good." He was happy because he knew that I hated him. "Your uncle will come and make you marry somebody you don't like."

Mr. Chang, the father, smoked opium because he was a little weak, and the doctor said he should smoke opium. At that time, if you had money you could have opium. Mr. Lai said Mr. Chang's son also took opium, but later on I found out it was not true. He told that on purpose. He also told me the son had a couple of children by another woman without



being married. Later on I found out that wasn't true. He told me all these things so I would hate Mr. Chang's son. I thought these things were true. He said these things while talking to his wife, but he wanted me to hear. Then, on the other hand, he asked my uncle to come.

My uncle said, "I understand Mr. Chang's son comes almost every day to visit you because he likes you." I said I didn't like him, and I wanted to go back. I couldn't tell him that I had seen his letter, because it was shown to me in confidentiality. He said, "You don't want to go to study in Chungking." I knew it was not to study; that was a lie. But I couldn't say I saw the letter. "And you don't want to marry here. So what do you want?" I said I wanted to go back and live in the village. He said, "If something happened to you, how am I going to tell your father? Because it is my obligation," and so forth. "What do you want?"

#### University Across the Bridge, and an Engagement

Wong-Vargas: I said I wanted to study. This is my number three uncle. How mean he was with me. Anyway, he said, "You want to study? Okay." So he planned something with Lai, with this monster. They told me that on the other side of the Hoy Chui bridge was a university, and I could study there. My uncle said they had medicine and everything there. He said I didn't have to go to Chungking to study. By this time he had already visited the Chang family. "But," he said, "you have to get engaged with Mr. Chang's son. Then I will pay for your tuition and you can study."

##

Wong-Vargas: My uncle said, "You know why? Because I worry about you. If something happened to me, where would you go? At least if you are engaged to someone, then later, after you graduate and your father comes back, you can marry. You don't have to marry right away." I was wondering what I should do. I didn't know of any other alternative. Where should I go? This time he said, "I'll go with you. You don't believe me." I knew I didn't believe him, because I had seen the letter.

He took me to the university.

Nathan: What was the name of the university?

Wong-Vargas: Ho Nani Tai Hoc, across the bridge. He said I could study there, and in a few more years my father would be back, and if I didn't like Mr. Chang's son, I didn't have to marry him. He took me with Mr. Lai--oh, how I hated that man, that monster. Of course, he was very tight with my uncle. I never addressaed him again. Well, anyway, they both took me to this university. My uncle paid for my registration. The classes would start a couple of months later, in September, I think. It wasn't that much money, but it meant that I was going to study. I believed him, because he paid, even though it wasn't that much.

I thought being engaged was no problem; I would never marry, I would just study. I knew the war wouldn't last forever. I thought about how I would be a doctor in the future, and I was so happy. So we got engaged, and he gave me a ring or something like that. There was no big event; we just got engaged at Mrs. Lai's house. It was a very simple engagement. Engagement in China was not important; it was important when you got married.

Nathan: Were you still staying at the Lais' house?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. But I avoided Mr. Lai. One thing, Mr. Chang Seen Pac was the director, the head of the school, so he hired a lot of teachers. I don't think his son was teaching. I don't know what he was doing. I didn't want to see him, of course. After we were engaged, his father said, "If you like, you can come and work at the school."

In the Chang family, the oldest daughter's husband was here in the United States, in Sacramento. Because of the war she could not come to the United States, so she lived at home with her parents. Her name is Chong (Joan), and she still lives in Sacramento. She was very nice to me.

The second daughter's husband was an English teacher, and she was a housewife. She was a very clever woman. The third daughter was a little bit overweight--fat like her mother. She is here in San Francisco now. Her husband was very nice; he was in business, or something like that. They also liked me. It's a long story.

Nathan: Was this young man the son of the first wife?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. His name was Nim Yee Chang [Chang Nim Yee].

The second daughter's husband--the one who taught English; his name was Yeu--was going somewhere for a short

time. Mr. Chang said to me, "You studied English in Hong Kong; why don't you come over and help teaching for a few days?" Sure, and I went there to help. I was already engaged, but I didn't want to see the son. Sometimes he was not there, so it was no problem. He was not working with his father. The old Mr. Chang was very kind, very nice, like a father that I never had; I didn't even remember my father. Mr. Chang was very nice to me. I still remember him.

I was there about three weeks, nearly a month; then I helped them in the school library. One day Mrs. Lai asked me if I had had lunch already. How could I have had lunch? But I said yes, even though I hadn't had lunch. I wanted to go away somewhere, but where? My uncle said he was going to find somewhere else for me to stay when I began my studies. I wasn't going to stay with the Changs, just because we were engaged. No.

My friend Rebecca wrote to me and said she was coming back to Canton because she didn't like Hong Kong. She said we could find a place together. We were able to write because you could communicate between Canton and Hong Kong. I told her I was going to study, and she always told me that if I became a doctor in the future, she would be my nurse's aide. And she never liked to study.

### A Long Fever

Wong-Vargas: After about a month, my uncle came again (he had gone back to the village). It was very close to the starting of school. He said, "You know something? I'm sorry to tell you, but the Chang family asked me to come, so I went to see them. The father wants his son to marry right away." Right away? But I'm going to study; I hadn't even started. He said, "Well, what can I do, now that you belong to them?" Oh, I will never forget it.

I told him he had promised, and he said, "But what can I do? You belong to them already." You know, I got sick with a high fever, and I got very thin. About that time, Mr. Lai moved down a few houses on the same street, to a place that was a little bit bigger, so I was able to have a small room for myself. I don't know if my uncle ever paid him or not. (I think Lai is still alive, but the wife died.)

Nathan: Was it true that Mr. Chang insisted?

Wong-Vargas: No, it was my third uncle who went to Chang's house and insisted. Later on I found this out. Mr. Chang believed in astrologists, and they told him that the astrologist said his son should not marry that year, and that would help Mr. Chang get healthier. Otherwise something bad would happen to him.

"Bury Her or Marry Her"

Wong-Vargas: I got sick, sick, sick with fever that never went away. I remember Mrs. Lai prepared some Chinese herbs, but that was it. My uncle never called in a doctor to see me. I couldn't eat, I was so sick with fever. You know what he did? He hired a stretcher and took me to the Changs' house and left me there. He told Mr. Chang [voice chokes up], "If she dies, just bury her. If she lives, marry her." And then he went back to the village.

Mr. Chang was very nice, and, really, he saved my life. He called in one or two Chinese doctors and gave me medicine--herbs--and little by little I got better and able to walk. I was in the same room with his first wife. She had only one son, so she spoiled him--you can't imagine. If he was having a cup of tea and didn't like it, he would go, "Blech," and throw the cup at his mother--but not in her face. His mother would say, "How can you do that?" And she would pick it up, and that was it. Oh, my God, I'm going to marry that man?

They had a few maids, I think. They bought one girl, Wong Choy (not my Wong), and then they had a man who was like a waiter who helped Mr. Chang. They were wealthy. They asked the maids to cook some special soup for me, with chicken and so forth. I will never forget how nice they all were. Mr. Chang was Michael and Martha's grandfather.

I couldn't even walk; I had to walk very slowly because I was so thin and weak. Mr. Chang's son always said, "We saved your life." It's true; little by little they saved my life. But also it was because of him that I got sick. Otherwise, I don't know--I might be a doctor, because I would have gone to Chungking to study.

After I was well, I began to think about what I should do. I was going to have to marry this man. My uncle didn't spend anything. When my cousin (the one who cut my

eyelashes) got married in the village--you can't imagine--three or four blocks of things. Because in China, when a girl got married the parents bought her furniture: chairs, tables, everything except the bed. The men buy the bed; they have a party and then all pay. All the furniture in the house, including blankets and so forth, is bought by the girl's parents. So when my cousin married, there were blocks of people--well, a block in China is not too long, but still--everybody carrying chairs and other furniture. There were no cars, so everybody carried the furniture in a long, long line.

When I married, nothing. My uncle bought only a skirt and a little coat. In China, instead of a gown like you wear here, you wear a red skirt and a short black coat. It is embroidered in colors. He bought me only that set. I still have it. He didn't buy me a pair of shoes or anything. No dress--only that thing that you wear when you get married the Chinese way. That was it.

My stepmother, Ah Sham, was so nice. She borrowed some money from Hoy Ko, the one who was going to take me to Chungking. I saw him a few years ago, and we talked about this. Ah Sham borrowed five hundred (I just remember the number five) from him, and little by little she paid him back. She bought a little sofa for me, shoes, some underwear. She was the one who bought for me. My third uncle was very mean.

### Marrying the Chinese Way

Wong-Vargas: So I had to marry this man, the Chinese way. I had to go to Lai's house in order to be there. In China you don't ride in a car, but in a box, with four men carrying you. I had to wear the dress that my uncle bought for me, and then my face was covered with red cloth. The man was in Chinese long dress. He would open the door, and I would--well, the ceremony was like that. It was only a Chinese ceremony, not the church.

When I got there I had to kneel and give tea to the father-in-law and mother-in-law, and then to the second wife, and one by one to the sisters. Then I gave everybody tea, and everybody gave me something, like souvenirs. I remember quite well that the Changs gave me a pair of gold bracelets, a ring, earrings--a set--and, most of all, a set of buttons.

I call them a set, because whenever there is an event you have to put them on. I always kept them; I didn't ever want to sell them, but I did sell them later.

Nathan: Were they jewels?

Wong-Vargas: All in gold. But from my uncle, nothing. So I married this man. Well, they forced me to marry him. How could I have escaped? Where would I have gone? I knew nobody. Remember my uncle hired a stretcher and took me to the Changs' house and left me there with high fever.

Nathan: Were you able to write to your father in Peru?

Wong-Vargas: No, because of the war. I only wrote to Rebecca, and she later came to Canton with her brother. She was different from me, flirting and so forth, but she lived in Canton. She had her problems.

So how could I have escaped? And besides, Mr. Chang Seen Pac, the old Mr. Chang, had saved my life, really. My third uncle didn't spend one cent on my sickness; he just sent me to the Changs when I was sick with fever. How could he do that? A few years later, before he died, I went to see him. He was crying when he saw me. He did very bad things to me, and he shouldn't have done that. Worst of all, he said, "If she dies, just bury her," like I was just an animal.

#### Living at the Changs' House

Nathan: So you were married and lived in the Chang house?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. On the other side of my room, which was quite big, Mr. Chang Seen Pac had a library. He had a lot of beautiful old books. He was like a Ph.D. today, very highly educated. One step more, and he would be close to the king. So he had a lot of books. He told me one day that those books were his life. That little library had the sofa that Ah Sham bought. They also had chairs there, so it was like a little living room for me. On the mezzanine I had a mattress there, and sometimes I liked to sleep there, and I liked to read some of Mr. Chang's old books. There were stairs on the mezzanine so you could go up. It was quite nice. When I got sick, I was always upstairs on the mattress on the mezzanine.

Did I tell you how the maids saw somebody like my mother looking at me when I was sick? As I said, my room was next to the little library that belonged to my father-in-law,

where he had his very special books. I was very weak and always got sick with fever. Yi Po, the children's nanny, said she saw somebody in white looking down at me, sadly. She said the woman was beautiful, all in white. She saw her about five o'clock in the evening.

The next day at exactly the same hour she saw her again. I was sick with fever. On the third day, she called in my mother-in-law to see, but nothing happened. She didn't see her anymore--just the two times. Later on I showed Yi Po my mother's picture, and she said it looked like the person she saw, because she was also in white. She said, "Maybe your mother's worried about you." Maybe so. I really don't know how to explain it. That house was over a hundred years old. I also saw my dead father-in-law in that house, but not in the same room; that time I was in another room. Later on--this is another story--I saw the nurse (who had died). Of course, I was dreaming, but it wasn't like a dream. I don't know how to explain it. It was mysterious, no?

Then I got pregnant with Martha right away, because in that time you never tried to avoid having children. When I had Martha I was sixteen--very young, and I knew nothing at all. When I was carrying Martha, I realized that this man was terrible--Martha's father, Nim Yee. Oh, he was very mean. If he threw his teacup at his mother, you can imagine how he was with me. He would say, "You do this," and "You do that," because he was the only son of the first wife.

He even told me that Ah Sham was a bad person. She would come to visit me. My uncle told him that Ah Sham was a bad person, and so he even didn't respect my Ah Sham. Martha was a seven-months baby, maybe because I didn't know how to do things. You know what he said? "I don't know; maybe she's not my daughter." I could have killed him. The worst part of it is that when you marry someone, they always want you to be a virgin. It's the Chinese way, that you have to have a handkerchief, and the next day you show your parents. Ugh, it makes me sick now. Oh, I hate those things.

His mouth--he had a very dirty mouth. He said everything. He said, "Your friend Rebecca is living with a Japanese, etc." At that time, if you lived with a Japanese it was the worst, because the Japanese was the enemy. He said, in front of his family, "You know, I saw Rebecca with a Japanese guy. She's living with him." I felt embarrassed, because she was my friend, the only friend that I had. It was none of his business. He had a very dirty mind.

Nathan: When the bride comes to the husband's family, what is her position in the family?

Wong-Vargas: I was the daughter-in-law. If I were rich, they would treat me totally differently, but I should say that they were nice to me, although nobody visited me--only Ah Sham. The sister-in-law who is now in Sacramento was very nice. The one who is in San Francisco now, she was not nice, but not bad. She wasn't at home; she was living with her husband. The second daughter always came to visit. She liked to talk with her mother--gossip. Then one day she said, "Well, my brother should have married somebody who has a lot of money," I heard about it. I didn't care, because old Mr. Chang was like a father to me.

Unfortunately, before Martha was born, he died. I know it was because he believed in astrology. Astrology told him not to be involved in any event that year. Mr. Chang told my uncle that he didn't want his son to get married yet, but my uncle said he had to, because "now she belongs to you, and if something happens to her, I'm here in the village, and I don't want her to be all by herself." So my uncle wanted him to say yes, and he didn't want it. Later on I found out. The astrologer told him that if he had an event like that, something would happen to him. He always believed that, but he was so kind. He thought, "But this girl is all by herself. Oh, it won't matter." And after a few months he died. I don't know the truth of astrology, but--it was truth and I felt so sorry and upset for what happened.

Another reason he died was because his brother was working with the navy in a very high position, and he died. He was on a boat, and I think it was bombed. Mr. Chang was very upset over that, and little by little he got sick. I remember he called me to him, and he said, "Oh, you are getting heavy now." He said he knew I was a very nice and responsible person, because I helped him. [voice breaks] I was different. If I could have married him, it would have been better. I think he would have respected me.

#### The Promise Not to Sell Family Property

Wong-Vargas: He said, "I know if I die, my son will sell everything. But please promise me to not let him sell my property until my other son comes back." His second wife had two sons and one daughter. The daughter was small, and the other son was about eleven years old. The oldest son was in Chungking.



"If I die, wait until the other son comes back." They had some property there. He said, "Promise me you will help me." My husband was the only son of the first wife.

I told him, "Don't worry. You're not going to die. But I promise." When I promise something, I do it. Then he died. Most of them said that I brought bad luck to them: "It was your fault that he died." I was so sad, and I cried. Because it was true; he hadn't wanted his son to get married yet. It was my uncle's fault.

Nathan: If I may say so, it seems that you brought something very good into their lives.

Wong-Vargas: I think so, because I helped them a lot. They all liked me. You can't imagine how I suffered. The second wife was very nice and a very good friend of the auntie who lives in Sacramento. And the young daughter, about ten years old, was very nice to me.

[Interview 4: April 18, 1989]##

Nathan: At our last session you had gotten us up to the point in your life where your father-in-law had died.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. It was the Chinese custom at that time to have another meal after twelve o'clock at night, like midnight snacks. They always served something like chicken soup--something good for your health. He always tried to call me. He didn't call me himself; he would call his daughter and say, "Why don't you ask A Sou to have a snack." He used to call me "A Sou," which is a term of respect--like his son's wife, but not daughter-in-law. Sometimes I felt embarrassed because he was so nice, and maybe the others would be jealous. Sometimes I just pretended I was sleeping. Of course, I was expecting Martha at that time.

#### Death Ceremonies and a Vision

Wong-Vargas: Then he passed away, just two or three months before Martha was born. The Chinese custom when you were wealthy was that when you died you had to be at home for at least three weeks, I think. Then every weekend the priest would come over, a Buddhist, and chant and pray with a gong--ding, ding,

ding--the Chinese way. When the priest came over, the family had to feed him. The family had to be there, kneeling at a certain time when they prayed. Otherwise you just sat down. But since I was carrying Martha, I felt so tired.

One night I was so tired that I asked the sister-in-law (the one who lives in Sacramento now) if I could go back to my room and rest a little bit and then come back. She said, "Oh, of course; go ahead." So I went to my room and lay down on my bed. All of a sudden I saw him. I didn't believe it, but I saw him. He came to my room, but he was dead. He always worried about me, and I remember he said, "You should take care of yourself. You are cold; why don't you put that blanket on?" At that moment I forgot he was dead. Then he helped me put my blanket on, and I could still hear the ding, ding, ding from the prayers. I got so scared. I don't know how long I lay there, unable to open my eyes. Maybe I was dreaming, but it was my same room; everything was the same.

Then I felt so cold, and an aunt kept calling me, "A Sou." I heard another woman's voice, so I barely opened my eyes and told her about what happened. She said, "Oh, he really worried about you, because, you see, he's taking care of you." Well, that was very important, and I never forgot that time. I don't believe in the soul or things like that, but he was so real.

They said he worried about me, and maybe it was true; because his body was still out in the living room. That was the Chinese way when you were wealthy. Every day they gave him food; like before we ate, out of respect he was given food first--just a little bit, just a symbol.

The second wife of my father-in-law had two sons and one daughter. The oldest son was in Chungking, but the youngest was about eleven years old. He was very mean to me, very mean. He had a little knife, and he would pretend that he was going to stab me, and he did it, just a little bit, almost enough to break the skin. Oh, I was so scared, because I was young.

I was carrying Martha, so I was always a little bit hungry, and he would look at me at the table and then say, "You can't eat that much--only one bowl. Because I'm sure your family is poor and you don't have that much to eat anyway." Oh, he was very mean. But the sister was very nice. She was younger, and she always came to see me, and I would always cry.

I remember one year it was May 16, my birthday, and I was crying. She asked me why I was crying, and I said because I remembered my mother. I said that if I had a mother, I would give her flowers because it was my birthday, and she gave me birth. I told her my mother died when I was very young, and that was why I was upset. She remembered, because I saw her a few years ago, and she told me she remembered me telling her that. She thought it was a nice idea, to give the mother flowers on one's birthday.

They called the mean son, Bad Sou, which means "number eight." His sister was Kau Sou, which means "nine." Martha's father was "number three," another sister was "four," and "five" was the son who was in Chungking. "Six" and "seven" maybe died. So it was "eight" who was always coming at me with a knife. He did it just enough to make me feel scared and hurt a little bit, but never blood.

Nathan: Did he have authority over you?

Wong-Vargas: No, not directly--but indirectly yes, the problem was that nobody knew about it. I couldn't tell anybody. He would say these things when nobody was there. I couldn't tell my mother-in-law. He would just look at me at the table. Then I didn't feel hungry anyway; I was upset.

#### First Wife's Son and His Behavior

Wong-Vargas: I remember one time one of the aunts lived there (not the sister-in-law aunt)--maybe it was my father-in-law's cousin. She was a widow with no children, no family, and she lived there. She was talking with this second sister: "Now that the father died, and the oldest son is a man who just throws money away"--he didn't like to work; he was just lazy, and if he had money he just drank. Oh, he was a drinker from the morning until the evening.

Nathan: Were you able to do what your father-in-law asked you to do?

Wong-Vargas: No, not at the beginning, but I did later. All the property-document papers were kept by my mother-in-law, the first wife. The second wife, poor thing, nothing. Of course, she was also a member of the family. The first wife's son would ask for money, and she would give it to him. They had a few small houses that they rented, and then they had three or four shops rented out. The first wife collected the rents

and took care of buying things for the family. She gave money to her son, of course. The Chinese at that time preferred the son to the daughter.

Nathan: Was Martha's father there in the household?

Wong-Vargas: Most of the time he was out, because he had money that his mother gave to him. He had a very good friend who lived on the same lane. They had a few small houses there, and one was rented to his friend Sam King Lau. I remember him quite well. He was a nice man, but his economic condition was not very good. He was married, and his wife and small children lived in that small house. Chang, the son, always called him, and they would go out together. Chang always paid, of course, because his friend didn't have money.

I could tell that Sam King Lau was a nice man. But one time he did something, and they put him in jail. This was later on, and I went to guarantee him. He always remembered.

I overheard old auntie saying, "Now father is gone, and the son just spends money and doesn't know how to use it, plus the wife is a half foreigner (from Peru). I'm sure that within one year they will sell off all the properties, because there's no productivity, only spending." And she said, "And now she is expecting a baby. So there will be another mouth, and they will spend all the money." When I heard that, I was so hurt. It was true that the man was terrible, but me? I was a half foreigner, yes, but not the way they described it.

I wondered what I should do. I couldn't talk with Chang, because most of the time he was out with his friends or with another woman or something like that. He was just a playboy. I wondered who would give me anything when Martha was born, because my husband would never give me one cent, and I couldn't ask him. I had nothing of my own.

### The Japanese Lady

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to tell you that before this, one day when I was still living in Mr. and Mrs. Lai's house, I was shopping for her and passed by a shop that was like a tailor's shop. I kind of liked something hanging in the window, and then I heard the lady say something in English. She said, "I don't know how to use this," or something like that. It caught my attention, because I had taken English in Hong Kong, and I

understood what she said. She was a Japanese lady in her thirties, not pretty. I looked at her and asked if I could help her, because I always like to help people. She said, "Oh, sure. I don't know how to use the Chinese pants." They are very wide in the waist, and you fold it over in two places, and then roll the top. So I taught her how to do it. She asked me where I lived, and I told her about Hoy Chui Road. She said she lived very close by, and invited me to come and visit her.

This was before I was married. So after I was married, and after my father-in-law died, I was carrying Martha and I thought about her. I wondered how she was, and I went to visit her. She lived in a very simple place. I hated the Japanese at that time, but she was so different. She was not pretty and not ugly, but a little bit on the ugly side. But she was very nice, and her English was beautiful. You would have thought you were talking to someone who was British or American. I liked her, and I think she liked me, too.

We talked, and then she told me she had a daughter in Japan. She knew I was going to have a baby, and she said to let her know if I needed anything. So now, when I was so close to giving birth to Martha, I called her. She worked as a translator from English and Japanese for the Japanese newspaper in Canton. I asked her what she recommended for the hospital. Because I had nobody to talk to. My mother-in-law would say, "Oh, not yet; don't worry."

And the husband--oh, that man. After my father-in-law died, he become more aggressive. He was aggressive before, but he became more and more so. For example, I would ask, "Where are you going? He would say, "That's my business; that's none of your business." He never told me where he was going. So he had become very aggressive and bad. I would walk by, and he would push me on purpose, even though I was carrying Martha. If I had gotten smart and said, "What are you doing," or something like that, maybe he would get scared. But I was so scared, and he knew that, so he kept abusing me. He knew I wouldn't do anything. When he was mad or drank too much, he would raise his voice to me. I couldn't say anything. I just cried. Who was I going to tell? Who?

One day he was very drunk, and he started screaming at me for no reason. Then he pushed me down, and of course I was crying. The mother heard the sounds, and asked what happened. I said something had fallen down; I never said that he treated me as he did. One day his mother came in and

said, "That's natural, because he's jealous of your having a baby. So anything he says or does to you is natural. It will pass; it will be all right later on." Oh, that's the Chinese way. I don't know if she really believed that, or maybe she was fooling me. I would just cry.

He knew I was young and scared--I think now, at my age, I would hit him back--so more and more he went like that beating on my face or my head, and I just cried.

For some reason Martha was born at seven months. So then I called the Japanese lady, who's last name was Lin. I called her Miss Lin. Her Japanese name was Ling Mok. She said that close to where I lived was a very nice hospital, and I told my mother-in-law.

#### IV MRS. WONG, AND GETTING STARTED IN REAL ESTATE

Wong-Vargas: When I was still carrying Martha, my friend Rebecca came back to live in Canton with her brother. She was renting a small apartment, and the owner of that apartment was named Wong Shao Wing. (Her husband was a Wong, and her last name was Sam; so we called her Sam Shao Wing. In China, you wouldn't call her by husband's name and then hers. Even when married to Chang, they didn't call me Chang Wong Sou Lan. No, they called me Wong Sou Lan, or Mrs. Chang.)

#### A Doctor Who Knew Real Estate

Wong-Vargas: Anyway, this lady, Mrs. Wong (Sam Shao Wing), had quite a few apartments for rent; she was quite wealthy. Rebecca wanted to rent an apartment, and Mrs. Wong asked if she had any guarantee. Rebecca said no, but she had a friend. She mentioned my name and said I was married to somebody Chang, and gave her my father-in-law's last name. Mrs. Wong said, "Oh, I know him. His daughter-in-law is good to guarantee you, no problem." So Rebecca called me, and I went to meet Sam Shao Wing. (Later on she became my godmother. She was very nice.)

She was about forty at that time and was a doctor. She went to the university to study obstetrics. At that time it was not common for a woman to be a university graduate, because it wasn't so easy. She was a very clever woman and intelligent. I knew that her husband was in Shanghai at that time, and the Japanese were not there yet. The number eight daughter lived in Shanghai with her father. Later on I learned that they were separated, but I didn't know it at the time.

She was very good in the real estate business, so she had a lot of property. I learned that sometimes she loaned money to people with no interest, because my friend told me. Later my father-in-law died, and then Martha was born.

### Caring for Martha and Needing Income

Wong-Vargas: I called this lady to see if she knew of somebody to help me raise the baby. You needed someone, because my mother-in-law said, "You have to find somebody." In China it was very easy to find someone like a maid to take care of the baby when you are not home and so forth. You had to have somebody for at least one month, and three months was better. Somebody had to help, because in China you were supposed to be in bed for about fifteen days and rest. Now it's not necessary, but it was at that time.

I called Mrs. Wong, and she sent me somebody I called Yi Po, which means "second aunt," or something like that. That was Martha's nanny. Yi Po loved to sew, and she came with her little sewing machine. She had one daughter, and her husband had died. Her daughter was married, and she had two grandchildren. She was very nice and took care of Martha.

Martha was born at seven months, and I went to the hospital. I didn't know it would happen so fast, but the doctor said maybe it was because my husband was too rough on me, the situation--everything. Martha was born very thin. I remember that Miss Lin was the first visitor I had. She brought me a bottle of port; it's very nice after you have a baby, because it makes you have more milk and makes you strong.

Then I went home with a baby girl, and always they like boys better. And this man [my husband] treated me really like a slave. This father was so different from his father, the old gentleman. It was like black and white. This one was so spoiled by the mother; more than spoiled, he was mean, no feelings at all. He always said, "Be grateful, because we saved your life. Otherwise you would be dead."

Nathan: How did you decide what you were going to do?

Wong-Vargas: I couldn't talk to Mrs. Wong, out of respect. But Miss Lin, yes. She told me about her life, which was very sad.





Left: Sham Shao Wing, godmother of Isabel Wong-Vargas, May 30, 1955.

Below: Isabel Wong-Vargas and Sham Shao Wing, Sacramento, California, 1959.





# #

Wong-Vargas: I sat at home thinking about what I should do. I had to have some income. I didn't dare ask this man, because he would never give anything to me. I thought, "I don't have money, but I have gold jewelry," that I had gotten for my wedding. I thought I could sell it and purchase some false gold jewelry just like it; so if there was a party I could put it on and they would never know it. In the meantime, I would have capital. [laughs]

Ah Sham had given me a very nice net, because in China we needed that for mosquitoes. She had made it herself in the Chinese way, first sewing the material (not crocheting, but something like that), and then making the whole thing. For me it was a treasure, because she made it for me.

I wanted to die again. Martha was born, and this man was terrible. Maybe the small ways he was mean to me I don't think about today, but two big things I will always remember. One was when he was going out. His number seven uncle called first, and I wondered if he was going to see him. When I asked, he said, "It's none of your business." I said, "If you are going there, I'd like to go too and see how he is," because he was very nice to me and to the whole family. He said, "If I go, you are not going." Then he twisted my right calf, and I couldn't walk for a few days. I still have something here.

A couple of months passed by. Nobody knew about this. Maybe they knew, but they never asked me, and I never told them. The mother was in the next room, and maybe she heard something but pretended that she didn't know. It was embarrassing. Who was I going to tell? My Ah Sham? She would worry. My uncle? He couldn't care less.

One day I went back to Kung Wuo City with Martha and Yi Po, her nanny, because I knew that my number three uncle was sick. My uncle was lying down on his left side. He was dying. He saw me, and he started crying. [emotionally] He had so much money at that time; I mean, we had a big hacienda. He could have helped me or sent me to school. Why did he have to lie--and why did he have to force me to marry Chang?

He was crying, and I remember his face, something like sorry. He looked at me, and then he looked down and cried.

Defending Ah Sham

Nathan: Did he give you any help then, when he was sorry?

Wong-Vargas: He was dying. He didn't say anything. He couldn't. I told him he would get better, and then I left.

The next time I went to visit, he had died, and I went to see Ah Sham again, with Martha. My cousin was also there--the one who cut my eyelashes. She was spoiled like her mother, my number three aunt. Poor Ah Sham was so nice, and she was working as a slave. Ah Sham was washing the wok used to cook the rice for dinner, and this cousin said, "You be careful"--like a slave--"you don't have money to buy one, so be careful when you wash that." I said to her, "Just a minute. You don't speak that way to your aunt."

If you treated me that way, I would just take it, but if somebody is doing something like that to Susana or my Ah Sham, then it's different. That's it. I said she shouldn't scream at her, because first of all she was her aunt. Secondly, she was my mother. I said, "Never do that again." Whoa, she was wild.

In China, when somebody dies you always put a little wood box with the name of the person, like a cabinet without a door. Her father's name was there, my number three uncle, because he had died. My cousin went there and cried, "Father," to the wood, "now you've died, so Lan answers me back," because I was not supposed to answer back, never. At home, if I were to answer back they would maybe kill me. I was just supposed to be quiet. I have a quiet personality, but also I have suffered so much that many times I don't say anything. What's the use of talking? Just don't bother me.

Then my number three auntie came over and told the two of us to get out. She knew her daughter would be coming back the next day, but to me she said, "You go out and never come back again." Oh, I was crying. You can imagine. The worst part was this cousin. She was very mean, and she said, "I wish, I hope, that when you get back to Canton, bombs land on your home and you and everybody in your family dies." I was so scared.

At that time I believed in the Chinese God. I think he was black in color. In China he is a saint. They call him

Dai Sin, meaning "big saint." I always liked him. In the Chinese way they had a whole bunch of sticks with numbers, and there is something like a ball. You put a stick there, and then shake it, and one by one the sticks fall out. (It's something like I Ching.) I only shook one, and the first one was the answer to my question. At that time I prayed to God that whatever she was saying, that it not be realized. On the other hand, I wished her every kind of happiness and good health. Really, that's me.

The stick that came out--you had to see what the number was--said, "Don't worry; don't pay attention to whatever evil things want to bother you. Just keep doing whatever you think is correct." I was so pleased, because it meant that nothing would happen to me or my daughter.

### Wanting to Die

Wong-Vargas: Then I went back to Canton. Very soon after that, one day my husband again went out. It was raining that evening. We had a phone, and he called. Yi Po answered and said my husband was coming back, so she was going to take an umbrella for him. She took two, one for him and one for her. I said I could go with her, so I walked with her. The lane was quite long, and he was there already with a rickshaw.

Yi Po gave him an umbrella, and I walked back with her, without anything. My husband said, "Wait, just a minute. You're supposed to carry the umbrella for me." He was like a king, you know? I said, "I already came to give you the umbrella. That's enough." So I didn't pay attention, because I graduated from high school; I was not like somebody who had just come from the village and didn't know anything.

I continued walking with Yi Po, and he screamed at me, "Hey, I'm hollering at you. You're supposed to stop." I kept walking. Then, with a stone--bang!--right on my head. At that time I didn't feel hurt; I just walked faster and faster with Yi Po, with him coming fast behind us.

There was no doorbell at the house, just a bell that you pulled on a cord. His sister (the one who is in Sacramento now) and his stepmother (the second wife of my father-in-law) came and opened the door, because I was pulling so hard on the bell cord. One time was enough, because he was chasing me and I was scared. The two of them asked, "What happened

to you?" Because the blood was coming [my head was bleeding], and I didn't know it.

In the meantime, he was chasing us, and had arrived at the house. He said, "You cannot go into my house because you don't listen to me. You're stuck here outside." His sister (this is why they like me; they know I have suffered so much) and the second mother said he shouldn't do that. He had another stone in his hand. Another one. Oh, no, this was terrible. I don't know, maybe he was drunk. Yes, that was the only excuse, but why not kill himself rather than harm somebody else like this?

He said, "You can come in only if you kneel before me and say, 'I'm sorry, next time I'll do whatever you want me to do'." I didn't want to, and they both said to say it, because I was bleeding. I said, "Why should I do it?" I had to do it, because Martha was inside; I had a daughter there. Oh, he humiliated me. [emotionally] Then he threw the stone away, rubbed his hands together, and he was like a king.

The next morning I went to Hoy Chui Bridge. I wanted to die. That was the second time. When I got there I was thinking. I was thinking about Martha, Ah Sham, and Susana. The first time I had thought about Ah Sham and Susana, and who was going to take care of them. Now Martha, too. If I died, she would be like me, with no mother. No, I thought I would go back.

So I walked back, but I really wanted to die. Sometimes you don't know where to go, who to talk to. Rebecca was different from me, so it was difficult sometimes.

So I went to see Miss Lin. I told her, and she said not to worry. Then she told me her story--very sad, too. She said, "If you need a friend, don't forget; at the last minute, when you are thinking about dying, think about me. Come to me, Miss Lin."

### Miss Lin's Story

Wong-Vargas: Miss Lin graduated from the university, and then she met her husband. He wasn't finished yet, so she helped him to finish at the university. She was older than he was. After they were married they had a daughter, and he found somebody younger. So they divorced. Her sister was taking care of

the daughter, so that's why she lived very poorly; she sent money back.

She was a very good friend. Unfortunately, after the war the Chinese wanted to kill the Japanese. That's another chapter. Everybody was chasing the Japanese on the streets to kill them, because the Japanese had been mean to the Chinese. I went to her apartment, and everything was on the floor; maybe they stole her money, I don't know. I wondered where she was, because I wanted to see her. She was my friend. Of course, I hated the Japanese, but she was different.

I went to the place where they had all the Japanese together--the camp. My husband's family said not to go see her, because maybe they would say I was looking for a man, not a woman. I said I didn't care, and I went. It was 1945. But I couldn't find her. Afterwards, when I was living in Hong Kong, she wrote to me in Canton, and they sent it on to me. I think that was the last letter. She said when she got back to Japan she found out her sister was very mean. She never told the daughter that her mother sent money to raise her, so the daughter thought her mother had abandoned her and didn't want to speak with her.

Miss Lin was very upset and got sick, and she went to a hospital. She wrote me the letter from the hospital. She said, "If I don't write you back again, it means I have died." [voice breaks] And she died. I never received any news from her. Unfortunately, I don't know where her daughter lives. Miss Lin was my good friend.

We were talking about how I didn't want to jump off the bridge, and I went back home. I said to myself, "I'm going to take care of my daughter, and I'm going to do some business; it's the only way." Then I started thinking what I should do. I did sell the jewelry, the bracelets and the buttons that were given to me. I replaced only the bracelets, because I couldn't replace the buttons; you couldn't find ones like them. I promised that someday I would buy them back, and I did, I bought them back later on, but somehow I lost them in Berkeley, California. It wasn't the same thing, but it was gold, something similar.

Buying Wood to Sell

Wong-Vargas: I learned it was very hard to get wood for cooking (*leña* in Spanish). There was no electricity, so you had to use wood. From Canton you had to walk to take a bus to Sa Ho, where they had very good noodles but also a lot of wood. The village women took all their wood to that place, and then you bought it there and brought it to Canton. People would always say, "Oh, the wood in Sa Ho is very cheap," and I was always thinking. I said to my mother-in-law that she had a small house empty, and I asked if she could lend it to me, because I wanted to go buy some wood and store it there, and then I could sell it. She said of course--because it was empty; nobody was living there.

First I went to buy wood, and I always took my Chinese calculator, the abacus. It was small, and I could do very well with that. The first time I went with Yi Po, just as if I were visiting, and looked around. Then I went by myself on a bus. You had to be there early in the morning. It was just like a flower market, only it was a firewood market. They sold the wood tied in bundles.

Nathan: How did you get it from the village back to your house?

Wong-Vargas: I hired a four-wheeled cart. It had to be big (four times bigger than this table), and one person pulled and two people pushed. At the beginning I had to hire people; one man was enough to pull, and I hired one lady to push. Then I pushed, too. I told them I wasn't going to push when we got to the city--not for me, but for the sake of the Chang family. The other woman was strong. Later on I didn't hire women because they weren't strong enough, and I hired mostly young men. Little by little I learned how to do it [laughs].

So I bought a load of wood, and then I sold it.

Nathan: How did you sell it?

Wong-Vargas: I put a notice in the paper in front of the door that we sold wood. Everybody knew the Chang family and the lane. If they wanted to buy it, they came to Chang's house and asked me, and I walked over to the little house and sold it to them. At first we had a little Chinese scale, and then I said, "No, I really should sell it by the bundle." Because sometimes somebody wouldn't want that much; they would want only half. I would calculate what half a bundle was. It simplified things.



Little by little, I was selling the wood for the same price they were getting at the market in Canton. Since my place was closer, they would come to me to buy it. I always liked to buy good stuff that burns a long time, aged and dry. I liked it, but I had to go early in the morning and then back, and then I pushed the cart. It was quite far away.

Nathan: Did you have to go every morning?

Wong-Vargas: No. Sometimes I went three times a week. After all, I had a baby and had to give her milk; I nursed Martha. Then I was expecting another baby; it was the second, before Michael. (Yes, there was another baby before Michael, but he died when he was three years old.) But I had a full house of *leña*. I told my mother-in-law, "Don't worry." She said, "Do you know how to do business?" I told her I was learning, but not to worry. She was always worried: "What happens if the people don't pay rent?" I said, "Don't worry. If I'm here, I'll help you." I said, "I am here, and we will always have rice and wood." According to Joan, the one in Sacramento, she always remembered that I said that. But her son is another story. Oh, so different.

#### Stopping the Sale of Father-in-Law's Property

Wong-Vargas: Then I was thinking about Mrs. Wong, my godmother. One day she came to the house when I was very pregnant. I was a little bit tired, but I was still doing it [selling wood]. She was looking for my mother-in-law. I said, "She is not here. May I help you?" She said, "No, I want to talk to her. Why did she sell the property so cheap?" I asked what property, and she said, "The property that belonged to your father-in-law." Remember that there were three and a half, like four, shops? "They are selling so cheap." I asked who was selling, and she said, "Your husband is selling them." I almost died, because I promised the father that I was going to protect all the property.

I said, "Please tell me about this," and she told me. She said, "Your husband wants to sell this property very cheap"--she knew, because she was in the real estate business--"and he should not. That's why I would like to talk to your mother-in-law. She shouldn't allow him to sell it that cheap." I said I was afraid she didn't know about it, because she never mentioned it. Then I said, "Please

don't tell her. Let me find out more, and then I'll come to see you." She said okay and went home.

My mother-in-law came back, and I didn't dare to ask her, because I was scared. I waited until my husband came back, and I asked him if he knew anything about selling the property. He said it was none of my business. He always spoke like that: "It's none of your business." I said I just wanted to know if his mother knew about it. He said no, and I asked how he could sell it. He said, "Well, I know where the papers are." He stole the papers.

##

Wong-Vargas: He hadn't stolen all the papers yet. In China it's like that. First you say, for example, "I'm going to sell this house. I'll sell it for \$200,000, even though it's worth \$400,000. Later on I'll get the papers. I don't have to get them first." So maybe he had some, but still his mother had some. Maybe he stole some already, but not the whole thing.

Nathan: Did he have the legal right to sell the property?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, if he has all the documents and he will say his mother said yes. I went to see Mrs. Wong and told her my mother-in-law didn't know, that it was only my husband. I told her I didn't know why, because he said it was none of my business. But, I told her, I had promised his father that I wouldn't let the property be sold until the other son came back from Chungking. So I asked her to please help me keep the property from being sold.

She said, "Don't worry, I'll go with you tomorrow." I wanted to see the whole group of people who were going to buy it. Chang was there. I was there with Mrs. Wong (whom I called my godmother later on). He asked what I was doing there. I didn't know what to say, but Mrs. Wong said, "Well, we've come here to stop you from selling the property, because your mother doesn't know it. Why do you want to sell the property?" He said, "Because I owe money." He drank and womanized, so probably somebody had loaned him some money and he had to pay it back.

Mrs. Wong asked how much he owed and said she would help him find somebody to lend the money to him, but not to sell the property. I said, "Please don't sell it, because I promised your father." He didn't dare say anything to me, because Mrs. Wong was there. I was forced to talk to her later on, telling her that he was mean to me.

Nathan: Was she able to stop him from selling the property?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Then I went with Mrs. Wong and him to borrow some money. You know from whom? From Mr. Chew, the one who had the beautiful home in front of the Lais' house. I met him then, because Mrs. Wong knew him; and he also knew Chang. Mr. Chew was with the Japanese government--because his brother was a Navy minister and had a very high position--and he had a lot of money at that time. So he loaned the money, and we signed a note saying we would give it back with interest, guaranteeing it; but not until the war was over and we sold the house. Everybody thought at that time that the war would be finished the next month, then the next month, and the next month. Of course, it lasted about three years and eight months.

So Chang got the money to pay off his debt, and his mother never knew about this problem. Mrs. Wong didn't tell her. His mother never knew that her son was going to steal the papers; only God knows. Chang knew, and I think he would remember it if he were still alive. Mrs. Wong died a few years ago.

#### Beginning to Learn about Real Estate

Wong-Vargas: Mrs. Wong told me I was a very nice person, "because you promised something, and you wanted to do it, good things. How about real estate? Would you like to learn how to do it?" So then I stopped the firewood business and began to learn from her.

Before that, I still didn't know what I was going to do, but I could talk to Mrs. Wong and have confidence in her. Then I heard somebody say, "If you go to Hong Kong, buy some second-hand clothing; it is very good to sell in Canton." I wanted to try that also. For example, if you bought twenty dollars worth in Hong Kong, you could sell it for maybe fifty dollars in Canton. But you had to go to Hong Kong to buy it and bring it back to Canton. I wondered where I could get the money.

Of course, I had a house full of wood, but that was already invested there. One night I remembered that Rebecca told me that Mrs. Wong loaned money. I already knew her and knew that she worked in real estate. She knew I would really

like to help and that I kept my word, because I promised my father-in-law those things. So I went to see her one night.

In the Chinese way, they always give you tea and cigarettes: "Do you smoke? Will you have some tea?" She gave me tea and asked me if I smoked. I didn't smoke, but I said yes, because I had to do something; I was so nervous. That was the first time I smoked, and I started coughing. She said, "You don't smoke." I said no, so she said, "Don't smoke. What is your reason for coming to visit me?" She was very clever.

I said I couldn't tell her because I was so embarrassed. She said, "You want some money. You want to borrow some money. Tell me what reason?" I just couldn't speak, "I--I--." I didn't tell her that much about my husband, like that he hit me. I didn't tell her yet; later on I told her. I told her about this and that, and she knew he was going to sell the property without asking his mother. She knew a little bit, but she didn't know he was mean to me. I was embarrassed to tell her at that time.

#### Borrowing Money and Paying Back

Wong-Vargas: So I said, "Yes, I want to borrow some money." I told her I'd like to go to Hong Kong to buy second-hand clothes. She said she would lend it to me, yes. "But this money doesn't belong to me. You know I invest with a group in a real estate company." It wasn't like here. Maybe five or six people put some money in, and everybody divides the profits. Some money stays in for the next opportunity to buy another property. Here, you introduce somebody to buy property; over there, you could buy it without studying anything. If you have money you can buy it, and then you sell it. It's much easier than here. Over there you have to have connections and good judgment for properties.

She said, "I can lend it to you, and I wouldn't charge interest." I knew she never charged interest. "But the only condition is that when you say 'one month,' you have to give it back. Not one month and one day, but one month exactly." If she gave it to me on the first of May, it had to be paid back by at least the first of June, exactly. I promised her, so she loaned it to me.

So I went to Hong Kong and purchased some clothes and sold them. It was okay. I earned already some, about 30 percent, which was quite a lot. I remember the day I gave back the money to her, on exactly the day. It was raining like you can't imagine. I said to myself that even though it was raining so hard I had to give back the money, because I had promised. I could have gone the next day, but--. So I went to her door, and when she saw me she said, "It's raining. What did you come over for?" I said, "I promised to give you back your money, so here is the money. I promised it today, so it has to be today."

Since that day she really liked me and asked me to learn some real estate from her and to work with her. I said I knew nothing, and she said, "I can teach you." I said, "Okay, next time," because I already had go back one more time to Hong Kong. I already had made arrangements. I think I had done it three times.

I remember one time I bought Martha a black doll. I just liked it, I don't know why. It was so beautiful. Martha has a picture with the doll in it, when she was small. I bought it on my first trip to Hong Kong. I always bought something for her.

I had a very good friend in Hong Kong, Lau Yin Ha. She is the one I shared a carpet with at the Chinese school. When I went to Hong Kong I visited her always. Her parents were very good to me, and I stayed there instead of having to go to a hotel. She was very nice to me at that time. She's still in Hong Kong, and when I go there I always call her and we chat over old times.

Then my second child, a son, was born. Poor thing, he was born at home. I don't know why I didn't go to the hospital. A lady came over to help with the birth. The day he was born, there were a lot of bees buzzing all around the house. There were a lot of flowers there. The bees came almost at the moment he was born and buzzed around, and then they left. That's why we named him Chan Fung. Chan means "Chinese tradition." My husband's name was Nim Yee. In China they have to see the family tree in a name, so after this name, you have that name. The generation of my husband was Nim, and the generation of his children is Chan. That's why Martha's name is Chan Ming, and her brother was named Chan Fung. Michael is Chan Hun. Michael's children would have a different first name.

Children's Illnesses

Wong-Vargas: Fung sounds like "bees," so it was a very nice name, Chan Fung. The next day after he was born, I felt there was something wrong with him because he couldn't have a bowel movement. It was closed up. He had to have an operation. So he started throwing up everything. Oh, it was terrible, the poor baby. I didn't know what to do. Again, my husband was not there. My mother-in-law sometimes liked to go out and play mahjonn, and I didn't know where she was, either.

I called my friend Miss Lin, and she said I should take him to the hospital. She gave me the Japanese hospital name. I hated the Japanese at that time, so I went instead to the Chinese hospital with Yi Po to help me. The Chinese hospital didn't want to receive him because they said I had to pay first--the Chinese hospital--and I didn't have money to pay. Where would I get it? So I had no choice. I called Miss Lin again and asked her the name of the Japanese hospital. She told me and said she would wait there for me. She waited for me at the door, and I took my son to that hospital--walking, of course, because we didn't have a car. They operated without my paying anything. In that way the Japanese were nice. They cured him, and they didn't charge me anything at all.

I was so grateful to Miss Lin for taking me there. Later on I told them, but they said, "That's it." Nothing more to pay. Martha was about a year old when this child was born. Martita was not strong; she was born at seven months. She had at that time something like diarrhea, and I didn't know what to do. I took her to the doctor, and of course my husband wasn't there. Sometimes he was gone for two or three days, and I wouldn't know where he was. I couldn't ask for anything. Martha was quite sick. I took her to a woman doctor. I had to walk quite far. She said, "Take this medicine and this medicine." I had little money, but it was enough to buy medicine.

I came back home and gave her the medicine, and she still couldn't stop the diarrhea. I think this was before the wood business, or I would have had some money. I didn't have money to take Martha to the hospital. The worst part was that she still kept having diarrhea.

I called my mother-in-law and asked her if she could please lend me some money to take her to the hospital again. She walked like this [demonstrates] because her feet were bound before, and I could hear her coming, click, click, click. She walked into my room and touched little Martha on her little foot like this, and then she said, "She's going to die tomorrow or the day after. Why should you spend money?" She did not lend me one cent. And she left, click, click, click. I did not know what to do, believe me. I was a cry of desperation!

I had already sold the net which Ah Sham gave me. The only thing I could sell was a dog. I had a small dog named Lucky. I bought it for almost nothing because I got him when he was small. So I sold the dog in the market. I'm sure they killed the dog to eat, because they had a market to kill dogs. Those were other kinds of dogs, domestic dogs, kind of cute. Not like a shepherd. Lucky was white.

With that money I went to see the doctor--the same doctor--and she gave me medicine, and then I walked back with Martha and Yi Po. With that medicine I could cure her, thank God for giving me light and strength to save my daughter.

I had to do something. That's what drove me to sell those gold things and get into the wood business. Then I did the clothing, and then real estate. My Amah, my godmother, why did I call her my godmother? Because she said, "You're so nice; you look like me." She said she had so many daughters, but none of them looked like her. "But you remind me of myself when I was young," she said.

### Husband's Violence

Wong-Vargas: Little by little I had to tell her things, oh, so many things, but one day it was terrible. All of a sudden in the morning he [my husband] wanted to have some dim sum. He drank from morning on, so he carried a small bottle of liquor with him in his pocket. He would put some in his tea. I was scared when he drank. When he didn't drink he was a bum, but when he drank--and always he drank from morning to night. Then he would disappear, and I wouldn't know where he went.

On this morning I said, "Don't drink again," and he said, "That's my business." This was at the dim sum breakfast restaurant; there were a lot of people around. He

said, "If you say one more word, I will throw this tea cup at you." I said, "Here? In the restaurant?" He said, "Yes, in the restaurant." I said I didn't think he would be so mean, and--wham--right here on my head. I still have scars here over my left eyebrow. Of course there was blood, and then he left. People were watching, and I was so embarrassed. The owner helped me put some tobacco over my eyebrow to stop the blood. He didn't pay anything.

What could I do? I couldn't call the police, and I was embarrassed to tell. I had to go back home and live with him again. So you had to be quiet. Oh, I'll never forget that. Another night he said I shouldn't say anything, and then--bam--he hit my head against the wall. Again there was blood. My godmother was supposed to see me the next morning, and she came. She saw this, and I told her. From that time on she came to cure me; she was a doctor. From then on I talked about him. She said, "Don't worry; from now on I will help you. He won't dare," she said. "If he says something, come to my house and bring your children to stay with me." So it was a little bit less, because he knew I had somebody to help me. A couple of times I did take my children and went to stay with my godmother.

### Real Estate Deals in the Tea House

Wong-Vargas: Then my godmother taught me about real estate.

Nathan: How could she teach you to judge a house, for example?

Wong-Vargas: In China, every morning we would go to a dim sum house; they're called tea houses. Everybody who is in real estate sits in a group on one side, like smoking and non-smoking here. They had one side only for real estate people who buy and sell houses. The people who want to buy sit in another section. They come over and tell the real estate people what they want.

The good thing was that Amah--that's what I called her later on--was the head of the group. She was the person who checked on the money and everything. She was very nice. Until now I have never seen such a nice man as my father-in-law, and I have never seen such a good woman as my godmother. I was really lucky. She liked me because I looked like her when she was young and because I liked to help people; and she also liked to help people. For example, if she had one piece of bread, she would give you half. I'm



like that. Nobody told me to be that way; that's me. She said her children were not the same.

Nathan: Was she honest in her business?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, very honest. Very nice, I could tell. She was not only honest, but correct. The real estate in Canton was like this. For example, the people in the group had money, and they would buy and sell. In China, let's say I liked this house, and I knew the market was \$300,000. But a person wanted to sell it for some reason for \$200,000--maybe they needed money--and the group would purchase it. You would have escrow, like here, and you have two or three months to pay it off, but not like here, where you go to the bank and get a loan. Over there you have to pay in cash, in two or three months. It all depends on the time negotiated. During that time we would put down maybe just \$10,000, but in a few months we would have to have the whole thing to pay it off. If you don't pay, you lose the \$10,000. If they find somebody else and don't want you, they will pay you \$20,000--double your down payment. People liked to put down about \$50,000, because if they pay you double, you earn money anyway.

If, during that two or three months, you find another buyer who will pay \$300,000, you make \$100,000 without using any money from your pocket--only the down payment. Here you couldn't do that, I don't think. We call that *my fah*.

##

Wong-Vargas: Here, realtors have to study and pass an examination. Over there, you don't have to. I watched my godmother, and she taught me. Over there, houses were made of cement and concrete. She explained the important things I needed to know about a house. If the base is concrete, it's good. Little by little I learned. I liked it, and I had good feelings about it. I said, "Amah, I think this is good." Even if I couldn't go with her for some reason, and the house sold, she always gave me my commission. She always protected me because I had two children, and she knew about my husband.

She got to know me more and more, and she knew that I liked to work. I'm not a person who just sits there and does nothing.

Nathan: Would you keep your finances separate from Chang's?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. In China you can do that. We had such good opportunities. In the beginning I bought two little houses with her help. It was near the lane where I lived. It was

during the war, and the owner somehow went to Chungking. Someone closely related, like a sister, had the papers, so we could buy it. As long as all the papers were there, it was legal, and she signed it. If the brother was in Chungking, he could sign the papers by mail; well, you couldn't mail things, but they could be delivered, and another person could get power of attorney, and then they could sell it.

So I purchased two little houses with Amah, and then we sold them and earned some money. There was one more--I still have that one in Canton--that I bought with Amah. She said, "Buy this one in your name." I already had a down payment, and then I needed to find somebody to buy it. Of course, if I couldn't find anybody to buy it, I would have to pay. I was scared, and I asked Amah what would happen if we couldn't find somebody and I lost. She said she had some money and would help me. She always said that. That's why I have what little I have, because she helped me. Otherwise, I was so scared and weak at that time that I couldn't have done it.

She always told me, "Real estate will never go wrong. Real estate is the best." She always said that, and she said, "When you buy something, before buying it you have to think of selling it." That's a very good idea. Then, "If you think nobody's going to buy it from you, then don't buy it." That's why before I buy something, like this house, I always have to think about whether somebody would buy it. If you think nobody would buy it, then you'd better not buy it, because you will get stuck with the house.

The best part was that in a very nice business area there was a shop on the second and third floor. The first floor was rented to someone who had a business. My Amah said we had to buy this one. It had a very good price. I said, "But, Amah, the down payment." She said, "You should, because you have children; my children, they are all grown up." Her children lived in Shanghai, and she used to send money to them. I went with her to send money, and she said, "Oh, I feel so good because I already have sent money to my children." She was so nice. It reminded me of when I was in Peru and I sent money to Martha when she was at UC Berkeley. I felt so good after I sent a check for her while she was studying.

So this shop was very nice, and my Amah said we should buy it in my name. She said if I couldn't do it, she would help me with the money. And then it was a good price. God helped me, after making the down payment; we called that money *chuei pey kuin*. At that time it was Japanese money,

but not the yen; it was Chinese money, but in the Japanese time.

All of a sudden, a very short time after making that down payment, the chuei pay kuin--zooooom--it went way down, just like that, and I signed for it. So that house, which had been worth maybe \$100,000, was now worth only \$20,000 or \$30,000. I felt so sorry, but that's the way it went, unfortunately for the seller, who has to receive in chuei pay kuin. That's why I could buy that building, the one small building.

Nathan: Could you live in the upper floor?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, but I was living in my mother-in-law's house until the end. Of course I could have lived there, but I leased it. I rented everything out. We only invested in rental property.

But I was so happy, because the chuei pay kuin fell so far down at that moment, and I could pay off the payment. Right now it is a million and a half *intis* exchange to one dollar in Lima, Peru. Last February it was one million. (It reminded me of that time in Canton with the chuei pay kuin.)

Nathan: Was this part of inflation?

Wong-Vargas: I think so, yes. So I got that shop by making the down payment, and then I was hoping to sell this little house. I had been a few years with my godmother, and she said she would help me if I couldn't do it by myself. She was always behind me, so I could do things.

We kept thinking the war would be over; the people always said that. The newspapers were full of stories of people dying here and dying there--from the bombs. The bombs were not Japanese; they were American and Chinese bombs. The Japanese had taken over Canton, so the Americans wanted to kill the Japanese, not the Chinese. But unfortunately the bombs were not so exact that they hit only Japanese. You never knew whether they would hit here or there.

#### The Bomb that Fell into the Kitchen

Wong-Vargas: One day I was nursing my son, and Yi Po was holding Martha, who was about a year and a half. I remember I was reading in the newspaper about a woman nursing her baby, and zzzzzzzzt.

Oh, it was terrible, and I was scared reading about this, because I was thinking about myself. When the planes came, they gave you a warning siren. The war was terrible. It was so close. I was thinking about the lady in the newspaper, and I gave the baby to Yi Po and I took Martha. I was in the same room where the flowers were on one side, and the library was on the other side. There was a double door, and in the middle there was a metal bar. The kitchen was on the other side of the flowers. And then the bomb came, zzzzzzzzzzzt, boom. The kitchen.

Nathan: It hit the kitchen?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. As I say, God always helps me. In the kitchen they had a well, but nobody knew it was a well because it was covered with a cement cover. I didn't even know they had a well. The bomb fell from the sky, zoooooooooom, into the well. Half of the bomb went down, and half was up. The wall fell, and I couldn't get out because the door was closed. Everything in the kitchen was destroyed. Can you imagine if the bomb had gone a little bit over to one side? I don't think I would be here to tell you the story. This is why I say God always helped me.

I remember my mean cousin saying we were all going to die and the Chinese God, Tai Sin's stick answer said not to worry and that everything would be all right. And it was true.

It was an incendiary bomb, and a few bits had gotten in and the books were already burning. Oh, I was so scared, because I had promised to take care of the books, which were very valuable to my father-in-law. I couldn't get out of my room, and Yi Po was screaming and Martha was crying, even though she didn't know what was happening. She was crying because we were screaming.

You know what I did? With my back and arms I knocked the door open. I'm so strong when it is an emergency. I moved the bar from the door and pulled the door out. I don't know how, but I did it. Then I had to climb out, because the wall was already down on the floor. I told Yi Po to give me Martha first, and I took her to my mother-in-law. She went to a safe place because there was a bomb shelter two blocks away. Then I took the little baby, and then Yi Po. I called the maid, Wong Choy, to help me. After Martha and the baby and Yi Po were safe, I went back with Wong Choy. I wanted to save the books, but there was no water. Nobody told me what to do; I just used my intuition. I pulled out the flowers

with their roots and dirt, and beat the flames with them. I saved all the books, with the help of Wong Choy. She was so scared; the planes were still overhead, the sirens going zzzzzzzzzzzzz.

When the bomb hit, it sounded like money falling from above--like somebody from up above was pouring down piles of dimes--clink, clink. Then bam. It was such an experience; I will never forget that. You've probably seen movies, and it's exactly like that, only more. The noise is terrible.

After that, I always heard the sound of the airplanes in my ears. It rang in my ears every day, and I was scared. I would say, "Oh, the airplanes are coming." The others would say they didn't hear anything, but I could hear them clearly myself. I would take Martha and the baby and run under the bed. The beds were raised higher off the floor than they are here. This went on for about a month, and then the war was over. If not, I think I would have gone crazy.

#### War's End (1945)

Wong-Vargas: When the war was over, I thanked God. In China it's not like here, where you pray an Our Father or an Ave Maria. Over there, with your head like this, bow. I promised to the Chinese God that when the war was over I was going to bow on the floor one thousand times.

Nathan: So you put your forehead on the floor?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I promised one thousand times, and I did it. I was so happy. Somebody even jumped from the second floor with happiness and died. The war ended in 1945. My husband was not there, and I couldn't have cared less. I was so happy with my two children.

The neighbors liked me. One night I heard them saying, "Help," because of fire. It was two or three doors down on the next street. I wanted to help, so I jumped up and went to see if I could do something. I asked where the fire was, and they said, "Inside." There was a fire inside, and they just ran out. You have to do something, you know [laughs], and they did nothing. In China there are a lot of mosquitoes, so they use nets. And in order to kill the mosquitoes they have a little oil lamp. You touch the mosquito, and it goes inside the net and can't escape.

It may have been that someone was killing a mosquito, and accidentally the lamp dropped and started burning the net. I pulled it back, and I didn't realize that there was something broken, and I cut my foot. I didn't feel anything at the time. When they saw me working to put out the fire they came back in to help, too. Afterwards, they said, "Look at your foot!" There was blood all over, and the next day my foot got swollen. I don't know what caused it; it might have been tetanus, but at that time it was not known in China.

Nathan: So your foot and leg became infected?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. The neighbors came to visit me; they came with food and so many things. I couldn't walk. But the war was over, so there was medicine that could cure it. Volunteers from the United States came, I remember, to cure my foot. Oh, I was so happy, I didn't really care about my foot. The war was over, and I could write to my father. Oh, I was so happy. After the war was over, my brother-in-law, Nim Yan, came back from Chungking. My husband could sell his property and divide with his brothers--only men; the daughters do not count.

I didn't see my husband any more, and I didn't know where he had gone. He went to Hong Kong. His mother might have known. I couldn't have cared less.

#### Becoming Amah's Godchild

Wong-Vargas: My Amah liked me and asked me to become her godchild. In China you can do that. If you like somebody, you can say, "I'd like to be your sister," or your brother or godmother, or something like that. I said it was an honor for me, and of course I would love to. She gave me a gold ring with my name on it as a symbol of the tradition. She had a nice party, invited friends and family, and would even say to people, "This is my goddaughter," and I then called her Amah, or godmother. She was just like my mother.

She really loves me, and whenever she needs me, I'm there. We really like each other so much, just like mother and daughter. I don't think most mothers and daughters are that close.

Then they told me my husband was with somebody else in Hong Kong, and I said I didn't think so. Maybe he was fooling around, but I didn't think it could be so. I didn't pay attention too much, because I was working in real estate and learning from Amah, and the war ended. Of course I wrote to my father. I felt happy anyway; everybody was so happy. Of course the Japanese were suffering at that time. Some of them were killed, and I don't know what happened to the others. My friend Miss Lin went back to Japan.

My sister-in-law (the one who lives in Sacramento) said I should go to Hong Kong because my husband was with somebody. If I didn't go it would mean that I really didn't care. They knew that I suffered so much. They knew that he was mean to hit me. They didn't say anything and pretended they didn't know, since I didn't tell them. But they knew. The second daughter's husband--the one who taught English--told me one day that if I were his sister he would tell me to divorce him. "But since you are our family you'd better stay with us."

My husband had Japanese friends at that time, and he invited so many people over. His uncle, who died by a bomb on a boat--he was in the navy--knew Japanese in high positions, so they had Japanese friends. But I didn't like them; I only liked my Japanese friend. I didn't like these Japanese at all, but they always invited them to dinner, and I would pretend I had a headache. I didn't like Japanese; I hated Japanese at that time. Now, of course, that's all finished.

My husband always said, "You don't like the Japanese, so how come you like Miss Lin?" I said it was because she was different. She was human, she was nice.

[Interview 5: April 25, 1989]##

Nathan: It was the end of the war, and you had learned a lot about how to handle real estate. I wondered if, when you went to Hong Kong, you were still active in that field?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I was working in real estate but not so active like I was in Canton. As I told you, my sister-in-law told me that I had to go to Hong Kong, because she had heard that her brother had somebody living with him. I wasn't quite sure, because people would say so many things.

The oldest son of the second wife did come back. He was a very nice person. His name was Nim Yan. He was a very

nice gentleman like his father. He died very young, in his early fifties. He was very happy when they divided the property. My husband and his group invested something in a boat. I don't know; I never helped him with his business. I never even dared to say anything. He did it with his friends.



## V POST-WAR HONG KONG AND THE IMPORT-EXPORT BUSINESS

Wong-Vargas: My husband went to Hong Kong, and he invested some money in a jewelry store with friends. I don't know how much, but it was his money and I never asked. So I went to Hong Kong with Martha (Michael was not born yet) and the second one. We called him Chan Fung. (Remember when I told you about when he was born?)

### Husband in Hong Kong

Wong-Vargas: Of course I wrote to my husband and told him that we were coming, so he rented an apartment on the third floor in Happy Valley. My sister-in-law also went to Hong Kong but not to live with us. She often came to visit. I also took Martha's Amah--her nanny. The apartment was not too big, but it was big enough, and it was furnished.

My godmother was still in Canton, and I wrote to her and asked her to come. She was taking care of her property there. My husband would sometimes come back and sometimes not, and I never knew where he was. I had the children, and I would worry about this and that. One night he came back drunk; he was always drunk. I went down from the third floor and opened the door. He had a key, but I thought he might have forgotten his. I went back to the third floor, where we had an iron gate--a fold-in gate. There he was, drunk, and right away he closed the door on my finger on purpose. Oh, he was so mean.

So I was scared all the time. It was an unnatural life. Now I was carrying the third baby; I was expecting Michael in three or four months. At the beginning he didn't say anything. Then one day I went out to buy something, and I saw him and came back with him. He started again arguing on

the street, close to where we lived, and then he started kicking and hitting me on the street like a slave. On the street! I was so embarrassed, because the people on the second floor were looking out at me from the balconies. I went back crying to the apartment on the third floor. This man was terrible and savage.

I was carrying Michael, about five months along; you could tell a little, but not that much. I told you my husband had a jewelry store. I always wanted to have a pair of diamond earrings. I visited the jewelry store one day. I knew his partner, Mr. So, and I talked to him. I told him I always wanted to have a pair of diamond earrings, and he said, "By the way, we just bought a pair of very nice earrings. Why don't you have it? I can tell your husband and write it down. It's a very good price." They weren't big, but something quite nice. I took them home and told him, but he didn't say anything; or he said it was okay or something like that.

#### Renting an Apartment for Father

Wong-Vargas: During this period of time my father wrote to me from Peru, because the war was over. He said he was coming back to Canton and would pass through Hong Kong and would like to stay a couple of months. Could I find an apartment for him, because it was very expensive to stay in a hotel? I was very actively looking around for an apartment, and I found one on the Kowloon side, on Boundary Street. It was in a very nice area, on the second floor, with furniture. It was a very reasonable price, because after the war ended there were a lot of empty flats there.

I knew that area (I didn't find it in the newspaper) because when I was in Canton working with my Amah in real estate, there was a family from Nicaragua who had five children--two from the first wife and three from the second wife. The father had passed away, but his second wife was still alive. She was Nicaraguan and didn't speak any Chinese, only Spanish.

Nathan: Did you speak Spanish at that time?

Wong-Vargas: No. Very few words--"how are you" and "thank you," that's it. This family had some property in Canton and they wanted to sell it. So my godmother met the three sons, and I also met them there. They told me they lived in Kowloon Tong. I



Isabel Wong-Vargas, Kowloon, Hong Kong, circa 1947.



had their phone number when I went to Hong Kong, and I called them to help me find an apartment for my father. They said, "Oh, next door is an empty one." That's how I found it. It wasn't exactly next door, but one floor down from when they lived on the third floor.

One son's name was Gonsalo, and he had a sister Maria and a sister Angela. The two other sons belonged to the Chinese wife. The father and the Chinese wife had died, and the second wife and her three children lived together. They had a lot of property because the father had bought a lot of property in Canton. They sold some, and my godmother helped them.

I remember rent of the apartment was \$120 a month in Hong Kong money, which is even less than the U.S. dollar. This building belonged to a big government company or something like that. I was very lucky to get that apartment. I think I paid less than \$1,000 for the furniture. It was second-hand, but quite nice. Of course, I paid for my father--\$120 every month for him. He was going to pay me back, but of course he didn't.

My friend Rebecca came back to Hong Kong after the war ended. She had a little daughter, and she didn't want to live with her parents. Maybe she was divorced, I don't know; that is her business. She asked me if I knew of somewhere that she could stay. I said I had an empty apartment that I had rented for my father, so she could live there until he arrived from Peru. Then she would have to find another place. So she was living there with her daughter and maybe with her brother. I was lending the apartment to them, because she couldn't afford to pay for it at that time.

#### Father's Family in Peru

Wong-Vargas: My father was due the next month. He had thirteen children, but three died, so he only had ten. At that time he had eleven, and one was named Soraida, who was about eight years old. According to my father, they went to the immigration in Lima, Peru, to get passports.

One cousin, David Wong--the one who stole my watch--was always crazy. He tried to help my sisters and brothers to get passports in Lima, but he didn't park the car right. My

sister Soraida was walking, and the car hit her and killed her. So my father couldn't come as soon as he planned.

So Rebecca was living in the empty apartment, and I was living with my husband. Oh, that man. After he hit me on the street I didn't want to go back to my room; I slept with my kids and the maid. About two weeks later, his uncle number seven--very nice--came and talked to me. He said, "Well, he's a man, and you are not in the same room, blah, blah. So that's why maybe he has another woman outside." They are telling me his excuse. He already had children at that time [by the other woman], but I didn't know that until later.

### Decision to Divorce

Wong-Vargas: I thought maybe he was right, so I went back to my room. One night he came back, drunk as always. I was expecting Michael. What could I do? I hated him, but where could I go? This night, a minute after sexual relations, he threw me--bam--to the floor. He said, "Aw, you look like a piece of wood, like a dead person." The bed was very high, and I didn't know he was going to do that kind of savage treatment.

I don't know how and where I got the strength. I was shocked, furious, and angry. I stood up and looked straight into his eyes and said, "You are never going to touch me again. I'll kill you if you touch me." When I said that he looked astonished, because I never said anything so fiercely before. I went to the bathroom almost out of my mind to look for some sort of strong detergent like ammonia to tear off my skin. I wanted to wash myself; I felt so dirty. I really could have killed him. Sometimes you just can't stand it any more. I was expecting a baby, and he treated me just like a piece of wood. I could have lost my son Michael because of this animal.

I talked with Rebecca and told her I was going to move. She asked why I didn't go to the police. I said if I went to the police they would come over and maybe it would get in the newspaper. My husband's father was a very nice man, and I didn't want that.

I said I was going to divorce him, and I didn't care what happened. She said, "It's about time," because she had always said that. She had seen him many times with a woman, very close to Happy Valley where we lived. I didn't want to believe it, and I was scared, too. I was very thin at the

time and very weak. My Amah was not there; she was in Canton. The next day I remained very strong and took Martha and her nanny and my second son and said, "Let's go. We are going to live on Kowloon side." At that time I was so sad. I only wanted to move away from Chang.

Gonsalo Ng Family, and an Import Business

Nathan: Did you have some money of your own?

Wong-Vargas: Very little. Before that I had already talked with the Gonsalo Ng family. I forgot to tell you that his father, before he died in China, bought a money order from New York for about \$10,000 U.S. He had a lot of money. A few years passed, and the family didn't know if it was still valid or not. I told them to write and check it out. They were a little bit naive about business. I was young, but I knew a lot about business already. They said they would write, but they had to send the check. I said they didn't have to send the check right away. "Why don't you import something?" But they didn't have any money. They asked me if I would like to buy the check, but I said no. First of all, that was too much money.

There were the five children and the one mother, so maybe they were going to divide it in sixths. I said I would buy one part--one sixth, but I wouldn't pay one-sixth right away. I would pay a half of the one-sixth and the other half when they found out the check was okay and the merchandise had arrived. I told them to import something. At that time it was so easy to import, and the cost was low.

They asked what they should import, and I started thinking. In China they dyed things a black color, so they needed dyes. Since the war they had had none, so I said "Why not buy some dyes?" Black was the best, or very dark blue or dark brown. I always heard that. What else? A car--a Studebaker. And I said, "Why not cigarettes?" Because they loved American cigarettes. I remember we imported Camels. What else? Automobile tires. So those are the things that we ordered. Because they didn't know, and I didn't know, either. But I said, why not these things? Cigarettes--I don't smoke, but everybody else smoked.

Nathan: How did you know where to buy these things?

Wong-Vargas: You had to send to New York. Gonsalo's family knew the Remedios family, and I went with them to talk to them. The Remedios family had two sons, but I only met one, Eddie. The other one is now a lawyer in Hong Kong. Eddie was the youngest, and his father was very nice. Mr. Remedios has a partner, Mr. Cheung.

Nathan: Were they from Nicaragua?

Wong-Vargas: No, from Portugal. The Gonsalo family told me they had an office in a very nice location on the Hong Kong side, so I went and talked with them. They said, "Good. We can lend you a space at our office. You can open the import-export business." Then they gave us a nice corner, and we opened our office.

Mr. Cheung was an Englishman. I don't know why he was called Cheung. Mrs. Cheung, his second wife, was Chinese. Eddie Cheung, his son, was also English. The father had three or four kids from the first wife, who died. His second wife, Mrs. Cheung, was much younger, but no children.

They asked me what name we should call it. I thought about how I came from South America and suggested they call it the South America Import-Export Trading Company. They also came from South America, so that was the name. They listened to me.

We got two desks from Mr. Remedios and Mr. Cheung's company. It was good and it was bad--good because they didn't charge us anything and bad because it was very easy at that time to find offices and furniture, and later on they wanted their office back.

##

Nathan: So later they needed the office back?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, because their business was growing. You asked how I knew how to order things. They also had an import-export company, so they had a lot of books there. If I would like to have tires, or cigarettes, I just looked them up.

Nathan: These are catalogs?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I would look up cigarettes, and I would not want California but New York, because the check was from New York. Then I would order. You didn't have to send the money with the order, but they did send the check because they wanted to



clear it to see if it was good or not. Half of the check paid for the merchandise, and the other half was sent back in another money order for the family. They didn't like the business at the beginning, but they did later on because we made money.

The car came, everything came [laughs]. A newspaper ad didn't cost that much, and people would come over. They wanted to import and export, too. A Chinese couple in New Zealand asked me to send them some Chinese goods from Hong Kong, like tablecloths and silk things. We sent samples, about \$400 or \$500 worth, and they never paid us back. So in exporting we didn't have much luck. But in importing, yes.

We couldn't sell the car for about a year. It didn't come right away; everything took a few months. But we sold everything within a few months, paid back what we owed, and earned a lot, believe me--not 10 percent, but 100-150 percent. It was a very good business.

But then the company, which was also growing, wanted its space back. We looked all around and couldn't find a nice place. Everything was so expensive. In six months the situation had changed completely. So we closed the office and sold everything but the car. I bought the car, but I didn't know how to drive [laughs]. In the beginning Eddie Cheung was going to buy it. But I decided I would buy it, because I had earned some money; why not? At that time the brother of my cousin David Wong's wife (Flora) came to Hong Kong, and he didn't know where to live. He was a good driver, so I said if he would teach me to drive he could stay with us. In China lots of places have a room for maids. In that apartment there were two rooms for maids. He was like a chauffeur at first.

### Saving Susana

Wong-Vargas: Did I tell you about my sister Susana? I was in Canton, and my second son was already born. I talked with Ah Sham, my good stepmother, and told her I was worried about Susana. I didn't want to go back to the village, because the last time I went my auntie said, "Don't come back again," and I was crying and left with Martha and Yi Po to go back to Canton. But I worried about her and also about my niece, Rosalia. I told my Ah Sham that I would like them to come to Canton and live with me, and then they could go to school, because they

were not going to school in the village. Ah Sham said she didn't know about Rosalia, because her grandfather and grandmother were there, but she thought Susana I could help. My Ah Sham was very nice and thoughtful.

Later Susana told me that one morning about five o'clock, without making any noise, they left Kung Wuo City, left Mausan, and Ah Sham brought Susana to the place I had when I was living there. My father-in-law had already died, and I was working with the wood. Then my second uncle was mad, and he almost hit Ah Sham: "Why did you take Susana to her sister? Why did you do that? You shouldn't have done that. She should stay here until her father comes back." He came to Canton to find Susana, and we had to hide her.

When I moved to Hong Kong I took Susana with me. Then I moved to my father's apartment in Kowloon and took her with me, too. Susana was with me all the time, so she knew all the story. One day I was out, and Susana was at home with Yi Po and the two kids. My husband came with a gun, drunk, wanting to kill me and the kids. Susana was scared and said, "My sister is not here. If you want to kill someone, kill yourself first." I don't know what all she said. He saw that Martha and the second child were sleeping, and he didn't do anything except touch them, and then he left. Susana said, "If you come again, I'll call the police." Susana was different from me. I was scared, but she was not. Oh, no, she was different. She has a different character. I was so scared of everything; I would never have called the police, never. When I came home she told me about it.

Nathan: At this time your father had not yet come from Peru?

Wong-Vargas: No. Then I was working, not in real estate, but in the import-export business. After we received the merchandise from the check, we did another transaction, because the dye was very good and went fast. Also the cigarettes went fast. Only the car was left [laughs]. Then I learned how to order. I learned that you only had to have an account in a bank, and you didn't have to send any money when you made an order. I learned a lot about the import-export business, and it was a nice thing. I liked it, but, as I said, then we didn't have an office and had to sell everything off. We split everything, and so I had some money and the car.

Advice about Divorce

Wong-Vargas: I remember my husband's second brother-in-law said, "You should go back with him." I said, "No, never." He said, "I know he really isn't worth it, but I would like you to be in our family as always." I told him the reason, and he said he didn't blame me. So it was okay. I couldn't be with my husband. I was embarrassed, but before I moved to Kowloon I told seventh uncle, who came to see me. He said, "You know how the family is, and divorce, the Chinese, etc." I told him the circumstances, and he didn't say anything. Because I told him why I would never, never be with him again. Then they said okay, I could do anything I wanted. I said I wanted a divorce.

My cousin Juan came back from Peru first, and David Wong also came back and stayed in my apartment in Kowloon. It was just a short time. I remember David said, when he came back after the war, "Let's go back to Kung Wuo City and to Mausan to visit our family." I said no, because my auntie had said never to come back again, and I still remembered that. He said, "No, let's forget about that and go back; the war is over, and it'll be all right." So I went back with him, and Ah Sham was happy and everybody was so happy.

The number four cousin, Juan Wong, came back and stayed in my apartment. He was the son of my number four uncle. He told me that my father said if I divorced he would cut me off as if I weren't his daughter any more. I said, "If he said that"--I was very strong, I don't know how--"if he doesn't understand how much I have suffered in the past, if he doesn't want to be my father, that's fine with me." I said that. Because when I rented that apartment, I rented it in my name. It was for my father, but I didn't rent it in his name because I couldn't do that. That's the way you do it in China; it was in my name, and I paid the rent. He only wanted it for two months and then he would go back. But after the death of his daughter, he was delayed in Peru.

So I said that. I cried, but I was very strong. For sure, my husband was not going to touch me any more, so there was no way I was going back to him.

Son's Death, and Change of Religion

Wong-Vargas: My second child had died when he was three years old. Up to that time I believed in Chinese Buddha and everything. He died after Michael was born; I have a picture of the three children.

My ex-husband, Nim Yee, came over to pay a bill or something and then went back to Hong Kong side while I was living in Kowloon side. His brother-in-law, his second sister's husband--the one who taught English in China (remember?)--was in Hong Kong. The oldest sister, Joan Quok, was very nice to me, and she went to the United States, in Sacramento, California, after the war to be with her husband. The second sister moved with her husband to Hong Kong.

When my second son got sick, Yi Po was there taking care of him and Martha. I had another nanny for Michael, because at that time in China it was very easy to have maids and nannies. Now it is difficult. The reason he died was that he had diarrhea and a fever, and Yi Po didn't tell me. I was working at the South America Import-Export Trading Company, and would go in the morning and come home in the evening. So I didn't know that he spent two days with fever and diarrhea. She only gave him an aspirin or something to get rid of the fever. The second night when I came back I touched him, and he had a fever. I asked what happened, and she said he had a fever. I said, "He had a fever and you didn't tell me?" Right away I took him to the hospital.

The hospital was very close to Kowloon, run by nuns, a Catholic hospital. I remember it was Dr. Wong Tin Sun. He said, "Oh, you have come too late." [very emotional] It was like I was cutting myself, it was so painful.

Then the nuns came to see me and asked if I was Catholic. I said no. They asked where I was from, and I said Peru. They said I must be Catholic. They asked if I had any papers, and I said no. Then a nun told me not to worry, that my son was going to go to heaven with God. "I'm sure he is in heaven. Don't worry; he will pray for you." She explained God to me, how beautiful heaven was and everything.

Nathan: Did it comfort you?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, a lot. She said, "Why don't you just imagine that he is there." It helped me a lot. Then I got scared, because I

thought maybe the Chinese god would punish me because I was changing religion. I couldn't sleep. My room had two beds, one for Susana and one for myself. I was young, and I was scared. I really believed in the Chinese god at that time, and now I was going to change.

One night I was so concerned, and I dreamed that the roof over my room opened. (Susana was there, and I could see her.) Then I saw a cross, and it was beautiful, with light. I called to Susana, and she woke up. I said, "Look," and there was nothing. It was just a dream. But it was so real, so beautiful. I said, "Okay, I think I should believe in God." Of course, I asked the Chinese god to forgive me for changing religion.

#### Advice, and Final Decision

Wong-Vargas: Then I saw Father Chau, Peter Chau, a Catholic priest whom I met after I came to Hong Kong. He said maybe the problem was that I had married my husband not in the church, only in the Chinese ceremony. If I had married in the church it would be different. [laughter] "So why don't you try to go back and marry him in the church, if he is willing. I'm sure that God will bless him." I said I could never go back, that I swore to the Chinese god that he would never touch me again.

He kept saying that God wished it and I thought maybe he was right. Then my husband kept telling my number four cousin--he's a little bit of a gossip, that one--"Well, I'd like So Lan (that's what he called me) to forgive me, and maybe we can be together again." My cousin told me, "Don't be so stubborn. He will be willing to say he is sorry, and he would be willing to let the other woman go if you forgive him."

Oh, this was all before Michael was born, because I remember I was still pregnant with him. My cousin told me, and I was going to go back. Rebecca said she would go with me. The priest had also said all that about not being married in the church, so I said I would forgive him. My cousin said, "He's so nice and wants you to forgive him, and you are so stubborn. You have to give him a chance." So I said all right, and I went with Rebecca.

Rebecca told me where the house was; I didn't even know. I knocked on the door, and the lady opened the door. She was

pretty. I said I was looking for Chang Nim Yee, and she said he wasn't there. She knew me, of course, and she said he didn't live there. I said I knew that he lived there. Then he said, "Who's calling me?" He came out from inside. He didn't know I would dare to go there to see him. The lady was scared, and she ran inside. It was Rebecca who had spoken, because he wouldn't recognize her voice; right away he would have recognized mine.

We went in, and I sat on the sofa here, Rebecca there, and the man there, and the woman inside somewhere; she was scared. I said, "Could you please ask Miss Leon to come in? I'd like to talk in front of her." I had the courage. He called her in, asking her what she was scared of. I said, "I'd like to say something, because you told my number four cousin that if I would forgive you, you would finish with Miss Leon and come home so we could be together again. So I want to ask you in front of her. She has a right to know." You know what he said? He said, "No, I never said that. I said I want to divorce you and marry her."

Oh, I was so embarrassed. The lady was smiling, and you know what I did? I am very sorry, but I tipped the table over and said to Rebecca, "Let's go." When I talked again with Father Chau, he said, "No, how can he say that?" Then I wanted a divorce. Divorce was not easy. Of course, my father didn't want to be my father any more if I divorced, but I was going to get a divorce.

Nathan: Was that possible in China at the time?

Wong-Vargas: Well, yes, but it was in Hong Kong. Rebecca helped me a lot. I remember he said if I gave him my children, he would give me some sort of money. If not, he would give me nothing. I think it should be the other way around. I have the children; I should get some money. I said to him, "I want my children; I don't want anything from you." And he said, "What about the diamond earrings?" These were the earrings that Mr. So gave me from the jewelry store. I said, "I will give them back to the store," which I did. I told him he should open wide his eyes to see the future, because I would raise and educate my children by myself, even if I had to clean the floor.

Well, he didn't pay me anything for the children; nothing. I wrote to Amah and told her everything, and she said, "If he's like that, it's better to divorce him." so I divorced him.

Deaths, and a Children's Nurse

Wong-Vargas: Rebecca was living with me for a while as well as Susana. Rebecca's daughter died in my apartment, and then my son died, so they said the apartment was bad. Somebody had told me the apartment wasn't good, but I didn't believe those things. After my son died, I was so scared for Martha and Michael. When my son died, Dr. Wong told me I had to take the children somewhere because of the danger of an epidemic. So I took them to a hotel for a week and cleaned the apartment. I was so scared they were going to die, because I had no family, and only the children were my family.

Remember the lady who lived in the beautiful house in Canton, in front of where I was staying, where I wished I could be a maid? Mr. and Mrs. Chew had moved to Hong Kong. My husband had already paid back the debt selling off the property. They lived on the Hong Kong side, and before I moved to Kowloon I saw them. They lived in a very nice area on North Point Street. I went to visit her, and she had a beautiful apartment. I said I would never even dream to rent an apartment there. I was so happy for her. Mrs. Chew had a nurse; they had money, so they hired a nurse named Sae Koo. They called her number four Miss. (*Sae* means number four). Her last name was Miss Kwan. She was a real nurse and took care of the children.

After my son died, I remembered the nurse Sae Koo. I called her and asked if she knew somebody who was a nurse, because I needed somebody. I was so scared, because if my two children died I wouldn't know what to do. Yi Po never went to school, so she knew nothing about anything. She didn't tell me my son was sick. I didn't have any money, but even if I had to work hard I would, to pay a nurse to take care of my children. She said she knew one in Macau, a very good friend. She couldn't work as a registered nurse in Hong Kong because she didn't speak English, only Chinese. Sae Koo said she would introduce her when she came over. I suggested she write to her first and tell her what I needed.

She did, and the nurse came. She was ugly. Half her face was normal, and the other half was brown, like a birthmark, but so big that the eyes and nose and everything was covered.

##

Wong-Vargas: Her name was Miss Leong.

Nathan: How was she as a nurse?

Wong-Vargas: She was very nice. Her voice was very calm, and she had a very beautiful way of expressing herself. But her face was so different. She wore very thick eyeglasses; without glasses she almost couldn't see. I asked how much she was going to charge me, because I said I was not wealthy. She said, "Don't worry; whatever you can pay me." I said no, she had to tell me. She told me a very low amount, something like 50 percent more than a maid. She said she wanted to help me, because she liked me. I was so grateful, and she said, "I will help you." She said she had no children and was not married, so she didn't need that much money. [emotional] She died, too, in my house. She helped me a lot. She helped me like Maria--more than Maria, because she was an educated person. When I would say that I saw something that I liked to eat, right away she would cook it for me. I will never forget her. It's not fair the way she died, poor thing.

Yi Po, Martha's nanny, was really jealous of her. I told Miss Leong that she was to take care of the kids, to supervise them when I was not there. She asked what they ate, and she fed them that. Yi Po didn't say anything, but little by little she became more jealous.

In this apartment there were two rooms for maids. They were quite small and narrow. Each room had a bed and a little table. My number four cousin, Juan, was visiting and staying in one of the rooms, and the other room I gave to Miss Leong. My number four cousin was married with a few children. Physically Miss Leong was not pretty, and she was a little bit overweight. She was not the type that a man would have an affair with, especially one who was married. Miss Leong had been there about six months, and my Amah came.

#### Buying and Selling Real Estate

Wong-Vargas: I told her I wanted to start in real estate. At that time I liked doing business. She said why not? I told Amah she should sell her property in Canton and buy in Hong Kong. She said no, because Hong Kong belonged to the English. She always said that. In China, it belonged to the Chinese. No, she would not move her property to this country. But she





Isabel Wong-Vargas with her children Martha and Michael in Hong Kong, 1949.



said I should do it, because I had children there, I liked it there, and I was another generation. She said she would help me buy something in Hong Kong for myself.

You remember that I already had that property in Canton that I was able to buy because after I made the down payment the price went down. Amah helped me to collect rent. That was mine, not Chang's. Then I had another small house, which I still have. I told Amah I wanted to sell the property, and she said she would help me sell it.

Amah went back to Canton, and then my father came from Peru. I had written to him and told him that I separated from this man--not divorced yet. He wrote back and didn't mention Chang. He only mentioned that he was coming, but he would not stay in Hong Kong; he would go directly to Canton. He said he would be at a hotel for a week, so I could stay in the apartment. I don't know, maybe he didn't like the idea of the separation.

My father came, and I saw him at the hotel, and then I saw my half brothers and sisters. They all went to Canton and purchased some property there in a very good area. Then he wanted me to help him to see the property, because he knew that I was in real estate. So I went back to Canton to help him. I introduced him to my godmother, my Amah. He bought something, but not through us--through somebody else, because he didn't like the property that Amah showed him. He always wanted to talk to me because I was the oldest, because I had been in China for so many years, and because I knew about real estate.

Amah told me someone wanted to buy my property, so it was about time to sell it. I don't know about now, but at that time in China, when you sold something someone had to guarantee that it was mine. Amah said, "Since your father is here, he would probably want to guarantee you because you are his daughter and that is your property." I took the paper to my father, and he said, "No, I'm not going to sign it. You say you bought it, but I don't know if it is yours or not." Can you imagine? My name was there, and he didn't want to verify it. I cried and told my Amah that he didn't want to sign. She said, "Let me sign it," and she signed it. That's why I said that Amah was better than my own father. I never had a chance to know my mother, but Amah was two or three times more than a mother.

So we sold that, and I got the money transferred to Hong Kong.

Nathan: Oh, that's when you bought that three-unit apartment house in Hong Kong?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. You know where I bought? At the North Point area in Hong Kong.

Nathan: That beautiful place? Oh, my.

Wong-Vargas: I couldn't even think that I would rent an apartment over there, and I ended up buying three apartments. Not in front, but just two or three houses on the other side of Mr. and Mrs. Chew's house, on the same street. My Amah was there; she came to help me to purchase them. Before that, I helped my cousin number four buy land, and we earned \$5,000 in one month--for him, but of course for my share I earned \$5,000, and I got some commission. He was so happy. At that time I had not yet sold my house in Canton.

My Amah's oldest daughter, Yin Che, was the goddaughter of the son of Sun Yat Sen, the president of China. His son was Sun Fo. My Amah was very famous before in Canton. She knew a lot of people. Her first husband was the consul general for China in Chile, South America. He died, and she remarried with Mr. Wong. Her daughter, Yin Che, the goddaughter of Sun Fo, passed away in San Francisco, California, a long time ago.

Amah knew Mr. Lee Sai Wah, who was at that time over thirty; I'm not sure, but he was young. He was a playboy. He had an inheritance from his parents--hotels, properties. He had a very nice office, I remember. He used to have a Rolls Royce, number 7777--four sevens--and he had big boat, a yacht. He liked me. My godmother introduced me to him, but I didn't like him. He had a tiny, short face. He was a nice man, but everybody knew he was a playboy. He invited me and also my cousin Juan and my godmother to go on his yacht and all around Hong Kong in his Rolls Royce 7777. I could tell that he liked me very much.

Then my Amah told him that I was looking for some property. She told him that I was divorced and that I had two children, and she wanted to help me buy some properties. He said he had so many properties, and one was on North Point. He said he lived on the second floor. "The first floor is okay, but the second floor is very nice. Would you like to come and see it?" So he invited us to go and see it. It was beautiful. Someone was living on the third floor, and someone was living on the first floor. He lived on the

second floor and had a beautiful bar, beautiful furniture. The bar was very modern for that time--very light. He lived there with--I could imagine all the girls. It was not his home, but it was his place.

Amah asked him how much he wanted, and he said about \$180,000 in Hong Kong money. It was less than \$200,000; but it was a lot of money in '47 or '48, over forty years ago. I said I didn't have that much money, no way. But my Amah said we could do it; we would put some money down, and then we'd find somebody else to buy it. We would sell it and make money if we couldn't purchase it ourselves. Then she said she could sell her property in Canton to help me. Can you imagine? She was so nice to me.

[emotionally] You know, without Amah, I don't know--God sent her to me. She would sell her property to help me. I was thinking, then, that if she sold her property we would be half and half; that's what I was thinking, because she didn't say that. I was so grateful to her. I wouldn't be fair for her to sell her property just to help me. No, we would be buying it half and half, and in the future we would sell it.

I said I would like to live on the third floor. At first I didn't want to, because it had no yard or anything, but then I realized you could go up on the roof. I was thinking that I would do something for my children and convert the roof into a playground and garden. I didn't like the idea of his living on the second floor, because he liked me and I didn't like him. I said I would buy it on certain conditions. First, I needed the three flats vacant. He would have to move out. At that time it was easy to ask people to move, because there were plenty of places, and they could move somewhere else.

Amah talked with him, and he said it was no problem. He was going to move. He was going to give everything to me; he wasn't going to take the bar and the furniture with him. Of course he would charge a little bit more. I remember that I still owed him some of that money, and I paid off with my photo-enlargement equipment which I bought for Susana, my sister. He died; he committed suicide. I heard about it later on from some friends from Hong Kong. I never saw him again after he moved. He really liked me, but I told him one playboy was enough. Another playboy? No way. I would prefer a poor man without anything, and then we could work together.

Shanghai People Fleeing the Communists

Wong-Vargas: This is also how God helped me. So I made the down payment. In a very short time, less than a month later, the Communists took over Shanghai. The Communists promised the rich people in Shanghai, "Don't move, because we are going to be the same. You are going to have the same business. Don't worry," and they believed them. That's why the people in Hong Kong now are afraid, because the Communists never keep their word. After they took Shanghai, they took everything. People with gold flew to Hong Kong. A lot of rich people went to Hong Kong, and property values zoomed up.

God listened to me, because do you know how much they paid for one empty apartment? Only key money, just to get in there; if you had some furniture, even more: at least \$20,000. But everybody paid 20,000 to 25,000 Hong Kong dollars without furniture.

Nathan: That's not for rent or anything else?

Wong-Vargas: No. Then they paid rent every month. Everybody knew that in Hong Kong. If I had told Amah no, or she hadn't said she would sell her property to help me, I wouldn't have dared to buy it. My nurse, Miss Leong, was still alive, and she helped me sell my apartment in Kowloon. Do you know how much I sold it for? Forty thousand dollars, with furniture. People paid cash. Why did they pay that much? Because the rent was only \$120; the rent could not be increased.

Nathan: Was there rent control?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, on those apartments. That's why the Shanghai family could afford to pay more, because the rent was less. But on the Hong Kong side they paid \$800 a month and only \$25,000 for getting in the apartment. The people on the second floor paid me about \$30,000, because the bar was special. The Kowloon side was the most expensive for key money because the rent was less.

With that money I paid off the three apartments. Of course, I had already made the down payment. In other words, with the money I got from the sale of my property in Kowloon and the money they gave me for the second and first floor of the Hong Kong apartment, I could pay off the property. Can you imagine? So Amah didn't have to sell her property.

That's God's help. Because who knows that you will receive key money just like that? So that was an opportunity.

When I go back to Hong Kong this time, I'd like to find out more; I'm sure they have some newspapers there. The Communists took over Shanghai. Most of the Shanghainese went to Taiwan or Hong Kong. Some could go to Taiwan, and some could not, because Chiang Kai-shek was already in Taiwan, and he didn't welcome the people from mainland China at that time unless you had relatives to vouch for you. Even if you wanted to immigrate you could not. Hong Kong was much easier at that time, so a lot of money came to Hong Kong. Also Formosa and Macao. Oh, you can't imagine the Shanghainese. They're still very rich.

So that's why I could purchase property. Oh, this was really from God. And it was a good opportunity, right then.

(Let me tell you, I just came back from Peru in March. The American dollar was high; 1,500,000 Peruvian soles buy one American dollar. Now 2,400,000 Peruvian soles buy one American dollar in Peru. That's in only one month. If you borrowed money last month and paid it back this month, the difference is unbelievable.)

Real estate value zoomed up, because the Shanghainese could give you \$20,000 for an empty apartment, and still they paid you rent. A house was much more.

That's how I got the North Point house, and I never dreamed of even renting an apartment house there. I didn't pay everything off to Mr. Lee, because the furniture was another arrangement. I remember I owed him about a thousand dollars. Of course I could have paid him, but I didn't. I wanted to say "thank you" and pay him in person. I remember he liked to take pictures. Susana also liked to take pictures. One time I bought for Susana some equipment to enlarge photographs. After my father came, Susana had to go back to Canton to study, because her parents were now there. She went to Maryknoll High School and graduated, and then her parents took her back to Canton.

So I had this enlarger, and I knew that Mr. Lee liked photography. It was not cheap. I bought it for about \$500, and I think it cost about \$1,000. So I gave it to him and said, "I owe you almost \$1,000, and I bought this for \$500. I will give you the rest of the money, but if you don't want this, that's fine with me. I can take the machine back." He

knew that at that time the machine cost more than \$1,000, so he said it was fine. That was the last time I saw Mr. Lee.

### Apartment House Living in Hong Kong

Wong-Vargas: Then I had to move from Kowloon to Hong Kong. Miss Leong came with me. How many rooms did I have? One for her, one room for Martha and Michael with two little beds (I think I have pictures of them), one room for me, and one room for Yi Po. And I also had a maid, so she had a room. It was quite a big apartment house. On the roof I made a garden. I went to the beach and brought back so much sand. Then I bought a teeter-totter and a swing made out of wood for the kids. Mrs. Chew's daughter came to play with them (I have pictures of that). I saw them in 1982 with Martha, and I was very happy that Miss Kung was there.

A couple of months after we moved, my number four cousin, Juan, bought a machine business with another village cousin, Po Wha. Of course he couldn't stay with us, because there was no room. I met Wong Pow Wha, who is not a cousin but is from the same village. He bought Singer Sewing machines and fixed them. I introduced him to my number four cousin, and he put in some money and they opened another branch of the sewing machine business on the Kowloon side. My cousin worked there, and his wife came also, and they had an apartment on the Kowloon side.

### Miss Leong and Number Four Cousin

Wong-Vargas: Miss Leong was with me. One day my father called and said he wanted me to help him with some property he bought in Canton. I didn't want to go, but I said okay. Miss Leong said, "Miss Wong"--she called me Miss Wong, and I called her Miss Leong--"I want to talk with you." I said, "How about when I come back from Canton?" I thought maybe she wanted to leave, or maybe she was going to tell me someone offered to pay her more. She asked when I was coming back, and I said maybe a week. She said okay.



[Interview 6: May 2, 1989]##

Nathan: Last time you were talking about Miss Leong.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, before I left for Canton. She was going to tell me something, and I thought maybe she wanted to leave because she was not earning that much as a nurse, which she was supposed to be. She said, no, she was not leaving me. She just wanted two weeks of early vacation. I said, "Sure, you can go. Where would you like to go?" She said Macao, because she had a brother there. Her parents passed away, but she had a brother who was a Communist.

I said fine, and that I would take her to the boat for Macao before I left for Canton. I took her to the boat, and that was the last time--well. She left, and I went back home, and the next day I went to Canton to help my father. He wanted to buy some property, and he wanted advice from me. I was in Canton about a week, I think, but I didn't stay with my father. I stayed with my godmother, my Amah. I liked her so much.

After about a week, they called me long-distance from Yi Po and told me that Miss Leong was ill. I asked what happened? Did she come back from Macao? She had told me in one or two weeks she would be coming back, because she knew I was not at home and needed someone to take care of the children. At that time there was a night train, and I took it right away back to Hong Kong. She was not at home; she was already in the hospital. It was called Tung Wah Hospital, and it belonged to the government. It wasn't very expensive. Her friend, Miss Kwan, took her there. She was Mrs. Chew's nurse who lived just across the street from us.

Right away I went to see her. The train got in late at night, so I went there the same night. She couldn't recognize me. I think half of her body was paralyzed. I remember the priest told me that if someone is not Catholic, and they are dying, you should try to baptize them. I did, because I thought she was dying. Then I called a doctor. Since this was a big hospital with a reasonable price, she was in a room with ten people. I asked the doctor to transfer her to another hospital that was private, Yeon Wo Hospital. It was very nice, and of course much more expensive. I was very grateful to her, and I wanted her to be seen by a good doctor. In the government hospital there was nobody there, and she was dying.

So the next day they transferred her to the private hospital. The doctor examined her and also had the report from the previous hospital. I saw her the next morning, and Miss Kwan was there, too, and the doctor. I asked what happened to her, and he said, "Well, it seems like she had an abortion, and she caught a cold and got a very high fever. She stood up to go to the bathroom, and she fell and hit her head." That's why she was paralyzed. But I think she still understood; she was still conscious, but she couldn't speak or eat. It was very sad.

I said, "No, you must be making a mistake. She's a single woman; I don't think she was married." Then Miss Kwan took me aside and explained to me about my number four cousin, Juan, the one who was married with children (remember I told you he had stayed with us for awhile, and how Miss Leong was not pretty). This man was married. How, why did he do that? He took advantage of her. I said I would kill him. How could he do that to her?

Later on Juan came over and asked, "How's Miss Leong? How's she doing?" Something very fresh like that, because he thought that I didn't know. I looked at him and said, "You come over here. I never dreamed you would do that to her. Why did you do that? First of all, you have a wife, and second, you don't love her." I don't think he loved her, because she was not pretty, and I know him; he would never look at someone who was not pretty. I said, "You took advantage of her. Now you have to pay everything. I was going to pay, but now that I know it was your fault, you are going to pay every cent. We'll see what happens later on with your wife, or whatever."

Then he was a little bit ashamed and said he was sorry, and that he shouldn't have done that. "Let me deposit \$5,000," because they had to have a deposit first. I went to see Miss Leong every day. I had to change into a white dress in order to take care of her. I held her hand, and she kept crying. She couldn't speak, only cry. Unbelievable.

I recall one day we went shopping, and when we passed the cemetery, she said, "If I die, I would like to wear all white like a bride," because she never married. I told her if I died, I would like to dress in the Chinese way--red skirt and black coat. We were always joking about this. Now I had been helping care for her for about nine days. Father Chau came to see her, and Mrs. Cheung (whose husband lent us the office space) and other friends came to see her. After nine days, Miss Kwan said I should stay home that day. My

children were left with Yi Po, their nanny, and I was spending most of my time at the hospital. So I didn't go on the tenth day, and she died that day.

Before that, my cousin Juan said it seemed like she wasn't getting well. She had to have a private nurse every night, but during the day I could take care of her. He paid, of course. He said, "It seems like she's going to die, so I don't think I should waste any money having a nurse." I said, "She's dying because of you, and you can't spend some money for her? You have to pay everything. If not, I will tell the police." Of course, he was scared, and he had to pay, but he was mad at me because I said she had to have a nurse at night. What would happen if she fell again?

Then she died on the tenth day. I remembered that she said she would like to be dressed like a bride, and I ordered everything like a bride for her. On that day her brother came from Macao. Her brother wanted to sue me. He talked with Miss Kwan first and said, "I'm going to sue Mrs. Wong because she moved my sister to a private hospital." In a government hospital everything was public; in a private hospital everything was private, so there must be something wrong. He knew it was my cousin's fault and thought maybe I wanted to cover for him, and that's why I moved her to the private hospital. He wanted to sue me and my cousin.

Miss Kwan said, "If you want to sue, sue the cousin, but not her," and she explained to him. He said okay. The day of the funeral, when we took her to the cemetery, her brother came and hit my cousin. I was so happy. Almost killed him. Mrs. Cheung also went to the cemetery, and she said, "Oh, he's killing your cousin," and I said, "Well, he deserves it." Really, I was so mad, because Miss Leong was so nice, and she was my good friend. And I had given my cousin board and room and never charged him one cent. He was an animal. How could he do that?

Later on the brother went back to Macao, and he didn't sue my cousin. But my cousin paid for everything, and he was mad at me because I ordered everything. It was his account, and if there wasn't enough there, he had to put in more money. It was a very nice funeral. I was so upset that day, because I always talked with her at night. That night I said, "Miss Leong, if you are still around here, why don't you come and sit with me. I'm not afraid of you." I talked to myself like that.

Letters from Mr. Sam

Wong-Vargas: So Miss Leong had passed away, and I was all by myself. Mr. Sam had finished with the war and had gone back to Canton to visit his father. I was living in Kowloon at that time, before I purchased the Hong Kong building. He wrote to me and said that later on he heard that I had married Chang, but that he was still single--"single because I was waiting for you," and so on. "Now I know that you are divorced, so if you need anything, I will be very happy to help you." I showed the letter to Rebecca; I talked over everything with Rebecca. She said, "He is clever. He knows that you are in Kowloon and have a car"--remember the car? "And he knows that you don't need him, so that's why he says he will help you." [laughs] She was much smarter than I. I said no, that she always thought badly of people.

Again he wrote to me, because he knew I was on the Kowloon side now. He gave me his address in Xian with Chiang Kai-shek. The war was over, and he was in the military. He had gone to Chinese military school. His mother had three boys, and he was the oldest. One brother was an airplane pilot in the war, and the other brother was a chiropractor in Canton and in the village Kon Chuin. His father was also a very famous chiropractor there.

He wrote beautiful letters, and I loved to see them. Nobody had ever said anything nice to me, and he wrote so beautifully. It was something like a poem. I think I fell in love with his letters. I always kept them. I answered back, and he would write to me maybe once a week. I looked forward to receiving the letters because I had never seen him.

Then he told me he was going to Canton, and I happened to be going back there. Michael was born in Hong Kong, but in the Chinese way they always had a ginger and red egg party for the son. I was separated by that time, but my mother-in-law still wanted to have a party for Michael.

Meeting Mr. Sam

Wong-Vargas: Anyway, I went to Canton and stayed with my godmother. I wanted to meet him, because although he had been writing letters, I didn't know if he was tall or short, or what. I told him I would be at my Amah's house, and he could go there. So he came, and the first time I saw him--he was tall. I was scared, because his eyebrows were straight across, but it was very nice, because he was wearing the uniform. It wasn't like falling in love at first sight, no. He was not ugly; he was okay, but I didn't like his eyebrows [laughs]. It scared me, because they were so military-like, sort of mean looking.

I didn't go out with him, because in Canton, China, I couldn't do that because I was not divorced yet. He said that next time he came to Hong Kong he would like to visit me. I said that was fine. My godmother had invited him to tea, and she said she didn't like him. His jawbone was very big. In China we say that if you can see a man's jawbone from the back it means he is mean. Amah said she didn't like him, and I said I didn't either [laughs]. I told her everything, and she liked to help me decide if he was a good man for me or not. She said she didn't think so, and I said okay. Besides, she said, the military people don't have money. I'd have to give him everything, and work. The military man gets used to everyone serving him, but he doesn't make much money. She said, "You have been working so hard for your children. You have to find somebody who is financially secure. Then you could work together. But somebody who doesn't have anything--you would have to give to him. I think you have to think twice." I said I would.

He kept writing; well, he wrote even more now, because he had seen me and I wasn't so ugly. I think he liked me much more than I liked him. The only thing that I liked were his letters, his beautiful writing. He could express himself so well. Like a flower--he could say so many things about a flower. I like those things. I am the romantic type [laughs].

He came to visit me in Hong Kong after I divorced Chang. When he wrote to me, he said something like, "God wants this to happen, because I am single and you are divorced. It means maybe God wants us to get together." I didn't think so. I told him I was Catholic, but he was not. He said that for love he thought he would become a Catholic right away. Later on he told me he wanted to become a Catholic, in the

army, not in Hong Kong. So he seemed like a nice man, because he wanted to become a Catholic to marry me, or to have a friendship with me at that time; we weren't talking about marriage.

### Mr. Sam's Daughter

Wong-Vargas: When he came to visit me in Hong Kong he told me that he had a daughter. "What? You have a daughter?" He said it was because after he found out that I had married Chang he lived with a girl. I said, "But you are single." He said, "I am single. I never married; we just lived together." He said that if he had told me before that he had a daughter, I wouldn't want to see him. That was true; I don't think I would have bothered to meet him. So he was a little bit cunning; he had studied the situation. I mean, he was not sincere. I didn't like that. He said that the woman he lived with had a daughter, and then she died when the daughter was about two years old. That was true.

He had a friend in Kowloon, and he came to visit the friend. A couple of days later he went back to Canton. He wrote to me again, blah, blah, blah, explaining. I thought, "Well, that's true. If he had explained it to me before, I never would have met him." Besides, he never married, and the woman died. Sam's daughter was with his father in Kon Chuin. She was about six or seven years old at that time.

He kept writing to me. He wrote that he had some money that he had saved, and he wanted to buy some property in Hong Kong if I would help him. He said that he sent his money to his stepmother, because his mother died also a long time ago. The stepmother was taking care of the money for him. I really believed him. I always believe whatever people tell me. I think that's my problem. Rebecca always said, "No, don't believe that." I said, "But there must be somebody nice." She wished me luck and said, "How can he have saved some money? Because in the military you don't have that much money. How could you save enough money to buy a small apartment?" She said, "I don't think so, but you never know."

Of course I told my godmother, and she said the same thing as Rebecca. I didn't dare to tell my godmother too much, because she really didn't like him. Since I liked his letters, I said, "Well--." Most of the time my godmother was

in Canton, and I talked to Rebecca as a person I could trust and tell something like that to.

### Rebecca's Ways

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to tell you about when Rebecca was living in my house in the Kowloon side. Her daughter died before I hired the nurse. She met a nice man from Peking. He spoke Mandarin, so I always spoke Mandarin with him, because I took Mandarin in high school. Mr. Gonsalo, our neighbor who was half Chinese and half Nicaraguan, was the one I worked with. It ended, but we were still friends. He lived on the third floor, and I lived on the second floor, so we always saw each other. He liked to eat, and I liked to cook sometimes. Even if he already had dinner, he would like to eat something. Later on when Miss Leong prepared meals he also liked to eat it.

One Sunday Rebecca came with her handsome boyfriend, and I said we should go to the beach. I asked Chalo--that's what we called Gonsalo--if he wanted to go. He said okay, so we all went. One day Gonsalo couldn't go, and Rebecca's friend said, "Where's your husband?" "My husband? He's not my husband; he's my neighbor." "Rebecca told me he was your husband." Because Rebecca was jealous--"Oh, she lied. She's married, and that's her husband, but now they are divorced."

I almost fought with her. "How dare you say he is my husband?" She said she was jealous because her boyfriend liked me, so she made up a story like that. I told her never to do that again. If she did, I said I didn't want to be friends with her. She always found somebody to introduce me to, because she was very jealous of me.

I forgot to tell you before that when I was in high school I always got very good grades. One year I got a few honor prizes. I was first in my class, always good. I was also in the choir, and I was the captain of the Girl Scouts. In everything, I was always the first. Nobody came to see me when I received an award, but Rebecca, yes.

At that time, when we were in school we knew the war was coming, and we had to sell some tickets to buy clothing to send to Chungking to send to our soldiers. Rebecca helped me. Her father was a mechanic and was working in an English dockyard, so she knew a lot of English people there. She

sold a lot of tickets to those young boys there studying. One was named John, and he saw me. He liked me maybe because I received quite a few awards from the school. Then she introduced me to someone about ten years older than I, Thomas Brown, and he liked me very much, I knew that. When I was living in Kowloon after the war, Rebecca saw him, and he asked where her friend was. He asked if he could see me, and she said she didn't know why not.

One day she came with him to visit me. In Kowloon at that time they didn't call to say, "I'm coming to see you." No, they just came. They do the same thing now. So I saw Mr. Brown (he was English). One day Rebecca made reservations for dinner with him and her brother and me. She told me we were going to have dinner, and I asked with whom. She said Mr. Brown, and I said, "You go ahead." She said she had already told him I was going, too, and that he liked me. I said I didn't think so, and I didn't like him. He was English, and I was scared of foreigners at that time. Also, I don't think my divorce was final, and people might talk. I said I wasn't going.

He drove up to my apartment with Rebecca and her brother anyway, and she said, "Oh, come on; change your mind." I said I wasn't going. Rebecca told me later on that Mr. Brown threw his wallet out and said, "Money is not everything."

##

Wong-Vargas: I told you all this because she was very jealous; she really wanted me to have somebody, because her boyfriends always liked me. First of all, because I liked to work. Second, I was young and not ugly.

Even Mrs. Chew was always very jealous, because Mr. Chew talked to me about business and everything, and I always understood and answered and gave my opinions. She was jealous, because she was a beautiful lady, but business was zero; she knew nothing about business. She told me she never nursed her children, and I nursed all my babies. She said she would never nurse her children, because she wanted to have a very nice body. She said if you nursed the baby, your figure would change, so you knew that she liked beauty. She had very nice, beautiful skin, and her nurse always gave her injections of some vitamin oil or something for her face. She asked why I didn't use some, but I said no. I didn't like to use any paints or powder, not even cream--nothing, because it was not natural.



Amah's Opinion, and a Secret Engagement

Wong-Vargas: Sam continued to write to me, and he said he wanted to help me raise the two children. I was all by myself, and I thought maybe God really wanted me to marry him. He had become a Catholic now, because of me. I talked with the priest, and he said I was never married in the church, so he didn't see why I couldn't. So I told him that if I married him, I would marry him in the church with God's blessing.

I said okay, we could be engaged, or something like that; this was just by writing letters. I didn't dare to tell my Amah, because I knew she didn't like him. I told her that I didn't like him either, so how could I explain that now I had said okay? Not telling her was my mistake, too, but it was because I was scared, and she would say, "No, no," and she was right.

I told this man that I thought maybe God wanted us to marry. I told Rebecca, and she said, "Well, now that you have a house, maybe, but I don't think you should." Sam's Catholic name was Paul, so I called him Pablo. His Chinese name was Po Wuan (Paul). He left Xian, and Chiang Kai-shek moved him to Formosa (Taiwan now). His brother was in Taiwan, so he wanted to move there. He would still have his military job. He said he would like to go to Taiwan later on, and I said, "If I marry you, I will marry you there, not here," but in the church.

He came to visit me. He said he was going to stay in Kowloon, and I looked for a place for him to stay. I was still mad at my cousin number four because of the death of Miss Leong, but I knew that he had a room for rent. I asked him if he could rent the room to Sam, and he said, "Sure." I said I was going to pay for it, because I couldn't say he was going to stay with my cousin and then charge him for it. I told my cousin not to charge him, that I would pay for it. My cousin, he did charge me for it, although when he was living in my house I didn't ever charge him.

Sam's Stories

Wong-Vargas: So Sam was living in my cousin's room. He told me he was going to go to Canton to get the money to purchase a small apartment. He said, "You know, you work so hard, and you have two children. You can rent your own third floor, too, and that money you can save for your children. You can live in my small apartment." I could kill him. I believed him.

We were talking about being engaged at that time, not married. Eventually we would marry, but not in Hong Kong--somewhere else. He went to Canton, and after about a week he came back. He called me and wanted to talk with me; because he lived in Kowloon and I lived in Hong Kong. I wondered what he was going to say, so we went to have dim sum in a restaurant in the morning. I thought maybe he needed money, maybe he owed some money. Before this, I had asked him if he was sure he was not lying to me, because I wanted somebody honest. After I knew that he had a daughter, I asked if he was sure that he didn't have anybody else. "Please tell me, because if you lie to me in the future, I will divorce you right away." Well, I didn't like divorce, but I didn't like lies. He said, "Oh, no, you shouldn't say things like that," blah, blah, blah.

When we were in the restaurant he said his stepmother had the money for the house, and she had loaned it to somebody else who was paying interest on it. She couldn't get the money back, so he could not buy an apartment. Can you imagine? His stepmother would never do that, because the money didn't belong to her, even if there was money there.

I felt bad when he said he was sorry that now he couldn't buy the apartment. He said he was furious with his stepmother, and now he would have to wait for the people to give back the money. I had a little doubt already because of what Rebecca had told me. Now he couldn't buy an apartment, and if he married me it would mean he would live with me in my apartment. Never. I didn't like that. Then he explained many things to me, and I couldn't say I would not see him again. It was so difficult; I couldn't say that.

After a while he went back to Canton again to see if the money had been recouped or not. He came back again, he called me, and we met in the same restaurant. We talked about it, and he said I promised not to be mad, but he still couldn't get the money out. And there was something else.



Back row, standing left to right: Susana, Lue Muey, Robert, Isabel Wong-Vargas, Rebecca, and Rose (in Rebecca's arms). Middle row, seated: Tai Ka Sou, Amah (Isabel Wong-Vargas's godmother). Front row, seated on the floor: Ana Maria, Michael, and Martha. Hong Kong, August 22, 1950.



You know what he told me? He said that after the woman he was living with died, his father took care of his daughter. Then his father wanted somebody to take care of the daughter, so he wanted to find a woman for Sam. He did find a cousin or a niece of a cousin--somebody from within the family--to be his future wife, and they were already engaged. Now he knew that I more or less wanted to marry him in the future. He didn't tell me before, he said, because his father didn't tell him. Do you think they would do that in China? For the daughter, yes, but not for the son. The father would say something to the daughter, and she would have to obey, but the son, never.

Nathan: The son does not have to obey the father?

Wong-Vargas: No, no. If he doesn't want to, he doesn't have to obey. But the girl, where could she go? The son could live on his own, especially if he was in the military. Do you think the father would do something for the son without the son knowing? Of course not. "But now," he said, "I already went back to annul it, and the engagement is over. I tell you this because maybe you would hear it from somebody else, and I don't want you to have a misunderstanding." I said, "That's enough. I told you that I liked to be honest." Then I said to forget about the whole thing. "Please don't call me. That's it." I said that, and I meant it.

He asked how I could do that, and I said I could do it because he had lied to me. I said he could live in my cousin's house as long as he wanted, but to please not call me. I was so mad, so upset. How could he lie to me? If he had told me at first, it would have been different.

I wrote to my father and said I wanted to go back to Peru. My father had been in Canton, but he went back to Peru in 1949, and that's when I wrote to him. He went back with two stepbrothers, Sixto and Jorge. The other children stayed in China with his wife, my second stepmother.

### Marriage on Paper

Wong-Vargas: Oh, I forgot about something. When Sam came back from Canton and said he couldn't get the money, he said he had really made up his mind to go to Taiwan. He said he would like to go with me. I didn't know about the other engagement at that time, and I said okay. He said that in order to apply for

me, he had to say I was his wife. "Just papers," he said. Well, I thought if it was just papers it didn't matter. I didn't tell my Amah. He said, "We could marry here in city hall, and that's it; you're free and I am free."

Nathan: It would be like a civil marriage?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Then he could apply for me and Martha and Michael. So their names would be changed to Sam from Chang.

Nathan: So Martha's name is actually--

Wong-Vargas: Actually, her father is Chang, but the papers to go to Taiwan put her name as Sam. I said okay. Miss Kwan was my witness. My godmother didn't know, because I didn't tell her. I think Rebecca knew. So we gave them the papers, and that was it. But I told him I would never live with him until we were married in the church, because it was God's wish, and I had to obey the law of God. He said it was no problem; it was just the papers. So he was very clever in that, because he wanted to marry me, in other words.

He didn't tell me about the other girl at that time. After I married him on paper, he went back to Canton and came back and told me about the girl that his father had arranged an engagement for him. I said, "That's it. I didn't marry you." I thought the most important thing about marriage was being physically together; the papers were nothing. I told him not to call me, because everything was finished--to forget about marriage. For me it didn't count. I was foolish and young. Later on I told Amah, and she said I shouldn't have done that; but I did it, and not to worry.

#### Plane Tickets for Peru

Wong-Vargas: Then I wrote to my father and said I wanted to go to Peru. He didn't know that I had remarried; he knew that I had divorced. He said, "Okay, you come over with the children, and I will help you." He sent me our plane tickets and documents.

Nathan: This was really the first time that your father had helped you?

Wong-Vargas: I suppose so. My father helped me because he wanted--oh, it's a long story. Also, he wanted to use me to work. He

knew that I was a hard worker. Anyway, he said I should come on over, and he sent me a ticket for Pan Am--for Susana and me and the two kids. My small three-floor building was still there, so I gave the power of attorney to my Amah. I didn't give it to Sam. I didn't want to see him, but he did come to say goodbye. I just ignored him, because I hate lies. He could have told me the truth, you know?

Before he told me about the other engagement, he came with his daughter. I felt kind of sad, because I was young, too, when I was in China with no parents. I have a picture of her with Michael and Martha, when she came to visit. I think the girl stayed with me for about a month, and then he took her back.

Nathan: Did you begin to feel for her?

Wong-Vargas: I liked her. I like kids, children. I liked her because it was so sad--no mother, and almost no father, because she was living with the grandfather. She was a little bit aggressive. Even if it's a girl, you can see it. I remember they were playing, and she would be a little bit jealous of Martha and Michael. We had a garden upstairs from my third floor, so the kids all wanted to play there. But she pushed Michael down the stairs. It's a good thing nothing happened to him. She pushed him. She was a little bit aggressive.

Sam took her back to Canton and then told me about the other girl.

I also forgot to tell you about a time when Miss Leong was still alive and we were living in Kowloon. I don't believe in astrology or things like that, but someone told me there was a lady who could tell me right away with cards what will happen. It only cost \$5 Hong Kong, and I said okay. I didn't like it, but I went. Miss Leong said, "Oh, I'd like to go see what happens," so a group of us went, including Rebecca. I remember the lady said for me, "You are leaving Hong Kong, and you are going somewhere starting with an 'S'." At that time I hadn't even thought of going to Peru, South America. "Maybe south," she said. "I don't know--South America, San Francisco?" I asked her about my children; would they be with me? I was really concerned about them; I didn't want them to die. She said, "Don't worry, they will be with you, and you will have some more, too." She said I could have been a good writer or a good doctor. I liked to write at that time. She said other good things about me.

About Miss Leong she said, "You are going to leave Hong Kong also, but I can't tell you where; I can't see that." And then Miss Leong died, you remember. But she said to me, "When you go to the south, take a boat, but don't take a plane. If you take a plane, something will happen." I remembered that always, so when my father sent me the Pan American airplane ticket, I was scared. I wondered how I could take a boat, now that I had a plane ticket. I was so concerned and worried.

Finally everything was arranged, and I gave the apartment to Amah; she was there in my house at that time. I told her to live there as long as she wanted, but if she sold it she should send the money to me in Peru. She said not to worry, and that was it. Yi Po, who took care of Martha, I helped purchase a small wood house in Hong Kong, new area. The girl who took care of Michael was still there, because she promised to stay until the apartment was sold. She later married the butcher in Hong Kong.

Amah took us to the airport, and we said goodbye. The suitcases were already on the plane, and all of a sudden I looked at Michael, and when I touched him he had a very high fever--like burning. I called a doctor right away from the airport, and the doctor said we could not go that day, because Michael had to go to the hospital. We took him right away to that private hospital, Yeon Wo Hospital, and he stayed a couple of days. It was the flu or something, but at home it was nothing; he was sick just at the airport. It was unbelievable.

After about a week he was fine, and then we had to book again. You had to book ahead of time--two weeks or a month, not right away tomorrow. A couple of weeks later, again we went to the airport, again we said goodbye to Amah, again the suitcases were put on board. Again Michael got sick. He was fine at home, and now he had a fever. Again to the hospital.

I remembered what the lady had said about not going on a plane, and I thought maybe God was helping me--two times, with the suitcases already on the plane. It sounds like a movie, but it was true.

The third time, Pan Am asked, "Are you sure this time that you want to go?" [laughter] The night before, they checked Michael over. Everything was fine, and he was fine in the morning. We went to the airport, and everything was okay. So the third time was all right. There was another young lady on the plane who was going to Peru. She knew



nobody there, but a marriage had been arranged by her father. Her name was Li, and she was going to marry someone named Suin. I called her Suin Li. She was very young, and she was crying. She told me that she had a boyfriend in Hong Kong, but she was going to marry someone that she didn't know. I told her not to worry and to call me in Peru.

Susana, Michael, Martha, and I were sitting on the plane, and I was thinking, "Now I'm going to Peru, and how am I going to raise my two children? Will I be able to raise them?" When I divorced Chang, he said, "If you take the children, I will give you nothing. If you leave the children with me, I will give you some money." I knew he was lying, because if I took the children he should have given me alimony. If I didn't have the children, why would he give me money? But he knew that I loved my children so much, so he acted on purpose like that. I told him I didn't want anything from him.

Then he said, "Well, pretty soon you and the children will be dying of hunger." I said he would see. In China we say, "Put your eyeglasses on and see a little bit further." I told him he would see that even if I had to wash floors [voice breaks], I would raise them. Then I told him they were going to have a good education. He said, "Okay, you don't have anything from me, but you have the diamond earrings." Remember the earrings that I liked (from the jewelry store business)? So I gave him back the earrings. I shouldn't have, but I was very proud. I didn't want them. I never even wore them. Later on, when Martha came back from her honeymoon, she brought me a small, cute pair of diamond earrings. I was very touched.



## VI LIVING AND WORKING IN PERU

Wong-Vargas: Now I was in the airplane and wondering if I would be able to raise the two children. Of course I prayed to God to help me. I didn't bother to think about Sam, because for me it was over.

### Family Apartment in Lima

Wong-Vargas: My father rented an apartment in Lima in Lince. It was an area of middle class apartments, but it was okay. I lived with him in a four-bedroom apartment, quite nice, with a kitchen. One bedroom was for me and my two kids, one for Susana, one for him and a stepbrother, Sixto, and the fourth one for another stepbrother, Jorge, and my cousin's son, Carlos. They went to school and studied everything. I was very happy, although I didn't know the language.

My auntie Aurora knew I was back, so she and my cousins came to visit me. I didn't know what they were saying because I couldn't understand Spanish at all. I was crying, wondering when I could talk with them. This auntie was my mother's sister. I knew that my grandmother had already passed away, and the cousin Ines that I liked had passed away. My auntie came to visit me with Carmen, Celinda, and Iris. But I couldn't say anything. I just went back to my room and started crying.

Then my father took me to his hacienda in the north to visit the whole family. My father is a very strange character. He liked the number two cousin. He didn't like number three, number four, number five, number six [laughs], because they had their own business, another hacienda. He liked everybody to be together in one hacienda. But that's not the way to be, not even with your children. He would

say, "If your cousins come to visit you, I don't want you to open the door." Number six--I didn't like him either--had been in my house, so he would come to visit me. Number three was Alberto, and he was very nice. He was in Hong Kong also and visited me at that time, so he had to invite me over: "My cousin's coming from China," you know. But my father didn't want me to go with them. "Don't go out with them; only with number two" (Carlos).

Nathan: When you were all together in the large apartment, were you responsible for running the household?

Wong-Vargas: My father paid the rent, telephone, electricity, and some other things, and I purchased meals every day. I went to the market and bought fish or meat and so forth. He didn't ask me to, but I had three people to be responsible for, so I paid for the food. Sometimes he also purchased some food, but mostly I went to the market and bought milk and things like that. When I was in Hong Kong, I had never washed and cooked. I always worked very hard, but I didn't have to wash dishes and things like that. In Hong Kong it was easy to find somebody to do it, but when I got to Peru I had to do it [laughs].

Nathan: You had to do the housework?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and cook. I liked to cook, but I didn't know how. And my father was very fussy. If he didn't like it, he didn't like it. We didn't have a washing machine, and he changed his bed sheets and towels every week, so I had to wash them by hand. I also had to wash the clothes of my stepbrother's nephew because they had no maid, and they had to study. I had nothing to do, so I washed them with my hands. I remember very well one time he was displeased.

##

Nathan: You were saying that your father was displeased--?

Wong-Vargas: He threw the bed sheets on the floor and told me to wash them again. No, my father was something. When I was young I always said, "If only my father could be here, things would be different." But then I realized that it wasn't like that.

Pretty soon he found a teacher who spoke English and Spanish to teach Spanish to my stepbrother's nephew and Susana, because they also forgot their Spanish. Jorge, Susana, and Carlos--Carlos was the son of another cousin

Carlos--would sit at the round table in the living room to learn Spanish.

Nathan: Were your two children too young?

### Wanting to Learn Spanish

Wong-Vargas: I called my children, because I knew my father was walking around there. I pulled up a chair and sat in to learn at the same time. [sigh] I will never forget it. My father came in, and you know what he said in front of them? "Why do you want to learn Spanish? That's only for them because they are going to school. What do you want to learn Spanish for?" It meant, "Get away from the table." I looked at him, and I went to my room with my children and cried. I cried and cried, and I promised myself that one day I would learn. Even in China my uncles didn't want me to learn, and now my father was saying the same thing.

Later on I knew that he wanted me to help him in the hacienda. He knew that I was smart, and he thought that if I didn't speak the language I would just follow whatever he wanted me to do. Very selfish. The hacienda's name was Talla, in the village of Guadalupe. One third of the hacienda belonged to him. There were three people: Ernesto Chang, and then Carlos Wong, my cousin, and my father, Jorge Wong Shung.

### The Hacienda, and the Children's Education

Wong-Vargas: So my father wanted to get me there to work. He would stay in Lima, of course, and give my stepbrothers an education. I told my father I could not go to work there, because I had been to Talla, and I knew what it was like. It was a village with only a school for the workers' children, and Michael and Martha would go to study with them. I would die to give the children a good education; I would not take them to the village. I told my father I was sorry, but I could not go; I couldn't take them there. But I said I could help him however he wanted in Lima. So he was mad at me from that day.

He said, "If you don't want to go to the hacienda to help me, then I will not help you in the future. Do whatever you want." I was a little bit scared. My Amah sold my building in Hong Kong and sent me the money to Peru. I had that money, and I didn't know what to do with it, because I didn't know the language. Carmen, the cousin that was my auntie's eldest daughter, married a Peruvian named Guillermo (like Willy) Rodriguez. He knew a little English, so I could get by with him. He was the only one who could help me, but what could I do?

Then Pablo Sam wrote to me. Oh, he always wrote to me, and I don't know how he got my address. He asked his father to write me a letter. His father told me exactly what Sam had told me, "My son didn't know when I engaged this girl for him. That was my idea, and I'm sorry if because of me..." I knew it was his father, because the writing was different. He was a very good man, and I liked him later on. I had met him a long time ago, because he was a doctor who went to the village; so we knew him. But I was small at that time.

So the father wrote and said he hoped we would get together, and Sam kept writing. At that time I was all by myself in Peru. I didn't know the language, and my father was mean. I thought if Sam came over, maybe he could help me. We could work together. He had no money, but that was okay. I had some money from my small building, so we could start a business; or maybe he could help my father so I could stay in Lima with my children. I was so lonely with my two little children, no friends, nobody to talk to. Maybe that is why I wanted Sam to come to Peru.

I wrote him back, and then back and forth, back and forth. He said, "Oh, of course I want to go," blah, blah, blah. Then I told my father that I had married this man. Oh, he almost killed me. He said, "There are so many people you could marry, and with money, and you marry him?" Everybody knew he didn't have any money. He was from the next village, and everybody knew which family had or did not have money.

Bringing Sam to Peru, and Marriage in a Lima Church (1951)

Wong-Vargas: I told my father I wanted him to come, and maybe he could help at the hacienda. So he liked that idea and asked about



Left: Isabel  
Wong-Vargas, bride,  
Peru, October 10,  
1951.

Below: With  
bridegroom Sam Po  
Wuan (Pablo Sam).







the papers. But Sam couldn't go to Peru right away unless you spent bribe money because at that time the president of Peru was Odría, and he didn't like the Chinese-Peruvians to come back.

Nathan: Was there prejudice in Peru against Chinese?

Wong-Vargas: No, it wasn't that. He didn't want new Chinese immigrants. If you were a Peruvian coming back, he would allow it, but it was very difficult to get him to sign the papers, and it took a long time. Like for me and my sister, Susana, we were born in Peru, but even so my father had to spend some bribe money for them to sign to let us back into Peru. The same thing with Sam, but he had to go to Ecuador first, and from there to Peru. It wasn't just him; there was quite a large group going that way from Hong Kong to Peru. First they went to San Francisco, where they were not allowed to stay in the city. They stayed at Angel Island. It was like a jail.

Nathan: Oh, yes, Angel Island?

Wong-Vargas: That's right. From there they went to Ecuador and then to Peru.

Before that, I sent money to Sam to purchase his clothing--a suit, everything. I paid. I said to buy this and that for him, because I wanted him to look good. To make it short, he came to Peru to the Talla hacienda and then to Lima. Then we had to get married.

I told my cousin Carmen's husband, Guillermo, that we wanted to get married. I told him that we had married in China, but that we wanted to get married in the church. I didn't tell him a lot of things, you know. My cousin David came to see me when my father was not there, because my father didn't want to see him and number five and number three cousins. He hated them at that time.

David was the one who was living in my apartment in Kowloon, the one who stole my watch in China. He was terrible. I asked him if he wanted to be the godfather. So Carmen was the godmother, and he was the godfather when I married Pablo [Sam] in the church in Lima in 1951. Then I told Sam to help my father by going to the hacienda in the village, and he did. But Sam had been in the military; everybody had served him, and he always had a nap. The

military always had a nap; he told me that. Then they always had very good food. They had very good treatment, but they earned very little.

He had already gotten used to this kind of life. When he was helping my father, he always had a nap [laughs], and my father didn't like that. He fought with my father. My father said, "My daughter should be a man, and you should be a woman, because you always sleep." Sam always liked to have tea and chocolates. He knew nothing about business, so my father didn't like him. So my father said he had better go, and he had to come back to Lima.

My stepbrother Jorge was finishing high school and was going to go to engineering school, so my father didn't have any help. I didn't want to go because of my children, and Sam was really lazy. He didn't like to work. Really, he just wanted to sit down. He is only about ten years older than I, but he would always walk around with his teacup like this [demonstrates]. Oh, he was so lazy, but I didn't know that. Of course, you know later on, but it's too late.

My father asked his son to stop studying and to help him. That's why my father was very mad. My father had another business in Lima, an import-export business named Wah San. It's a very nice name in China. *San* means "life," and *wah* is something like "China." He had that business, and he had a very good manager at the hacienda, so his son didn't go right away.

### Grocery Store

Wong-Vargas: I didn't know what to do. The money was going, and I didn't know how to put it in the bank in a savings account. My father had my money. Amah sent it to me, but she couldn't send it in my name; so she sent it to my father. So my father had it and told me whenever I wanted it to just ask him for it. I talked to a Chinese grocery store owner and he said the best way to learn Spanish would be to open a grocery store. Then I would learn how to say bread, jam, butter, and so on. "But how," I asked. I had never had a grocery store. I couldn't buy and sell real estate, I could not do import-export business because of the language barriers.



Bodega, "South America" (grocery store), Peru, 1951. Isabel Wong-Vargas center behind counter.



Nathan: Were your children learning Spanish just by living there?

Wong-Vargas: No. I put them in school from the beginning, very close to where I lived. It was Miss MacTae's kindergarten. She was from Ireland. She was all by herself. She liked me, and I liked her, too. I explained to her, and she said to just send them to her, so they would learn Spanish and English. This was before Sam arrived in Peru.

I was walking around, looking, and I saw an empty store. I thought it seemed like a good location. I couldn't talk with my father, because he didn't want to help me. So I talked with Guillermo, Carmen's husband, the one who spoke some English. I told him I'd like to open a grocery store, and asked him if he knew how much it would cost. He took me to meet the owner of the store, and he told me and said he had a friend who was Italian who could make furniture, counters and so forth.

So I talked to my father and told him I wanted to open a grocery store. He said, "Don't count on me, because I'm not going to help." It cost 1,500 soles rent a month, I remember quite well, in 1951. But if I had somebody to guarantee the rent, I only had to pay an advance every month. If not, I would have to pay two more months' guarantee, or 4,500 soles, which was a lot of money at that time. I asked my father if he would sign the paper guaranteeing me so I wouldn't have to pay three months. He had already given me the money, so I opened an account there. I also bought land close to the beach. Guillermo told me somebody was selling this small piece of land, so I bought it. The store was only for rent, not for sale.

My father said, "No, I told you I'm not going to help you. You'll have to find somebody else. Just like you don't want to help me in the north." So I was forced to pay 4,500 soles because he wouldn't help. I had Guillermo get his friend to make the furniture for the store. Then Sam came back from the hacienda, but he couldn't help because of the language. I hired a cashier and two men to help and take care of everything.

Sam and I were married, and the store wasn't ready yet because of a problem with the furniture. Oh, there were a lot of problems; it wasn't easy. First of all, we didn't have water or electricity. I didn't know how to speak Spanish, so Guillermo helped me after work. We went to the electric company, to the water company; I had to do

everything all by myself. Sam was at the hacienda at that time. When he came back, the store still wasn't ready. It's a good thing Guillermo helped me, because without him I don't think the Italian guy would have finished the furniture.

### Empty Boxes and a Cash Register

Wong-Vargas: There was one terrible incident. Guillermo was helping me. In the back of the store was only one room, and there was an empty lot behind it. I asked Guillermo if he thought I could build a storage room in the back out of wood. He said he didn't know, but why not? Now I know I should have applied at city hall first in order to build something, but I didn't know, and I just built it with wood. Guillermo worked with the National Cash Register Company, and he said they had a lot of boxes made out of wood. He said he could get a lot of them cheaply for me--five soles per box--and he did.

Sam had arrived, but he was at home. He didn't know how to do such things. I didn't know Spanish, but I knew English and I was self-learning Spanish and knew how to do it. Sam always stayed at home. I asked him to come over and help me by at least watching the men doing the building. He did once in a while. I wondered where I could hire a man to help me. I always went to the market when I lived with my father, and I was living with him at that time. I saw an old man sitting there, and with my bad Spanish I asked him if he wanted to work as a carpenter, opening the boxes only. He said yes, so I took him to the shop, and he helped take the nails out of the boxes. Another carpenter that Guillermo introduced me to came to do the building.

One day I went to the market and came back. The store wasn't open yet; the building was still going on. Sam was there, and Guillermo was there, very upset. He said, "You know, Isabel, they made a mistake in bringing the empty boxes, and one box has a machine in it." We looked around but couldn't find it. Then my husband said, "Do not say anything. I'll tell you the truth later. I have it inside." He said this in Chinese, so Guillermo couldn't understand. I told Guillermo that it must be around there somewhere and not to worry. I told him to go and come back later. I wanted to find out what had happened.

I asked Sam what happened, and he said, "Well, they sent a machine by mistake, so I opened it." So he hid the

machine, because he wanted to keep it. I asked him how he could do that. Guillermo was helping us, and he would do that to him? I said he had to give it back to Guillermo. He said he wouldn't, and I said he had to. You know what he said? Oh, my God. He said, "Why don't you hire a taxi, and we'll take the machine and throw it into the ocean, because I don't want Guillermo to know that I took it." I said he couldn't do that. He said, "I told him that I didn't have it, so how are you going to tell him that I took it?" It looked bad for him, you see. He would rather throw it into the ocean. I said Guillermo could go to jail, because they might think that he stole the machine. I said I was going to give it back to him.

I took the machine and put it near the stairs. I called Guillermo and told him that I found it. I didn't say that Sam had taken it. I told him where I found it, and he said he had already looked around there, and it wasn't there before. I said I didn't know how, but that was where I found it. He asked where my employee was, the old man who was opening boxes. But Guillermo was there when the old man left, and the old man had said, "I'm not rich, but I'm honest." I think he saw my husband take it.

Then I was scared. First of all, my husband's papers were not ready yet. Then there was my father's friend who had helped him do the work. There would be a lot of trouble. I told the old man not to come back, because I thought he knew, and then Sam would go to jail, and then his papers, and then my father--oh, my God.

So when Guillermo asked where the old man was, I said I didn't know. Guillermo asked me where I had hired him, and I said in the market. He asked me to go back to the market and ask him if he took it. I said I didn't think so. "Well," he said, "it must be him."

Anyway, to make it short, I gave him the machine. But he had already told the police that it was lost, and they called me. I didn't want Sam to go, so I went. I knew a little bit of Spanish, and I went to the police station. They asked me to swear, and I swore; because I didn't take it, so of course I could swear to anything. I said I didn't take it, and my cousin Guillermo didn't either. Really, they sent it by mistake. I hired two people, I said--although I had hired only one--and I didn't know anything about them. The most important thing was that the machine was there, and they said okay. The company knew that Guillermo didn't take the machine on purpose. The only thing they didn't ask me

was if my husband took it. I didn't know what I would do if they did, but they didn't ask that.

When I went home, my husband said it was my fault, because he had wanted to throw it away, which would have been a better idea. Can you imagine? He would throw it away, but they would blame it on Guillermo. Guillermo helped us, and he would do bad things to him. So little by little I didn't like Sam. I'm white and he was black; or maybe the reverse, but totally different. We are so different in feelings and in so many things, and I realized that he was very selfish. The only good thing is that he never hit me or treated me like Chang did.

### Learning to Run a Grocery Store

Nathan: Did you get the grocery store open?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. Then I didn't know what to purchase. I went to ask my father again, because he had an import-export business, and when he first arrived, he told me, he had opened a grocery store in Chepén, so he must know about business. But he said, "I told you, you do it on your own." Then I didn't know what to do.

I went to Chinatown in Lima. At his import-export shop, Wah San, he had a salesman to handle purchases. His name was Manuel Chao, a very nice man. I told him that my father was very busy--I always hid the truth; I didn't want to tell people about the family--and that I didn't want to bother him.

I asked Mr. Chao if he could help me know what to buy for the grocery store I was going to open. He said sure, and he got a paper and wrote down a long list. He told me to purchase only half a dozen of each. I shouldn't buy too much, because maybe the merchandise wouldn't sell in my area, and I would be left with too much unsold goods.

So he taught me how to do it. He looked to see if they had some of the merchandise there, and if they didn't, he called some other place. Mr. Chao was so nice. He died young. He died in a car accident.

##



Wong-Vargas: He asked me if I needed a cashier, and I said yes. He recommended a girl named Delia. She came to work, and I found out later on from Delia that he went to a wedding in Chosica, a little bit away from Lima, with his wife and a group of people. He was in front, and in the car accident he died right away. The wife and son were saved. I lost track of them, and I wish I knew where they were, because he was very nice to me. You know, when someone is nice to me I never forget it. Without him I wouldn't have known what to buy.

Nathan: How was Delia?

Wong-Vargas: She was okay, not very clever, but she was honest. She is still around, so when I am in Lima once in a while she calls me. I told her when she was working she should study, because as a cashier she didn't have that much work every minute. I told her she should read something when she wasn't busy. She said, "Oh, yes, that's a good idea." She could finish high school, study, teach, or whatever in the future. She told me she is teaching now. After she left the grocery she finished school, and she is teaching little kids. She always remembered me because I always helped her and told her to study, because I liked to study.

I learned a lot in the store. I did it all by myself, because nobody taught me how to do it. Then I bought a notebook. If someone wanted something I didn't have in the store, I would write it down in the notebook. Then I would gradually buy these things and put them in the store, because I knew the person would be back or another person would ask for it.

The store was in a very nice zone in Lima called San Isidro. I didn't know anything about it at the time, but I just saw the place and I liked it. It's the best zone for business in Lima today. There is a very nice building today in front of the store, so I do have a good sense of choosing a location.

Nathan: Do you still have the store?

Wong-Vargas: No.

Nathan: What sorts of things did you carry in the store? Were they canned goods?

Wong-Vargas: Canned goods. Just like a grocery store. When I applied for the license for the grocery store--Guillermo helped me to apply--I told him to put down also vegetables and meat, because what do you eat? Not only cans, but you have to have meat and vegetables every day. He asked me if I was going to sell meat, and I said no, but you never know in the future. This is just something that I was born with--my imagination. That was very smart of me, because I had a license to sell everything, and little by little I did sell vegetables and also meat.

It was very difficult to get meat, but if you had a license it was easy. But I would always write down things that people wanted. A lot of North Americans and English lived in that zone. Since I took English in high school, I could get by with English at that time. They would come in and want me to help them. I remember Mr. Ben, the director of the telephone company. His wife was Portuguese. His wife was nice, but he was really nice. I think she was his second wife. Mr. Ben always came in the store and wanted me to help him. [laughs] Sam was very happy, "Oh, he wants you to help him." I would ask him what he wanted and then write it down and give it to the employees to fill the order. I would never fill the orders or be the cashier. I was just around and supervised and did the buying, looking to see what was needed.

I always believed that if you have two hands you can do so much; but with your brain you can use a hundred hands; you can use somebody else to do it. I always thought like that, so I always hired people to do things. But Sam, no; he liked to do it himself. He is different from me. I always trust other people to do it and have my own way of controlling the employees.

Little by little I learned how to control people. With me, I was born with the ability. I never went to business school, for example, but I know the way to do things. If somebody asked me if I had a certain product, I couldn't go looking everywhere, so my way was to have everything alphabetized in a notebook. Remember how I built a storage shed behind the store? There was one part of the room where you could sleep, and the rest was for storage. I would store sugar, rice, or whatever, and each would have a number. I thought this up all by myself. I organized that. Sugar, for example, was number two. So I could say, "Number two goes there." Otherwise, if I didn't number them, I wouldn't know where they were.

This was my own system. I liked to organize things, and it was all on my own; nobody told me how to do it. The only thing I didn't know at the beginning was what to buy. I had no idea what to sell in a grocery store, but little by little I learned. I remember one day an American lady wanted a turkey. She asked me if I sold turkeys, and I said, "No, I don't, but I can help you. How big do you want?" She told me how many kilos, and I went to the market and purchased it for her. I told her I didn't have it, but that I purchased it for her, and I gave her the receipt. So they liked me, because they knew I was honest. I never tried to make some extra money by overcharging on something like that.

Nathan: So you gave service?

Wong-Vargas: Service, but free. I never charged for it, because, you know, she wasn't going to have turkey every day. If everybody wanted turkey every day, then I would buy a whole lot of them. One day the American lady said, "Oh, the South American grocery store is the best." She needed nails, and I didn't have nails. I asked what kind and how many she wanted, and I went and purchased them for her, because she didn't know where to go and I did. Little by little I knew my way around. I decided that wasn't expensive, so I bought a little more in case somebody needed them. So gradually I had everything in the store, and I learned a lot.

Nathan: For ordinary things that you sold in the store regularly, was there a certain mark-up that was your profit?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. I didn't want to earn too much; but for example if eggs cost a hundred soles for a dozen, I would sell them for ten soles each. That would give me \$120, so it was approximately a 20 percent mark-up. Some people added more, but that's what I always liked to do. If something was twenty soles a dozen, then I would sell it for two soles each. I would make 20 percent on everything. Some people told me I sold things too cheaply, and I should get more, but I thought that 20 percent was fair.

I remember every Friday I would clean the floor of the store. I was expecting Ines, but I kneeled on the floor and scrubbed it, and then I put on red wax (the floors were red anyway). The next day, Saturday, and also on Sunday, a lot of people would come in, and the store would be so clean. My husband never, never helped me. He saw me, pregnant, on the floor cleaning, and he would say, "Why are you cleaning? Tomorrow they will walk all over it and get it dirty again. You shouldn't do that." We had employees who would come to

work the next day, but they didn't clean or wax; they would just go over it with a broom, and that was it. So that's why I liked to do it. But he never said, "Oh, let me do it." Never, not even one time.

Nathan: Were you open every day of the week?

Wong-Vargas: Every day of the week, including Sunday.

Nathan: What were the hours?

Wong-Vargas: From 8:30 in the morning, and we never closed until 8 at night. The latest would be until 9 at night. Oh, yes. The cashier came, but she left earlier.

Nathan: Were you open on holidays?

Wong-Vargas: Every day--Sunday, holiday, every day. I didn't work there all the time, but I paid the employees double on Sundays and also they had one day off a week. Peru is like that, but they do close now a half day on Sundays, I think.

#### Ines, First Baby in Peru

Wong-Vargas: That was my business, then, and I was doing fine. I really kind of liked it. Poor Ines, I was expecting her, and I didn't have time to go buy things like a little dress for her. She was actually my first baby born in Peru, and I had no baby clothes. You know, I didn't have anything. It was August, and Susana, my step-sister, would always come to visit me. She was living with my father. She kept telling me that I should prepare something for the baby, and I said I would.

I always arranged and changed the display in the store myself, because I liked doing that. I made beautiful displays, because it was my way. I remember one night I was cleaning, and all of sudden I didn't feel well. They took me to the hospital, and Ines was born. I had nothing, not even diapers for her. I think they just wrapped her with a towel. Susana had to go the next day to help me purchase some little dresses. I remember that quite well. I didn't know it was going to happen so fast. It wasn't like here, where you're supposed to get a check-up every month. They tell you an approximate date, and you think it will probably be another week and just keep going. I told Susana that after I finished changing the display, I thought I would buy a few

baby things the next day. But it was too late, because I was already in the hospital, and Ines was born.

Before that, my cousin Carlos was working in the hacienda. My father wanted Carlos to give him some money; every month there was supposed to be income from the hacienda, and Carlos was not going to give it to my father. My father said, "I want to buy a car for Isabel." My cousin Carlos thought that was fine, because he liked me. He said he would buy it for me. It was really just that my father wanted money from the hacienda. I'm sorry to say that, but I don't think he really wanted to give me a car.

My cousin bought the car at my father's account, and they gave it to me. I was in the grocery store at that time. It was a gift from my father. Carlos, particularly, had very good taste in cars. He always had a Cadillac. He got a new Cadillac every year. Oh, he knew cars. The car he bought for me was a green Chevrolet. That was the first car I had in Peru. I hired a maid, Justina, to take care of Ines. She was very clean and helped me a lot.

I forgot to tell you that after I opened the store I moved from my father's house to the store. In front was the business, but I had a room there inside. Pablo (Sam), myself, Martha, and Michael were all in the same room with a double bed and a bunk bed. The room was quite big. Michael used the top bed, and Martha was on the lower bed. My husband and I were on the other side. Then when Ines was born, where were we going to put her? Remember the storage shed in back? One side of it was for storage, but Justina and Ines slept on the other side. I nursed Ines.

Nathan: Did you have a kitchen or a bathroom?

Wong-Vargas: We had a small kitchen and a small bathroom in the kitchen. It had a shower, not a bath. It very seldom rains there, so we were never prepared for it. One day it was raining lightly, and the roof was leaking. We had to put pans out to catch the water.

### Father's Chalet

Wong-Vargas: My father--oh, he would come to the store. He admired me. He didn't help me, but God helped me, of course. Later he

rented another house, close to the store. It was a beautiful chalet on the Avenida Orrantia. I think it had three bedrooms, with a garden in front, and a garage. He didn't have a car, but he had a garage. Jorge, Sixto, Carlos, and Susana lived with him there. My father and Sixto had one room, Susana had another, and the two boys shared a room. They also had a room for the maid down below.

When he got this house, they had to move from Lince to San Isidro. I talked to my oldest brother, Jorge, and said how nice it was and asked him if they were going to have a maid. He said he didn't think so. So I thought that room would be nice for Michael, because Michael liked boys. He liked to be with my step-brothers. Sam was not really a good father for him. I asked if I could move a little bed in there for Michael. Jorge said yes, of course I could move him. So I bought a little bed, and I put it in there. My father was not there.

In the evening I took Michael over, and my father was there. I said, "Papa, Michael is going to stay here in the maid's room downstairs." He said, "Who gave you permission to bring a bed over here?" My father. "Who gave you permission? This is my house." And I had to take Michael back. Again, I started crying. I told my father I had talked to Jorge, but he said, "I am the owner here, not Jorge." Of course, Michael already was counting on being there in his own room without Martha and us. But back we went.

My father didn't feel bad about it. He would come to have lunch, because I had somebody to cook. He would send his children over to have lunch. I couldn't say, "Why do you come here?" I couldn't. That's me; that's my problem. Maybe because of that he took advantage of me. I couldn't say no, and that was my problem.

I liked to swim in the morning, and sometimes at 6:30 in the morning I would take Susana, Sixto, Carlos, and Jorge to the beach to swim. I had a car at that time. I learned there was a swimming pool nearby, so I took them swimming there. Then we would have breakfast, and they would go to school and I would work. They always remembered that I did that for them, even though my father was so mean.

Later the oldest brother, Jorge, went to the hacienda to help my father. Carlos and Sixto went to the university, and they didn't need the house anymore. My business was doing

well, and I told my father, "If you don't need a house, why don't I rent it?" It was 1,000 soles a month. He said okay, I could have it. At that time it was very easy to find a house, just like that.

So we moved to the chalet. I could afford to pay the 1,000 soles a month because the business was doing well. Martha had her own room. I hired a maid, and I already had a maid for Ines, and she stayed in the maid's room.

My cashier left, and I hired another cashier who was also nice. She was rather dark--not black--and her name was Carmen. She was much sharper than the first one. I mention this because her little sister always came to play with Ines. Right now she's working in the Bank of America in Lima, so I do see her once in a while.

Nathan: Did you and the children ever live at the hacienda?

Wong-Vargas: No.

Nathan: You were always in Lima?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Well, we would visit for one or two nights, but we never lived there. Sam lived at the rice mill, close to the hacienda, for three or four months until my father asked him to leave.

### Lima Schools

Wong-Vargas: Later I put the children in a very good school. I asked what the best school in Lima was, and they told me Santa Margarita was very nice. I sent Michael and Martha there for elementary school. I like to help people to study. David and his wife, Flora, were living in Chepén, in the village. They had several children there, and also the number five cousin. I asked why they didn't come to Lima to study, because there was nothing in Chepén. They asked where, and I suggested Santa Margarita.

Nathan: Was that a boarding school?

Wong-Vargas: No, just a day school. I said I could help them find a place to live, and I helped them rent a big house. So number five and number six cousins' wives came to Lima to live with the kids while they studied. Without me, I think they would

still be in Chepén, really. But now they are in New York, Miami, Hong Kong--all over. I think they will remember. I helped them to find a place, and I helped them get into Santa Margarita.

One of Flora's children, Artemio--he lives now in Sacramento--when he came to Lima, he told every kid at school about me and my divorce and remarriage (because all the family knew about it). He would say, "You know, this Pablo is not Michael's or Martha's father." The mother of a student told me about it. Oh, I was so upset. I helped the cousins' children get into the school, and now I had to find another school for my own children. Then I found out that Villa María was the best school for girls. It is much more expensive, but it is a very good nuns' school. I talked with the principal, and she was very nice. I knew that in order to get into that school you had to wait years, and you had to be the children of ex-alumnae. When the child is born, you have to go get their name on a list. So I thought they would never accept my daughter Martha. I had no money, I wasn't known socially by them. But I went and talked with the principal and told her I came from Hong Kong, was educated in a nuns' school, and would like a nuns' school for my daughter. I was sincere. I said I was not rich, but I would pay the tuition on time. So they accepted Martha. Then I had to find another school Michael. I found out that Markham is a famous English school for boys. It was much more expensive than Villa María, and also I had to find two English people to be the sponsors. I was very lucky and found two English families; they were my grocery store's customer.

#### Helping Susana Study in the United States

Wong-Vargas: I forgot to tell you about my sister Susana. She wanted to study. Before Martha got into Villa María school, I told Susana she should go to Villa María. I talked to the nun, the principal, first about Susana, and they accepted her. Then later on I talked with her about Martha, and she was also accepted. The nun said she accepted them because she knew I was very sincere and honest.

Susana was already so grown up, and she was almost finished. She was a little bit old for getting into high school. In Peru at that time it was very easy to change one's age; I would just say she was several years younger than she really was. Susana always remembers that. I did everything for her, because I wanted her to study, and



especially because she was my sister. My father paid for her tuition, of course.

Susana had already graduated from Villa Maria when Martha was still in Santa Margarita. I told Susana she should go to the United States to study. My father said, "I don't know how to do it, so you do it." So I did everything.

Nathan: How did you find out how to do it?

Wong-Vargas: When I was at Villa Maria I would hear things, and I asked the nuns and the principal. The principal said, "Well, she could go to Philadelphia." In Philadelphia there is a branch of the Villa Maria school. Susana did go to Philadelphia to the Villa Maria--Holy Names College, which belongs to the same nuns. I paid for it, and my father paid me back later. I was able to do that because of my business.

Susana always liked me very much because I was just like a mother; everything was for her first. She wrote and told me that she didn't have a typewriter. You know what I did? I knew some other girls from Peru who went to the same school in Philadelphia. One of the girls came back to visit during vacation (because they had a lot of money; the families of the students who go to Villa Maria are very rich), and she told me she could buy a second-hand typewriter for \$50. I gave it to her and told her to give it to Susana on her birthday. Susana now lives in Sacramento.

I remember Sam asking, "Why do you send your children to a special private school? There are so many government schools that you don't have to spend that much money." I said, "That's my money; it's not yours. I want my children to have a good education, so it is not your problem."

Business: A License for Meat, and a Cinema

[Interview 7: May 12, 1989]##

Wong-Vargas: After Ines was born I was still working. I just rested two weeks, and then went back to work again. Now there was another baby, so I had to make more income. Then I remembered that I had a license for meat. My father had moved somewhere else, and we rented his old house. We changed the room in the back of the store to a place to sell meat and vegetables, and I hired a butcher. Meat was really in demand at that time, but if people wanted it they had to

go to the market. They were very pleased when we began to sell meat and vegetables in one place.

Nathan: Did the butcher do the buying of the meat?

Wong-Vargas: No, we ordered it by phone, and they sent it to us. He only cut the meat and so forth. The business increased and was very good, and we didn't have to suffer by living there, since we were living in the small chalet. It was very nice. I kept adding merchandise, and then I decided I had to do something else.

Then I met Mr. Lee, who was a friend of my husband. I think they came from China at the same time and met on the trip. I had saved some money from the business, and Mr. Lee and another partner wanted to buy a cinema. He asked me if I wanted to join them, and I said I had a little money. So the three of us bought the old cinema. In Peru you had to pay the whole amount; you couldn't make monthly payments like here. The location of the cinema was not very nice--not like San Isidro--and that's why we could afford to buy it.

Nathan: Your real estate training must have helped you.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, really. I always liked to invest in things. The cinema was in an area something like East Oakland and not safe at night. A man, Mr. Carlos Mas, was already renting it, and I had to go there a few times to collect the rent. Mr. Lee and his partner never bothered, you know; I was the one who collected the rent and fixed things. Oh. Later on I thought, why not sell it, and we decided to sell it.

## VII BUILDING BUSINESSES: THE RESTAURANT AND OTHERS

### Three Floors. Three Shops

Wong-Vargas: Another Mr. Lee, a cook, had a grocery store with his brother. They wanted to sell it and split the proceeds, and he wanted to open a restaurant, but his Spanish wasn't very good. Mine was already getting better, and I said okay. I said I didn't know how to cook, and he said he did know how to cook. He told me I would just be the manager and take care of the business. First I had to look for a place. I had already looked around. Lince, where I first lived with my father, was very close to San Isidro. I found a beautiful building with three floors and three shops; two shops were still vacant. I went in and asked how much for the rent. To make it short, I told Mr. Lee, and he said, "Oh, whatever you say is fine; everything will be half and half."

I just went ahead and rented that. I was thinking: three stores, and one was already rented, selling radios and music. The other two: one would be for a restaurant; I had no experience at all about restaurants. I saw the kitchen, and it was just a little bit bigger than this room.

Nathan: This room is about eight feet by eight feet?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Since I had no experience, I thought that would be enough. Mr. Lee just said, "Whatever you say." He never helped me look at the place. I asked Mr. Lee what the working hours were when one had a restaurant. Mr. Lee told me, "You open at 12 o'clock noon, and you close at 3 o'clock." That's the Peruvian style.

Nathan: So it was just for lunch?

Wong-Vargas: Then you open again at 7 p.m. and close at 12 o'clock. I remembered that, and I was thinking, "What am I going to do

in the morning and between 3 o'clock and 7 p.m.?" The second shop was an empty store, and I was very ambitious for business at that time. I knew there was a very good machine laundry in San Isidro, and they were always full. Laundries that washed by kilo were very new at that time. You couldn't do it yourself, like in a laundromat here; you had to have someone there. The wage was very low, anyway.

They told me that you opened the laundry at 9 o'clock in the morning, and you closed at 12 noon; then you opened again at 3 or 4 o'clock and closed at 8 p.m. So I thought I could open the laundry at 9 a.m., close it at 12 noon and open the restaurant, close it at 3 p.m. and open the laundry, close it at 7 p.m. [laughs] and open the restaurant for dinner. And I did. I rented the second shop for myself and bought six washing machines and three dryers. The shop was large, very long. Then there was a counter for the girl who was working. You had to know how many kilos, so you needed a scale and more than ten big baskets for the clothing.

I asked Mr. Lee what I should do, and he said, "Everything's fine. Sign the contract," but he hadn't paid me anything yet, and I felt bad to ask him. Since I still had some money left, I didn't bother to ask him. I was going to have chairs and booths made. I was very creative, you know, because at that time in Chinese restaurants they always called the waiter by clapping. I didn't like that and wanted to do something new. So in every little booth I put a bell that would ring back in the office. You have to think and have new ideas when you open a business.

I got someone to make the furniture, but I had to pay for everything to get it. I talked to Mr. Lee, and then he said at the last minute, "You know what? I cannot sell my business, and I cannot be your partner." At that time I was expecting Lita. Oh, I didn't know what to do. I said he must be joking, and he said no. I said, "What am I going to do?" He said he could help me, but I asked how he could help me economically. I was so shocked.

### The License and the Oven

Wong-Vargas: I was so shocked, I didn't know what to do. I remembered that at my grocery store once I had hired a man, Louis Chow, to work for me. He was Chinese from Hong Kong, so he spoke very good Cantonese. We always talked, and we are good

friends. Later he left, and he opened his own grocery store. One evening it was raining, and I was so tired because of the pregnancy with Lita. I went to see him and told him my problems with the Chinese restaurant, and I promised him that I would give him 50 percent of the shares of the restaurant if he would help me. He said he was so sorry, because he had the store to take care of and could not help me.

I still remember that night. After I came back from Chow's, I thought to myself, "When will the day come when I don't have to worry about this?" I could not sleep, thinking about what I was going to do. My husband said at the beginning, "Why are you doing so many things?" Because everything I had to do all by myself; he never would even walk a few blocks with me to help me. He was like that.

After so many problems, it was a good thing that I could manage it, but it was really very, very hard. After I rented the building, they told me I had to go to city hall to get two licenses and prove that I could have a restaurant and the laundry. I should have gotten the license first and then rented, but I didn't know it--lack of experience.

I went to city hall, and gentleman, Mr. Lopez, was someone who worked there and was sent by the engineer to approve the location; then the engineer would look again and say okay and then sign so I could have a license. This man came and looked, and he said no, I could not have a restaurant. I asked why, and he said it was because the kitchen was too small. I said I thought it was big enough, and he said, "No, I'm sorry, but I cannot approve it." Oh. I had already rented it. I asked him who was going to sign after him, and he said the engineer.

I found out where the engineer lived [laughs], and I personally gave him a beautiful Chinese man's gown. I said I didn't know what to do. I told him that I had already rented the store. Beyond the kitchen there was a lot of space, but I wasn't sure that the woman wanted to rent that space. I promised the engineer I would rent it to enlarge the kitchen later. After the gift he signed it. Mr. Lopez was nice, and he said he was very glad the engineer had signed it, because he couldn't: "I work under him, and if I signed, he could fire me. I'm so happy for you, but, believe me, the kitchen is very small." I was pregnant with Lita, and each time I got to the city hall Mr. Lopez gave me a chair to sit in because I was tired. I remember little things like that,

because most people see you are pregnant and just think it's your problem, and they aren't concerned about it.

I had the chairs already, but I didn't have an oven. A Chinese oven is different. I thought I would just buy a small oven, but they said, "No, for a Chinese oven you have to do something different."

Then I started to talk with the lady in the back. She lived far away in Tarma, close to Huancayo. I took a bus all the way there to talk to her. She was a widow. She wasn't an Indian type, but a village type. I told her the truth; it's very important to tell the truth. I told her I had three children, I had to work, and I had already rented the place but the kitchen was very small. I wondered if she could rent me or sell me a little of the space in back. She said she would never sell it, but she would rent it to me for one or two years. Oh, I was so happy. I asked if it would be possible to continue to rent it after that, and she said sure.

I was very pleased, and right away we opened a hole and pushed the kitchen out. Then I had to get a big built-in oven.

Nathan: Can you tell me how a Chinese oven is different?

Wong-Vargas: It is about two and a half meters long. It's made of something like concrete and special bricks. On the top you have to put very thick iron and then two or three holes for woks. It gets very hot, so that's why the cooks always get so thirsty in a Chinese kitchen. They always wear a special apron that doesn't allow heat to pass through. I didn't know where to go to find someone to make such an oven, so I went to Chinatown and went into three or four restaurants to ask the owner where I could get one. Everybody said they didn't know.

Oh, I didn't know what to do. Nobody wanted to help or could tell me anything. Of course, I prayed to God to help me find somebody to tell me where, how--who is going to make this special thing? One day I passed by the American-Chinese Restaurant; they had breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was on Paruro Avenue in Chinatown, and I went in and talked to the Chinese man there who was the owner. He said he didn't know. It was so difficult. Also they were very narrow minded and jealous of people wanting to open another restaurant. But it was so far away; it wasn't in Chinatown. I would have liked

to know the worker's address in order to call him to come to build a Chinese oven.

In Peru there are a lot of colored men--Black. I saw one of these men coming out from the restaurant, and he looked a little bit dirty, as if he were a worker. I said, "Maestro"--that's like "Sir," but he was the "maestro" of woks. Then I asked him if he knew someone who could make a Chinese oven, and he said, "That's my specialty." [laughs] He said to wait a minute, because his father was coming from the restaurant right there. He was a very nice old man, also Black. They asked where my restaurant was, and I explained how badly I needed someone to help me build an oven. He said, "Don't worry, if you need someone today or tomorrow, I'll be there," and he was. I was waiting for him, and he told me what to buy and how to do things. So God heard my prayer, helped me, and resolved the problem.

So then I had everything, but I didn't have a cook.

#### A Cook, a Godfather, and Three Waiters

Nathan: What happened to Mr. Lee? Couldn't he even work with you?

Wong-Vargas: I know he said he would help me, but the grocery store was open until 8 or 9 o'clock at night, so how could he? I put an ad in the Chinese newspaper. Mr. Wong, a Chinese cook, came to work. He was very thin. He said he could cook, but he didn't have any recommendations from anybody. Since I needed him, I said okay for the first night.

I remembered Mr. Lopez had been nice to me--giving me a chair--and it was obvious to invite the engineer to be the godfather. Because you always have a godfather or godmother when you open some business in Peru. I didn't want to invite the engineer, even though he signed the license. I remembered Mr. Lopez, and I would always call him when I had any problems rather than the engineer. Mr. Lopez was older, and the engineer was younger. Mr. Lopez actually worked at city hall, whereas the engineer just came in for a few minutes every day, so it was easier to find Mr. Lopez there if there were any problems. So I invited Mr. Lopez to be the godfather.

Nathan: Was this restaurant La Caleta?

Wong-Vargas: No, it was my first Chinese restaurant.

##

Nathan: You were thinking about the name?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I remembered my grocery store, and the business I had in Hong Kong, the South America Import-Export Trading Company. In Chinese "South America" is *Na-Mey*. So I said, why not *Na-Mey* for the restaurant? It meant "South America," but people liked to hear Chinese words. In Peru they call a restaurant a *chifa*. I don't know where they got that name. I know the meaning of *chi* is "eat," and *fa* is "rice." The Chinese like to eat rice, and a Chinese restaurant is always called a *chifa*. So my restaurant was called "Chifa Na-Mey."

I invited Mr. Lopez to be the godfather and also his wife. He said he would be late, but anyway he came, by himself. He told me his wife was sick and could not come. There was supposed to be a godmother also, but he was the only one.

Then I hired three waiters by putting a notice up on the door. Three men came, and I hired them--no experience. I always liked to have something special, so since I had a Chinese restaurant I put little Chinese things in the windows--fans, flowers, and so forth that I had brought from China. It was also nice that I had a grocery store, so I knew where to purchase things. For example, I bought some canned tea, small souvenirs that people could buy for gifts. It was also a very good business. I asked Mr. Lopez if it was okay, and he said I could have it, that I didn't need a special license; I could have a restaurant and some gifts.

Nathan: How did you design your restaurant?

Wong-Vargas: The walls and so forth were concrete, painted all off-white, and I put very nice objects on the walls. I had a lot of Chinese things; I had been in China for so many years. I copied a design from a book and made a wooden frame with a carved wood design panel. It was like a screen, but all in wood. You cut the wood designs, painted them, and then put them up with glue first and nailed them. Before I opened I hired a carpenter to do it for me. I had about ten panels, large and small, very nice. You know how much he wanted to charge me? Five hundred soles for the large sizes and three hundred for the small, which was a lot of money at that time. Oh, it would have been very difficult for me to pay that



much; no way. And that was only the labor; I already had the wood.

So I measured everything, and I did it at night all by myself. They are still there. Each time when I pass by them, I remember that I did it at night, one by one, and then put it up. It was not so easy, but I loved to do it. I painted them in red, and the walls were white with a little pink in them. It was very beautiful--and clean, and that's important.

### Opening the Laundry and Sewing on Collars

Wong-Vargas: I had already purchased the washing machines, so I had to also open the laundry. A month later I opened the laundry. I made a mistake there, because I thought it would be full of people like the one in San Isidro, but Lince was different; the people there were not so wealthy. In San Isidro people were wealthy and could afford to wash every week or so. In Lince they would wash only every two weeks or more, so the clothing was more trouble, dirtier. I had two girls working there who took in the clothes and washed them. Later on I had three girls. Because the clothes were so dirty, I told them to first wash the collars and cuffs by hand and then put them in the machine. The men's shirts were rather old, so when you scrubbed hard they would tear. Of course the men would want to be paid for a collar that was torn; they didn't bring it in like that. So I had to figure out how much I had to pay back for a collar that the girl scrubbed too hard.

Then I learned: why didn't I purchase a dozen collars and cuffs wholesale, and I could change the torn collars or cuffs and charge for it. So I told the girls that when they received the shirts, first they had to check that a collar or cuffs weren't very new, then ask the man if he wanted to change it for a new one for an additional charge. I found out how much a collar and cuffs were in Lima, and then I found out where to buy them wholesale. At first I bought collars a half a dozen in size fifteen, fifteen and a half, sixteen, sixteen and a half; the Peruvian men are overweight [laughs]. I did that work very late at night after closing the restaurant and the laundry. The grocery store--sometimes my husband closed it. I would sew on collars and cuffs so I would have extra income. I was working very hard. Maria, my housekeeper, always said, "Don't work so hard; go to sleep."

The laundry was a good business, too, but then the girl started stealing things. The restaurant business was doing very well.

Offending the Cook, and Finding a New One

Nathan: Was your cook a good cook?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, no. I didn't tell you about the cook. The opening night was fine, but the first night we were open for business my husband, Pablo (Sam), said to the cook near the end of the evening, "You don't know how to cook." The cook said, "Oh, yes? You cook." And he left. Sam never liked to work, but he liked to criticize people. He never helped me with the restaurant, but he came to the opening night and had dinner there. I asked the cook if he was leaving, and he said he wasn't coming back. What was I going to do the next day? I asked Sam why he did that.

I went the next day and begged the cook to come back, to do it for me. Finally he said, "For you, I will come back, but just for a few more days." I asked him to please recommend another cook to me. He liked me, so he came back for me, but he said he would never do it for my husband. I told Sam to not even go into the kitchen.

Now I had to look for somebody else, and a friend told me there was a very good cook in Miraflores, but this cook had fought with another cook with a knife and injured him, so he was fired. I said, "So that's why he's looking for a job?" [laughs] I had no choice, and I hired him. But I told him he had to be very careful. I understood it, because he was quite warm from the heat of the kitchen. I called him Apac, which is something like "uncle" in Chinese. You can call someone who is a little older "Apac." I told him that if he needed something to drink, like mineral water or Coca Cola, to please tell me; because I knew it was hot and he needed water. Oh, he was so happy. He liked soda water, so I always kept soda water for him. I didn't tell the kitchen people that he had fought with a knife, but I told them that they had to respect him; if he needed water or juice to just give it to him, because he was the chef. He was in command of the kitchen.

The Chinese chefs are very different. I mean, they don't allow anybody close to them. They want to do it

themselves, unless he would point to someone and say, "Do this." If you put a hand in his cooking, he would be mad and throw you back or something. The Chinese were like that, but I don't know about him.

That man worked for me and was much better than Mr. Wong, so I was very happy. The people from San Isidro at that time had no restaurant nearby, so mine was almost the only restaurant in the areas of San Isidro and Lince. People waited in line for a seat, can you imagine? That was because of good food and a nice, clean atmosphere.

### Seeing What is Happening in the Restaurant

Nathan: Were you the one who received them?

Wong-Vargas: No, I just moved around. I just worked and saw what was needed. I didn't like to be tied up in one thing, like cashiering. For example, we didn't wash the glasses with the other dishes. If it was so busy that the dishwasher couldn't do the glasses, then I would wash them. I only did that once in a while, because I liked to be out where I could see what was happening. I would watch to see if the customers needed anything. I never liked to stay in one place.

I never liked my children to help me, never. Michael wanted to help, but I would say, "No, I have a cashier or somebody to do it; you are not to do it." That was my idea from the beginning to the end. I never wanted the children to help me at the business, because I wanted them to study and learn whatever they like. Martha was learning piano, ballet, Spanish dancing, etc.

I thought the restaurant business was very easy. It was only common sense, to love people, and to be honest. First of all be honest, then you have to treat your employees well, give good service and good quality food. People will come back. It's common sense, don't you think? Anybody could do it. You don't have to have a university degree in order to manage a restaurant business. I wanted my children to be somebody and to help them be themselves. If they wanted to be engineers, doctors--or even restaurateurs, then they would study to be restaurateurs and study hotel management, too.

I had some problems with commuting from my house to the restaurant every day, because I lived in San Isidro and had

to work very late at night--close here and open there. It was a good thing that I had a maid at home in San Isidro to take care of the house and look after my children when they came home from school. A bus took them to school from the corner, so it was very easy. I was also still doing the shopping for the grocery store. I asked Sam why he didn't help me a little bit. He said, "I don't know about business." He never liked to learn Spanish; he never liked to learn how to drive. He was in the army, but until he died he never learned to drive.

One day I was going to teach him to drive. It was after Ines was born, and I was about three months pregnant with another baby. He didn't know to control the car, and he drove into a hole. No one was injured, but I lost the baby. I lost two babies before Lita, or I would have had seven children. One was because of the hole, and the other one was when I was working in the grocery store. The doctor told me not to work as hard as I was. I was working like crazy--like doing exercises, reaching here, reaching there; and the employees came in the morning and just sold things. I didn't like people to come in and see empty holes in the shelves; I liked everything in order.

### Checks and Savings Accounts

Wong-Vargas: When I asked Sam to help me put something up at the restaurant, he would say, "Why put it up? Why don't you just leave it the way it is? Nobody asked you to put something there." I wanted to, because it was much prettier. But that was just him, unfortunately. One day in the store I had to sign a check, and I said we should sign with his name, too. He said, "Okay, but you sign the names." Everything. He didn't want anything to do with business. I said at least he could sign when I wasn't there. The markets aren't going to wait. The Banco Credito--Credit Bank--was opened in his name, too.

I also opened six little savings accounts. I put about a hundred soles each in them. At first I opened three, and then after Lita and Susy were born I opened a fifth, and six books for the children. So each one had one. I always believed that they should have savings. I like those kinds of things. Why six? Because I remembered that he had a daughter. She was not my daughter, but just like my daughter, so I opened one for her. That's me, you know.

So once in a while he would sign checks. It was very difficult, because first I would open the laundry, close the restaurant, and so forth, until night. At that time I had Martha, Michael, and Ines. The three kids, poor things, on weekends liked to come over to the restaurant for dinner. I had a car, so I drove them. They very seldom walked; they could, but it was a little bit difficult. I picked them up after school to have dinner at the restaurant. They were already changed out of their uniforms.

### Where the Children Slept

Wong-Vargas: They were tired and wanted to go to sleep, and I had to close the restaurant about 11 or 12 o'clock. You know where they went to sleep? We had a lot of big baskets in the laundry that were only for clothes that were clean and dry. Martha got into one, and Michael and little Ines into another, and they slept there and waited for me. This went on for a month or two until I said it couldn't go on anymore, but I couldn't take them home, so what was I going to do? The third floor of the restaurant building was vacant, but it was very small. It only had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, a little dining room, and a kitchen. Right away I rented it, and we moved there. That was about eight hundred soles a month. Alicia came from the North of Peru and stayed with us.

Nathan: Was that a lot?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, more or less. Because for the house we paid only a thousand--just two hundred more--and we had a chalet with three bedrooms, a garden, and a garage. But being close was the most important, so I could see my children, and I didn't have them sleeping in the *canastas* (baskets); they could sleep in their beds. I was thinking that I couldn't afford to have two places, but very soon the second floor became vacant--the big one. So we moved to the second floor, and I gave up the chalet.

Nathan: Did you still keep your maid to look after the children?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. There was also a room for a maid. In Peru there is always a room for a maid or for storage, or whatever you wanted. There is also another bathroom for a maid. The apartment was not in such a good location, but upstairs it was very clean. The second floor cost about nine hundred

soles, so for one hundred more I would have preferred the chalet. But I wanted the children to be close to me, so we moved. There was no garage, so my car was just on the street. But what could I do? I couldn't have everything.

I was very happy. My restaurant had a telephone, and I got an extension upstairs at my apartment. So if the children needed food, they could just ring, and it was very easy. I did a good job there. I didn't need a kitchen in the apartment, because we had one in the restaurant downstairs. So I converted the kitchen into my office, and I could do my work there at night. There was Martha, Michael, Ines, and Lita at that time. Later Susy came, and there were five. The apartment was quite big, so it was enough. Sam always liked to be at the store, so he had a little room there and sometimes he stayed there. That made it even better.

#### Waiters on Strike

Wong-Vargas: We were doing okay, and the business was very good. But the Chinese restaurant business was much better than the laundry. I was thinking, why not expand the restaurant, because there were a lot of people always waiting.

In the beginning I had three waiters. You know what they did to me? They knew that I was new, and the three of them went on strike. They said ten hours was too much; they worked ten hours. They said it was supposed to be eight hours. I didn't know that, and I asked my accountant. He said no, eight hours was for office workers, but it was ten hours for restaurant workers because they have lunch and dinner provided for them there.

The waiters went to the minister of work, the labor department, who sent me papers telling me what time I had to appear there. Oh, the restaurant was filled up, and the waiters didn't come back for even one day. I didn't know what to do. Maria was helping me with Susy at that time, and I told her, "Maria, come down and help me." I had two maids at that time. Maria helped me mostly with Susy, and the other maid was Lita's maid. They both came down and helped me.

The next day I had to go to the labor department, and the three waiters were there, so mad. I explained the whole

situation, and the director said, "You are right. It's ten hours; it's not eight." I told him that the waiters wanted eight hours, and he said, "Fine, just give them eight hours, but don't give them lunch and dinner. You have to pay them five soles each to eat somewhere else." That's the law. Then they would have to go out for lunch and dinner and come back.

Then the waiters were scared, and they continued to work for me, so I didn't have to call Maria. At lunchtime and dinnertime if they went out and came back, they had to be back in an hour. You cannot eat and be back in an hour; it's not enough time and also five soles was not enough. Then they said they were sorry, and they wanted it to be just like before, with ten hours. So I learned a lesson; I was correct. Then later they were very nice to me. I hired another one, and later on I had five. Then I needed to expand.

#### Trying to Buy, and Having to Sell

Wong-Vargas: In front of the restaurant there was a nice little old house that would be very nice for the laundry, but you had to purchase it. It was a very, very reasonable price; for about \$3,000, or around 80,000 soles, you could buy it at that time. The exchange rate at that time was about twenty-seven soles to the dollar. But I couldn't because of all the businesses I had. That was a lot of money at that time, and then I'd have to move the machines over there. Also, in order to have a laundry you have to have a special meter for electricity. I paid 10,000 soles for that, which was a lot.

I went to the electricity company, and they told me I could move to the house in front, and I didn't have to pay extra. But if I moved two blocks away I would have to buy a new meter, so that's one reason I wanted to buy that place. The business was okay. The girls who were working there stole some, but it was okay, and little by little I knew how to control that, too. I paid them something extra so they would have more initiative to work.

I didn't have the money, and then I remembered my cousin Rafael. He was the father of my niece, Rosalia. She's the one I took care of in China. She loved me, but she was still in China at that time. Everybody told me that Rafael was very generous; he always helped people who needed money. He

was my cousin and my father's nephew. My father took him to Peru. I wrote him a note.

##

Wong Vargas: He was in the north of Peru at that time, at the hacienda. My half-brother, Sixto, was traveling to the north to visit the hacienda because another brother was there already. I asked him to please give Rafael my note. I wrote it in Chinese and explained to him to loan me 30,000 soles and asked him to please give me an answer right away, yes or no. When Sixto gave it to him, Rafael said he would read it later on, and he put it in his pocket. He never answered me, to this day. I was very upset.

Remember, I told you that my father owned a hacienda with my cousin Carlos, and Mr. Chang. Corinna Chang was Mr. Chang's wife, and Alicia Chang was their only daughter; they had seven boys and one daughter. The daughter was studying in the north in Pacasmayo. I asked Corinna why she didn't have her daughter come and live in my house in Lima, and she did, so Alicia was living with me. She and Martha were good friends. They were almost the same age. I was thinking that if I wrote to the Changs they would say yes; but I didn't want to, because their daughter Alicia was in my house. I never received anything from them, and if I asked them they would feel forced to lend it to me, and I would feel bad. So I never asked them.

I went to another man, Mr. Tay, a friend of the Communist Party. He was very rich; I think he is still alive. He was my father's very good friend. When my father first went back to China, he gave his hacienda, "Cultambo," to Mr. Tay. I also knew that he lent money to people, so I went to see him. I asked my husband, Sam, if he would like to go with me, and he said no. He said he would go with me to Chinatown--because Mr. Tay was in Chinatown--but he would wait for me in a dim sum place. He didn't want to go with me. I was going by myself to borrow some money. He did not want to go with me, so I went all by myself.

I explained the whole thing to Mr. Tay, how I wanted to expand my restaurant and move the laundry to the house in front, and so forth. I explained the whole situation, and he gave me a big sermon. He said, "You know, some people like to run before they learn how to walk." I told him my business was doing very well, so that was why I wanted to expand it. It wasn't that I didn't know how to walk and wanted to run. If I had wanted to expand before opening,



that would have been bad; but the business was doing very well, so that's why I wanted to expand. I didn't want to give back the laundry machines that I had already spent so much on. That's why I wanted to move the laundry to the other side. I would buy that land and rent it out if I didn't want to use it.

He asked if my father knew about it, and I said he knew that I needed it, but I didn't ask him. "Oh, if he knows, fine. Then I'm going to give him the money and have him give it to you." Oh, I felt so hurt. I almost wanted to say, "Don't bother; I don't want it any more." But I couldn't because of the way I am. I said "Okay, thank you," and I left. But right away I called Jorge, my oldest step-brother. He was the one who didn't finish engineering studies and went to help my father. I told him that if Mr. Tay gave him the money or came to see my father, to tell him that I already found money elsewhere, and thank you. Just say, "Thank you very much," but I didn't want it. That was it. I was so hurt.

I decided the only way was Mr. Chang and Corinna, Alicia's parents. Because if I delayed any longer, the owner wouldn't sell the old house to me. So I did ask them for 30,000 soles, and I explained exactly what I needed it for. I told them I would pay it back with interest. They did send me a check for 30,000 soles. When I got the check I was so happy, and I longed to talk to the owner, who lived somewhere else. He had already sold it to somebody else.

So I wrote a letter and sent the same check back to the Changs because I couldn't use it, but I was very grateful to them, because they wanted to help me. My cousin didn't even answer. Then I told my father I was very grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Chang because they sent me a check, but that it was too late and I already sent it back. He said, "Sure, because their daughter's in your house." I said no, it wasn't that way. They were nice and they were generous, and that's why they lent it to me. And how about my cousin? My father brought him to Peru.

Anyway, I couldn't buy that place, so I had to sell the laundry machines one by one. I sold them very cheaply, and then I expanded the restaurant, because it had been doing very well for some time. Martha was in Villa Maria, and Michael was in Markham high school, so it was okay.

Matchmaking for Susana

Wong-Vargas: Then I came to the United States to visit Susana in San Francisco, California.

Nathan: Where did she go?

Wong-Vargas: She went to Philadelphia. (Now she lives in Sacramento.) She was in Philadelphia for one year, and then she moved to California.

The Communists took over Canton, so my godmother was forced to leave because she was scared of the Communists; they could kill her. She left China and came to the United States. She stayed in San Francisco for a while and in Sacramento for a while. She had two daughters, and the oldest was in San Francisco--the one who was the god-daughter of Sun Yat-sen's son. Her other daughter, Jeanny, lived in Sacramento.

So my godmother was here, and Susana knew her. Susana moved to this area, and she went to San Francisco City College to take some courses in radiology or something like that. Then my godmother wrote to me and said that Susana seemed to be going out with a married man. I was concerned about it, so I came to see her; I came to San Francisco. That was the first time I left my children when they were small. I had just started the restaurant, and of course now Sam had to sign checks, and I told him where to buy things, or where to call and have them send it, and he learned a little bit.

I remember Susana took me to Las Vegas and so many places with Sen Pac, her friend. I think they were only friends, but my godmother was concerned because they were always together. He was like an uncle, perhaps. I asked Susana why she didn't find someone to marry, and she said she didn't like kids from here.

She said she used to have a friend in China, Stephen Chen, and he always wrote to her. I asked her if she liked him, and she said, "Yes, kind of, but how can I say that I--?" I told her to let me do it, so I wrote him a letter. I said I had come to visit my sister, and that she had a lot of friends but she always remembered him; so why didn't he write to her: "If you like her, too, why don't you make a proposal and say something before somebody else--?" He listened to me and wrote her, and I think they became a

little more close in their writing. Later on he came to visit her, and then they got married.

Nathan: Good for you.

Wong-Vargas: But poor Stephen died two years ago. He was young; he died in his early fifties.

### Sam's Bank Account and the Grocery Store

Wong-Vargas: After three weeks I went back to Peru. Sam had gotten to like doing checks already, because he knew about the money and so forth. He became a little ambitious. He was starting to learn, but not the good way--the cunning way, the bad way. Then behind my back he opened his own account. Can you believe it? He opened it in his own name, and I didn't even know. He opened his account with my money in the Banco Popular, which was on the other side of the avenue. Oh, my God, that man. Poor thing, too.

Then he told me, "Don't worry about the grocery store. You just concentrate on the restaurant. I'm doing fine. But you know me, I don't have the patience, like you, so when the customers see me they go away." That's why the business slowed down, he said. He lied to me. Also another little market, a supermarket, had opened. But they always liked to go to my grocery store because it was close and gave good service, but business was a little bit down.

Every day he was taking some money out and putting it in his bank account. Oh, I didn't know. I thought maybe it was true that business was slow. I never thought that my husband would cheat me. Never, never in my mind would I do that even to a friend. I found out later on, but I didn't know at the beginning. He said business was slow, and I was concentrating on the restaurant and my children. Of course, I did go to the store, but I didn't have to be there like I did before.

Remember the machine he wanted to throw in the ocean? He had that kind of mind. Oh, it's a good thing that my three daughters are not like him. Thank God.

Nathan: Should we move along a little bit? You were saying that Sam had been putting money from the grocery store in his own account at a bank.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Then I learned that he had sent some money to bring a girl. Oh, I don't know. Supposedly she was the daughter of one of his friends that he met in the north when he was working with my father. I know about it because later on Sam got sick; he had a kidney stone. We were a little bit upset already, and most of the time he liked to stay at the grocery store. We had some exchange of words.

The earnings from the grocery store got less and less, until I didn't see anything. It was a good thing that the restaurant was a very good business, so I could afford to keep the children going to good schools. Children of high society went to Villa Maria and Markham, and they belonged to very nice clubs like the Lima Country Club in San Isidro that had a very good swimming pool, tennis, and so forth. I purchased a share to be a member there, not because I wanted to have it but only for the children so they could go with their friends who belonged to the club; they didn't have to wait to be invited. I loved to swim at that time (now I'm a little bit lazy, and besides it's cold), but I said no, it was for them. I didn't want people to see me there because they might know me from the restaurant. You know, I was concerned about that, because I wanted the best for my children.

When I went to the market I wore my market outfit: a skirt I made out of blue jean material, with a lot of pockets; a black leather jacket I bought (I still have it now, like a souvenir) that had an inside pocket; and heavy boots. When I came back from the market I would change out of these clothes. That was my way. The only thing I didn't know at that time was to wear gloves, so I touched everything with my hands. You can see these are working hands. I would select the fish and the shrimp by touching them, one by one. I didn't use gloves at that time, which would have protected my hands.

When I was about seven months pregnant with Susy, I remember, again, driving to the market. One day the little shopping cart fell and hurt my back. It was quite heavy. I was thinking I might have the baby right away, because that was very dangerous. But I kept going and kept going.

Ten Soles for the Cashier, and Susy's Early Birth

Wong-Vargas: I was working at the restaurant then, and I used to have a cashier who was very cunning. I didn't like him. For example, if a charge was 215 soles, he always put 225 soles; he always charged about ten soles more on purpose. I found out, and I asked him why. The clients discovered this, and they asked about it. It was always ten soles more, and he said he did it by mistake. But he would later take the ten soles for himself. If the client would complain, he would erase it and put the correct charge.

When I found out, I told him, "You don't do that to the client." He asked, "Why not?" I asked if he had done it on purpose, and he said, "Yes." Then I said, "Today is the last day. You have to go. I don't want that kind of people to work with me." He said it wasn't my money; it was the clients' money. I said, "No, even if it were clients' money, you don't do that." It's the principle. He said, "Okay, then I'll go now," and he left just like that. He was supposed to finish that day and evening. I was so mad. So I opened the money drawer and--ouch--it banged into my stomach. That's why Susy was born at seven months.

The next day I had to go to the hospital, and when Susy was born there were purple marks all over her body, and she was incubated for quite a while. She was very thin, and I was so worried and scared. Maybe the little cart and my back also had something to do with it.

After a few months she did well. She is very healthy, yes. Little by little the purple marks went away. There is still a tiny one on her arm that never went away. Flora, David's wife, kept me company for two or three days. She was nice.

Then, again, work. Now I had five children already, and Alicia was there with me, but she moved later. She went to a boarding house run by the nuns for students. After she graduated from high school she went back to Pacasmayo. Alicia is the one who is living in Germany now. She calls me auntie. She likes me very much. She also came to the United States and lived here for a while. She is just like a daughter. We get along fine. She says, "Oh, I wish you were my mother." [laughs] Her mother is different.

I kept working, and my father always came to have lunch there. He never helped me, but he would come to have lunch and sometimes dinner. I couldn't say anything. Then Sam--he had two faces, I think--called my father "papa," and he would ask, "Papa, what would you like to eat? We can tell the cook to prepare it for you." After my father left he would say things about my father: "He shouldn't come here," and so forth. I was the one who was in the middle. My father didn't help me, but he was my father, so I said okay. I couldn't say I didn't want him to come because he didn't help me and didn't want me to learn Spanish. I couldn't say that. I forgive him, though; but I remember always. I can't just forget the whole thing, but to forgive is different.

### The Architecture Exam

Wong-Vargas: My father decided to go for a visit to China in 1960 with my half-brother Sixto, who was studying to be an architect, but he didn't pass the examination. My father thought he had passed, and he was going to take him to Hong Kong to find him a wife. He told me he hadn't passed and asked me what to do. He had to study in the summer in order take another examination, so he couldn't go. You know what I did? I still remember.

I invited his teachers and the director, and I explained the whole thing. I said my father was sick, and he would have a heart attack if he knew his son hadn't passed the examination and couldn't go with him to China [laughter]. I lied a little bit, but I helped him. My father was a little weak in the heart, but not a heart attack. I asked them if they would just give my brother a chance, blah, blah. They said he wouldn't have to study during the summer but could take the examination when he came back. So my father thought he had already graduated. When Sixto came back, I think he passed; they gave him the diploma.

## VIII FAMILY LIVES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Wong-Vargas: My father invited me to China; he paid my ticket. I went in January of 1961. I had sent Martha to the United States to study. That's a long story. Then I went to China. It was after I came back from China that I found out that Sam had taken the money. Martha graduated from Villa Maria. Susana got married here.

Susana's Offer

Wong-Vargas: When I was here visiting her, Susana said, "Sister, you're so nice to me, and I will never forget it is because of you that I am in the United States studying." At that time she was not married yet. She said, "In the future, you just do whatever you can to get Martha here--give her the ticket--and when she gets here she can sleep in the same bed with me, and she can eat the same food with me. You won't have to worry about anything." I was so grateful, and I went back and told Martha that Auntie Susana was so nice, because Martha and Susana were always a little bit jealous of each other.

Susana learned piano when she was with me in Hong Kong, and I bought a piano so she could learn. Then Martha wanted to learn, and I said, "You're too small; not yet." So it was always Auntie first, because Susana was older. When Martha was in high school, I bought a piano for her. I exchanged a few words with Sam, because he said, "Why do you buy a piano?" I said it was my money, and it was for my daughter. One day he banged the keys on the piano, because Martha would play, "ping, ping, ping," all day, and he couldn't sleep. Every day he slept half the day. His siesta--no way you could stop him.

Martha's Music and Ambitions

Wong-Vargas: I told Martha that after she graduated from Villa Maria I was going to send her to the United States. She admired the nuns very much. Martha was very clever in music and very good in art. She liked to write in Gothic letters. The sisters wanted her to do many things for the school, so she was very happy and the nuns were very proud.

One evening they had an event at the school, and Martha would play the piano and someone else would play the violin. This was the year that she was graduating. She played piano beautifully. I remember the Schubert, the Chopin, the Tchaikowsky. I remember this one evening I went with a group of friends. I invited Mr. Lopez, his cousin Bertha (not his wife; she was always sick), and a little group to see Martha play piano. All of a sudden--it's unbelievable--when she was going to play, the lights went off, so she couldn't read the notes. But she had memorized the piece by practicing every day, and she played it in the dark. The applause from the audience--oh, my God, I was so happy and proud. The next day some friends sent me flowers for her, including Mr. Lopez.

She was very talented like that, and the nuns liked her. At that time they had a scholarship for a student to come to the United States. They had always chosen someone whose parents were important people or who had money, unfortunately. You had to take a test, and if you passed it you were supposed to get the scholarship. But this was not true. I thought Martha was qualified, but they didn't give it to her. She was very upset. She really was qualified, because the nun told me she would pass.

Then the nun called me and said, "Don't worry, I'm going to send Martha to our college in Philadelphia free," because Martha wanted to be a nun. She admired the nuns, and every day she talked of nothing but the nuns. She loved them, and they loved her, too. I told Martha she could not be a nun. Martha is very nice, but she has a very strong temper, very strong personality. I knew she would never obey. You can tell when they are small. Lita could be a good nun, but not Ines nor Susy. Three daughters (Martha, Ines, and Susy) are "Leo" sign. Their character is stronger.

Martha said if I didn't let her go, even in Peru she would like to be a nun. Oh, she was rebelling.



#

Nathan: So she was determined?

Wong-Vargas: She had made up her mind that she wanted to be a nun, even a Peruvian nun. I was thinking it over, and I said, "All right, if you really want to be a nun, I would like it." She asked why, and I said, "I would like you to be a nun if you were qualified, but you were not born to be a nun. You never obey. You would never be happy. But if you want to be a nun, I'm going to help you have a good education first."

### To Study in the United States

Wong-Vargas: I said I would send her for four years to the United States, but the nuns wouldn't. If the nuns sent her there she would study to be a nun; she would be forced to be a nun. I didn't know how, but I said I would send her there for four years. Then she could be a doctor or a teacher, and later she could be a Mother Superior. She would do the ordering rather than the obeying, if she was really born to serve God. Whatever she wanted to be was okay, but first of all she had to have a profession. Then I said I would be very happy with whatever she chose to be.

She said okay. I said that since Susana wanted her to come to San Francisco, I would send her there. That year Susana got married here in California, a civil marriage. The Catholic ceremony was in Lima, Peru, and she came back for that. My father gave a very beautiful ceremony for her. As I said, she married Stephen Chen, who was from Shanghai. They went to Machu Picchu for their honeymoon, and when they came back they were planning to live in New York. So Martha was preparing to live there.

Susana, Stephen, and I were sitting in my restaurant, Na-Mey, and I said, "Well, Susana, you will be leaving very soon. Martha has already graduated, so she is going to go also. Remember we talked about it, and you said I could send her to stay with you? How much do you think I will have to pay for the tuition?" I thought Martha was going to live with Susana and her husband. Her husband, right away, said, "Give me some paper." He wrote very well; he was like Sam. He said tuition would be so much--he knew much more about it

than I--and housing would be so much, and food would be so much.

I said, "But I thought Martha would be staying with you." Susana was very quiet, and she didn't say anything. She couldn't, because she had gotten married, and maybe he wouldn't allow it. Later on I was told that Stephen's brother came from Hong Kong and stayed with them. I was shocked, because I thought Martha was going to live with them, and I wouldn't have to worry that much.

I didn't ask anything, but I went to talk to the nuns. I said I wanted to send my daughter to the United States but not to their college. I told them the reason--that I wanted my daughter to be a nun if she really wanted to, but she was so young and had been with them for so many years and admired them, but she didn't know exactly what she wanted. I preferred that she study a profession of her choice, and then she could be a nun. Then I would be more than happy to have someone be a nun to pray for us every day.

The Mother Superior said I was right. She suggested I send her to Mount St. Mary's College in the East. It was like a boarding school, and she told me how much it would cost for one year. If she liked it, she could stay another year. I told her about my godmother in California, and she said I could transfer her there later on. I compared the costs of Mount St. Mary's College with the costs that Stephen Chen had given me, and it was more or less the same. It was much better, because it was a nuns' school and Martha would be a boarder there.

### Banderos

Wong-Vargas: I said okay, and I did it. Oh, you can't imagine how difficult it was. I had to do something like *bandero*; that's what we call it in Spanish. The one I organized was a *bandero* with interest. I invited ten people to dinner. I was the eleventh person and the number one. I agreed to pay the highest interest because I needed the money badly. In a \$1,000 *bandero*, each month the first person pays \$100 to whoever gets the *bandero* that month; the others deduct interest before paying. (Of course, the *bandero* can be much larger or smaller.)

This is how you become the first person. At dinner, each member secretly writes down how much interest he or she is willing to pay. The papers are opened, and the one who has made the bid to pay the highest interest gets the *bandero* for that month. The original first person pays the *bandero* holder \$100, but each of the others pays the \$100 minus the interest. The organizer is responsible for seeing that each member contributes each month.

The first time it was hard to find people to join me, but it became much easier later. They trusted me. If I am invited to join a *bandero*, I always accept, because I know how hard it can be to raise money when you need it.

So I organized a couple of *banderos* so I could send Martha and Michael here. You can't imagine. It was not easy. Some people didn't even want to accept me. They said, "I don't know if she can make the payments or not," and I had not just one *bandero*" but two or three. I had to work hard to pay them off. Oh. I always had to pay here, to pay there....never paid off.

Nathan: You had to juggle your money?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and all for education, a valuable cause. I didn't do a *bandero* because of me, no. Only for my children and business. It was good that my business was doing well.

Every month I had to pay sales tax. I had to purchase sales stamps. I had to put it in a big book and then stamp it; it was very old-fashioned at that time. Every month or two they would come to check. Sometimes I couldn't buy the stamps because I had to pay the money little by little. I had an accountant, and he would tell me what I had to pay. But I didn't pay, because I had to pay all the *banderos* and some money for Martha's tuition. Oh, it was not easy. I had to tell the Inspector that the book is in my accountant's office, please come back again and then invite them for lunch or dinner, so I can have more time to buy sales stamps.

#### Martha at UC Berkeley

Wong-Vargas: After one year, Martha moved to California and went to UC Berkeley, where she graduated. She had to rent a room. I sent her everything; she did not have a scholarship. Martha told me later that she had worked for pocket money. So did Michael. She would say, "Oh, Mommy, my friends are going to Mexico in the summer. I know you are working very hard. Don't send me

anything; I just wanted to tell you that it costs so much." [laughs] So I sent her that amount, because I knew she wanted to go, and she needed it. I never said no. She knew how to ask me. She always said I was so nice to her that in the future whatever she had she would give me half. She always said that, and I laughed at that time. I said I didn't want half; I wanted her to be happy. The most important thing in my life is for the children to have a good education and have a family and be happy.

Martha was a very sweet girl. She is by my heart. I made dresses for her and sent them to her. Her father's sister, Joan Quok, who lives in Sacramento, is Martha's auntie. She went to visit her aunt once in a while, and they were very nice to her. I would send her money for the tuition and for everything, and after I did I was so relieved. I would say, "Oh, now I don't have to worry for another three months." I sent money every three or six months. Then I had to pay taxes every month. It was so difficult. I thought, "When will be the day when I don't owe anybody anything?" I would pray to God, "Please don't let me die, because I want to pay my debts." People gave me money, trusted in me, and if I died, who would pay them back?

#### Bringing Ana Maria to Peru

Wong-Vargas: My father decided to go to China in '61 and he invited me. So I went to China. Before that, I was thinking about Sam's daughter, who was in the village with her grandfather. I thought how she was just like me, all by herself. I had a son three years old who died, so why not bring her? Maybe she would fulfill my son's place. I thought I would go to China and bring her to Peru. I talked it over with Sam, and he said, "Don't bother to bring her here, because she is a girl, and pretty soon she will get married. What for? If you want to take somebody, take my half-brother. He's in Hong Kong, and he is single. He can come over and help." Very selfish.

I said, "Your brother in Hong Kong is single, and he is a man and can work. But this little girl needs parents' love. She doesn't have your love. Although I'm not her mother, I would be just like a mother for her. I think I should take her, not your brother." I said, "If you're talking about a brother, I would take another brother who lives in China. He has a few children and is a very nice man. He could send money to the children." Sam said, "No, I

want someone who has no family so he can concentrate and help here." Very selfish. We had completely different values.

You know what I did? Behind Sam's back I did the paper work to bring his daughter, Ana Maria, to Peru. I was going to give him a surprise. I thought, "What stepmother would do that, when she was not even my daughter?" There was a very nice old gentleman in the foreign ministry. I lied to him, and I should not have. I told him that was my daughter. He said, "How could you leave your daughter there?" But if I hadn't said that, he never would have helped me. If she was Chinese, how could I bring her here if she were not my daughter? You couldn't do that; she had to be my daughter in order to bring her back. So I had to lie a little bit, but I didn't do any harm. It was a lie for a good thing.

I told him she was my daughter, but she was not born in Peru; she was born in China. He said that was all right; since I was Peruvian I could bring her there. I told him she was very sick when I left, so I left her with her grandfather. Now she was fifteen, and I wanted to bring her to Peru. He helped me, just as if she had been my Peruvian-born daughter. He signed everything.

Sam didn't know I had done this by myself, and I took the document with me. I had saved about \$600 to \$700 (that was a lot of money). One of my very good clients in the restaurant wanted to buy a nice pearl necklace for his wife. He didn't tell me the length, but he said they had to be perfect pearls. He paid about \$500 to buy real pearls, not cultivated ones. I had saved my money so I could buy a watch. I always wanted to buy a good watch. A watch was very important to me. I had always dreamed of having a Longine watch.

#### Family in China, and Eighteen Sacks of Gifts (1961)

Wong-Vargas: My father had four daughters, including me--Susana, Sofia, So Man, and me. He had bought gold Rolex watches for each of the other three already, and he asked me, "What about you?" He asked me to choose, and I asked him to give me the money so I could buy it myself. You know why? Because I had made up my mind to go to China. That would be the first time I went back after so many years. He said sure, so he gave the money for a similar watch; it was about \$600.

You know what I did with all the money that I had? I bought eighteen big and small rice sacks of food, clothing, everything. Because they had told me it was the worst year in China, and they needed everything. I thought, "I have a watch. I don't need two watches." So I never bought a Longine watch or a Rolex with the money that I saved and my father gave me. But Susana still has her Rolex. Later on, I bought a Longine watch.

I took the sacks of clothes and so forth to the village. I was very brave, I don't know how. I always think that if you are doing something good, God will help you. These things were to be gifts; I wasn't doing business. If it were business, I would be too scared, and I don't think I would do it; but I was helping people, and I didn't think it was anything wrong.

I bought the things in Macao, not Hong Kong. Susana's mother was in China at that time with the other children. Only Sixto and Jorge went back to Peru with my father in 1950. My stepmother had ten children, seven boys and three girls. I think she might have had thirteen, but some died.

My father rented an apartment in Hong Kong instead of paying for a hotel. He was clever. He was always like that. He and his son went over first, and then I came and stayed with them. Sixto had gone out with nine girls already--one girl, no; another girl, no; and so on until he got to number nine. I asked him if he had found anyone yet, because he was supposed to find someone to marry in China. He said no, so I said I had a friend, Lau Yin Ha, who went to school with me. I talked with her, and she said her younger sister had many friends. So her younger sister introduced Sixto to one of her friends, and they got married [laughs]. They are still happily married. They live in Canada now.

### Going to Macao

Wong-Vargas: I told my father I wanted to go to Macao. He didn't know I wanted to go to China, but from Macao I could go to China. My stepmother came to see my father, and then she went back to Canton. I told her I was going to see her, but not to tell my father I was leaving. She thought I was just going to Canton, because from Macao you had to have a special document to get in. In '61 it was difficult; and in Peru also, if they saw that you had been in Communist China, you could not go back to Peru.

I wondered how I was going to do it, but I was clever. I had a copy of my passport, and I left it in Macao. I had to take the original with me, and also the document that said I was from Peru and was going to visit family. I bought a round-trip boat ticket from Macao to Canton. You had to take a boat, unless you took a train from Hong Kong. I took my eighteen sacks of things from Macao to the boat and from the boat to Canton. Another lady was going back to Canton, too, and she helped me keep an eye on them. I was always thinking, you know, so I put numbers on them, just in case, so I would know which one might be missing.

I had purchased so many five-pound containers of peanut oil, because I had asked in Macao what they needed in China. They said oil, beans--rice, too, but beans were very important because they didn't have any there--clothing, wool to knit, a few cheap watches. And bread; they don't eat that much bread over there, but I bought it anyway. Most of it was food.

When I got to Canton, my stepmother, Susana's mother, was there waiting. You can't imagine the poor people. Their faces--and when they saw the bread, they almost grabbed it from me. I didn't know what to do, because they would see me coming, and they would follow me as I had to take a few of those little rickshaws.

#### Distributing Gifts in Canton

Nathan: Were you on the way to the village?

Wong-Vargas: No, my stepmother lived in Canton. I did not go to the village. My half-brother Sergio came, and I liked him. He is one of the seven half-brothers. He's an architect there in China. The immigration officials saw the eighteen sacks and couldn't believe it, but they let me in with everything. I told them, "In number one I have this and that; in number two, this and this." I never lied, and it's important to be honest. If they wanted to open them, they could, no problem.

I remember another person going to China; he lied. He had a lot of medicine. He should have said so, but he said he only had food. They opened it and found a lot of medicine and pills. Oh, he had a lot of problems there. Since I had

said they could open mine, they didn't even bother to open them.

I went to my stepmother's house with all my sacks. She knew I was coming, so she had already called some people from the village--my cousin who cut my eyelashes was there, and my number two cousin. There were a lot of people from the village.

Nathan: Had Ana Maria come yet?

Wong-Vargas: No, she was in Kong Chuin. I hadn't seen her yet, because first I wanted to give away the things that I had brought. I had already divorced Chang, but I remembered his mother, the mother-in-law (the one who didn't want to give me one cent to take Martha to the doctor). She was still alive at that time, and although I didn't owe her anything, I did send her something, exactly the same thing I gave to everyone. I sent her peanut oil, some food, some beans, and a sweater. I didn't go to visit her. I sent it with my Amah, who had a daughter in Canton (the daughter is still there; the number nine daughter, whom they call Kau Muei.) My ex-mother-in-law later wrote a letter to Joan and said that she was very grateful. [emotional] She said that she needed it so much, and that I was so nice to remember her.

Sam's father was still alive, and he liked me very much. He gave me a very old jade that I took back to Peru. I lost it; or maybe Sam took it, I don't know. I gave away everything, and everybody was so happy. But when I gave it to Sei Cache, the one who cut my eyelashes, I never saw a face so embarrassed. She turned her head away when she received it, because she couldn't look at me. She was a very proud woman, and in order to accept it she really had to need it. She couldn't refuse it. At that time one person was allowed four ounces of peanut oil a month. Can you imagine what five pounds meant to them? It was better than gold, because they couldn't eat gold.

I told her I remembered that she smoked and said she could have a pack of cigarettes. I brought some, and I didn't smoke. She turned her face away when she took that, too. I used to think that some day I would say something to her about all the cruel things she had done to me, but when I saw her like that, I felt bad. I could not say anything. I went away thanking God that I had the opportunity to help and could give it to them. So instead of punishing her, I felt so sorry for her.



Sewing Machines

Wong-Vargas: She wrote to her brother, my cousin Carlos, the one working with my father at hacienda Talla. She said she needed a sewing machine. She had to walk I don't know how many miles to a place to sew where she could use a sewing machine. The Communists were like that, you know. You had to go to the factory and use the machine unless you had one in your home. You would then sew the material in your house when you finished and take it back to the factory. At that time it cost about \$300 to buy a machine, but her brother didn't want to buy it. He said, "Oh, let her work." He could have done it, but he didn't want to. Finally I felt sorry for her, and later I bought her one.

My good friend and teacher, Wong Chau Yue, also needed a machine, and she wrote to me. I said I would buy it for her, and I had already sent her money to purchase one. I sent the money to Hong Kong, and then they had a way to send it on to Macao and on to China.

Sam and the Check Stubs

[Interview 8: May 15, 1989]##

Wong-Vargas: Most of the time Sam liked to stay at the grocery store, because we had a small room in the back. Also, he liked to take his nap [laughter]. Already I didn't like him because of so many things that happened. He liked to stay there at the store, and he never cared about the children. Susy was sick, for example. When she was young she always got sick from bronchitis. [emotionally] Maria really helped me, always with me, close to the bed, to watch over Susy. Maria was there always. (That's why Susy came back two weeks ago to see Maria.) Maria liked Susy so much; she was just like a second mother. I had another maid for Lita, and that one hated Susy [laughs]. Susy and Lita are eleven months apart; Susy was born at seven months. Lita's maid, Justina, she loved Lita just like her daughter, but Susy--I don't know. One time she almost hit Susy with a cleated shoe. It was just a tiny scrape on Susy's face, and, oh, I told her to go; I didn't need her anymore. She cried and said she was sorry,

so she stayed for Lita, and Maria took care of Susy most of the time.

When Sam was at home he would say, "Just leave her; she will be okay." He would never get up and see what was wrong with his daughter. Never. He was a very cold person and lazy, poor thing. I say poor because he died last year.

So I didn't like him, and maybe that's why he wanted to stay more often at the store. One day he was sick, and one of the employees called to say he was complaining. Mr. Lopez's cousin was a doctor, and I called him right away because he would go right over; with another doctor you would have to wait. I met a friend at that time. She is from China, Cecilia. She is also a Wong, but she is not related to me. I remember that I called her, and we went to see Sam. The doctor was examining him. Miss Cecilia Wong was a nurse from Hong Kong.

I went into the office, just by chance, to see the papers because I hadn't seen them for months. They were all in Chinese. I opened the drawer, and there was a bank book from the Banco Popular, and that's how I found out that Sam had opened his own account. I started looking at the stubs, and I saw a fare from Hong Kong to Peru, and a girl's name. So I knew he had paid the fare and brought a girl to Peru. Oh, I was so mad. It was all in Chinese, and I understood Chinese. I took home the book of stubs that contained the fare from Hong Kong to Peru, because the checks had all been used.

I was going to show it to my father. How can he do that to me? After so many lies, now he had another thing like this. I said, "Forget it," and I would divorce him. I didn't care. I wasn't going to work for him to support another woman. No way. I put the check stubs in my pocket, and I didn't even want to see Sam, so I didn't go in. I was mad. The doctor said he had a kidney stone, but he had an injection, and after a time he felt better.

Nathan:

I see. Now let's pick up the story of your trip to China and the eighteen sacks of goods you bought.

China: Procedures, Zones, and Permits

Wong-Vargas: I told you that everybody was so happy. I had already sent a sewing machine to a very nice friend from Peru. When you purchased something like that, you sent the money to a bank in Macao or in Hong Kong; from Macao they would send the money to Canton so she could purchase the machine. That was the procedure at that time. When I was in China I saw all these poor people who couldn't get out because they hadn't got relatives to help them. They tried hard and did their best, but they were still there. I knew my mean cousin needed a machine, as I told you, and I said, "Okay, I will help you," and I bought a machine for her because I felt so sorry for her, and I promised. So I went back to Hong Kong and I sent the money to her. Oh, she was so pleased. I had never seen such a face, you know? She was so embarrassed and grateful at the same time.

Then I had to go to Kong Chuin because Sam's daughter was there with her grandfather. In order to go to Kong Chuin from Canton, I had to go to the authorities to get some papers; otherwise they would not let me in or they might just kill me, and nobody would know where I was. We lived in Sai Kwan, a very nice area of Canton. My stepmother was there and lived in my father's property. In an area something like the Elmwood area in Berkeley there was a Communist government office, and they took care of that area. If you lived in another area, like North Berkeley, they would have a different office. Canton is divided into so many different zones, and each one had its own government unit. That's why the Communists were able to control so well. You know, the Communists are very clever in this sense.

For example, people didn't have private telephones in their homes. If somebody called you, they had to call the office first, and the office would call you and tell you that you had a call. Everybody knew each other, and if there was somebody strange around there, you had to tell the authorities. I had to go and tell them that I was from Peru, and they gave me a coupon to buy food; otherwise I couldn't buy food. If I went to another zone, they would have to get permission from my Elmwood zone. I couldn't go and eat there; I had to stay in my zone. That's how the Communists controlled.

If I just went to the north of China, who would sell me food without a permit? They would ask where I lived and why I had come. You had to tell the truth. The Communists

controlled everything and everybody that way. People couldn't mix. I told the authorities that I had to go to Kong Chuin, and they gave me permission to go. They asked why I was going, and I explained everything to them, of course lying about Ana Maria being my daughter. Again, they asked why I had left my daughter there, and I told them the same story about her being sick.

The gentleman gave me a sealed envelope, so I didn't know what it said. I was scared--I would go to Kong Chuin and maybe they would not let me out or would kill me. You never knew, because everybody was scared at that time. I opened the envelope very, very carefully with a needle. I wanted to see what it said. Ordinarily I would never open an envelope like that, but this was matter of life and death. It would take me over an hour to get to Kong Chuin by bus, and when I got there, would I be able to come back?

The letter for the authorities in the north was very nice. It explained my whole situation, plus he said, "This woman is very intelligent. She could be a leader." So I went to Kong Chuin, and I don't know how I did it. Only a mother could do that.

#### Meeting Ana Maria

Nathan: Did they know that you were coming?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I had met the old gentleman, my father-in-law, a long time ago. When he saw me, he was so happy. Then I saw Ana Maria, and I was so sad, because she was so skinny. I think her knee bones were even bigger than her thighs. Well, she was over fifteen years old at the time, but on the document I had put that she was only twelve, because everything was much easier, and at fifteen years you had to pay much more for the airfare ticket. [telephone interruption]

Nathan: You were saying that Ana Maria was very thin.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and I started crying. I remembered the time when I lived in China. The Communists did believe she was my daughter because I cried and cried when I saw her. The girl had never had anyone like a mother, so she was very close to me. I noticed also that Sam's father was a little thin. They had to stand in line to buy food. All of China was dry that year, no rain, so things were even worse.



Ana Maria with Isabel Wong-Vargas,  
Macao, circa 1961.



At that time I was a little bit overweight. Well, not overweight, but I think it was overweight for China, so they looked at me. So many Chinese, even in Canton, followed me because I was a little bit strange; my face was different compared to theirs, and they thought I was from Russia. The Russian people were there; they were friendly with China at that time. Then I had a hat on because it was a little bit cold, so they thought I was from Russia. It was worse in the village, because it was small, and they followed me.

I went to talk to the authorities about Ana Maria. They said, "Fine," and they treated me very well. I knew how to talk to them and explain to them. Sam's father was very pleased because I went to buy food for him. I didn't eat, first of all because I felt so bad, and I gave it to him instead. If I didn't eat for two times, I didn't mind, because I was strong. I told him I was full, and I gave it to him. So he was very, very happy.

Then I took Ana Maria from the village to Canton. She stayed with me in my stepmother's house. I told her I was going to take her with me back to Peru, but I had to do all the procedures--the papers--to take her to Hong Kong. I had to go first, and then she would come, because it took time--two to three weeks or one month. Everything went correctly, and she left one week after I left. I was waiting for her in Macao.

#### Getting Out of Canton

Nathan: She didn't go back with you, then?

Wong-Vargas: Not at that time. For example, I would have to wait two more weeks, and I couldn't because I was supposed to go back to Hong Kong and help my father find a girl for my half-brother Sixto. They were missing me and asking when I was coming back. I was in Canton about a week. Sergio, the half-brother that I like, was also there. I gave away everything, even my own sweater. I said I was leaving; I was going to Hong Kong. It didn't matter if I got cold at night; it was okay.

I had a return ticket for the boat, so I went to the boat. When I got there, they said, "Where is your permission?" "What permission?" Well, in order to get out

of Canton you had to have permission. Where could I get permission? They gave me a long talk about where I had to go. I said, "You mean I cannot go back?" They said no, I could not. Oh, my God. I was so worried, so scared.

I went back, and there was a long line of people wanting permission. I think they even slept in the line to get in the next day. Oh, I was almost crying. What was I going to do? I went to the government unit office to find out, and they said they thought I had come back to live in Canton, and that's why they allowed me to take so many sacks. Otherwise they would not have allowed it. Oh, my God, what was I going to do? They said I had to go talk to a high official in Canton, something like the mayor. I was very sad, because I had my children in Peru, and I didn't know what to do.

I went to talk to the mayor, and it was a lady. She looked kind and nice. She reminded me of my godmother--very distinguished. She was a very nice Communist lady, and you could really respect her. I explained the whole situation to her, that I had very young children in Peru, that my father was in Hong Kong. My father would like to come and visit, but I came first because we were told that if you came in, you could not get out. [laughs] I told my father that I wanted to come first, of course, in order to take my daughter to Peru. I was sure my father would be back here to visit the family. Why not? It was true, even though my father didn't say it. I told the lady that if she didn't let me go, nobody would come back to visit their family.

She said nobody wanted me not to go. I could go, but they wanted me to stay a little longer. Remember how the man had written in the letter that I could be a leader? At that time there weren't too many foreigners who came back to Canton, so maybe that's why; I don't know. She asked if I wouldn't like to go to Beijing or Shanghai, "Be our guest. We invite you, and we'll take you everywhere you want. Then you go back to Peru and tell them how good we are, how wonderful; everything has been changed for the good."

I said I would love to (but I was scared, of course), but some other time. This time I had to go back or my father would be very upset. I explained to her that I had small children and a business in Lima, and I had to be back. She said sure, I could leave the next day if I wanted to, but she really hoped I could accept her invitation to take me all around. I said, "No, thank you," and I was very scared. But she was very, very nice. She said, "Okay, why don't you go tomorrow. Go back to that same place with the line, and you



will have your permission there. Hopefully you will come back again."

Nathan: How clever she was.

Wong-Vargas: Very clever, and nice. I really admired her. I said goodbye, and I left. Oh, I was so happy. The permission wasn't for Ana Maria, but she would be coming the next week or so. I had done everything for her already. I said I would be waiting for Ana Maria in Macao, one or two more weeks at the most.

The next morning the line was so long. How could I wait? So I walked up to the front of the line, looking straight ahead, because everyone was looking at me. I said to the first person in line, very seriously, "I have a permission already here, and so-and-so told me to pick it up today." The man looked at me, and it was there. I dared to go in like that. I should have respected the line, but it had been forming since the night before. Since I was a little bit different, and I was scared, I didn't mind and just acted that way.

They gave it to me. I had been in Canton almost three extra days getting the papers for this and that. Finally I told my stepmother that I was leaving. But for the next two or three days I was so cold, because I had given everything away [laughs]. I remember that Sergio gave me his old coat. He was very kind to me.

Nathan: Was Ana Maria old enough to travel by herself?

Wong-Vargas: Not all by herself. Another lady's daughter was also going to Macao, so she would go with her. No, she was fifteen, and it was the first time for her. Ana Maria did come to Macao, and I bought a lot of clothes for her. I was staying in a hotel when she arrived, and I remember giving her a bath like a baby, because she was so dirty. It was just like she was my daughter. Right now she is in Peru. She was always very grateful. She would say, "If it weren't for you, I think I would still be in the village and married, you never know with whom."

So I took her to Peru, and I presented her as a surprise to Sam: "Your daughter is here." He said, "Oh, yes? Why didn't you tell me?" He didn't show any appreciation. He was always like that, so cold. I also remember one time when Sam wanted to buy a sportscoat. He was tall, and we couldn't find one for him. I asked him, "Do you like this one?" He

said, "Yes." This was before Ana Maria arrived. You know what I did? I bought a similar material and made one for him--at night, when he was sleeping, or when he was taking a nap. It took me quite some time to finish it. I liked to sew. I was so happy. But when he saw it he said, "Oh, nice." That was it.

I like to give, I like to help, and I'm very open. When I give something, I really give it. But Sam was a very cold person. Not long after we were married, before Ines was born, I liked to be cheerful every day, and I would say, "Hello," and hug him from his back. He would say, "Oh, don't do that to me." I've been divorced from Sam for about twenty-eight years, and I've never looked for another person seriously. First of all, I have had to work to raise and educate myself and my children, and later for the happiness and welfare of my children and in order to help others. Secondly, I don't have good memories from my two marriages. Chang was very mean to me, and Sam was very cold. I need love, and I don't want to give to someone who doesn't deserve it, really. Inside of me, I'm faithful, romantic. I'm a happy person and very young at heart. When I was in school I never had any boyfriends to go out with at all, never, so I am still timid and shy.

#### Ana Maria Learns About her Father##

Nathan: You brought Ana Maria to Peru?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Of course at that time I already had a restaurant, a grocery store, and an apartment upstairs. I also had a car. Ana Maria thought that it was her father who had money and that I was the one dependent on him, because most women did not work. She knew that I had remarried, and she thought her father was supporting so many children, two of them from my previous husband. She thought maybe her father sent me to bring her to Peru. Partly it was her age, but she was not very kind with Martha and the other kids. Anyway, I didn't like the way she was acting. If she had known that I was the one who brought her--

Nathan: Did you ever tell her?

Wong-Vargas: She was also lazy like her father. It's a good thing that Ines, Lita, and Susy are not like that. I put her in school to learn Spanish, and I could tell she was a little lazy and

would rather play. I got one more maid to help, because at that time it was very easy to get helpers to clean the house and sometimes cook breakfast for the children. I had to, because the maid taking care of Lita just took care of Lita; she didn't do anything else. She just prepared food for Lita, but didn't clean house. Maria helped me with Susy, but she didn't do washing or anything. Since Maria was honest, sometimes I would ask her to go down to the restaurant and keep an eye on things. She was a little bit slow in her mind; she wasn't smart, but at least she would be there. I couldn't trust anybody but her. Maria was better because she had a Chinese face, and people might think she was part of my family. The maid who took care of Lita was Peruvian, so they knew she was not my family.

In China there is a saying that when a woman marries again, the children from her first marriage are "leftovers." I didn't like Ana Maria because she said that to Martha and Michael. It was not nice to call my children that. I was really hurt. One day I told her father. I didn't know that she was lying on the sofa at the time. I told Sam that I had brought his daughter here, and I didn't like her to say that to Martha and Michael because it was not true. I told him, "You know that. Everything here is not from you; it's mine. You are not supporting my children; I am supporting them. Even your daughter, I paid for the ticket and brought her here. You didn't even know; you didn't want to her to come over in the beginning." I was the one who got the papers, as if she were my daughter, to bring her in to Peru. I said, "I think that she thought you sent me." I said the whole thing.

He said, "Why did you bring her here? I told you not to, so that's your problem," and he walked out. Then I realized that Ana Maria was there listening. She said, "I'm sorry, Mommy; I didn't know that," and she asked me to forgive her. She heard everything because I was speaking in Chinese. It was the truth, and she knew it. After that she changed, and she was nice to Martha and Michael.

I was very upset because Guillermo, the one who went to the United States, wrote me a very nasty letter. (He was my Peruvian cousin's husband, the one who helped me open the grocery store and to buy furniture. Remember the cash register that "got lost," and I told him where I "found" it? He said he had looked there already, and it hadn't been there before.) I wish I had kept that letter. You know what he said? He said, "I knew that you stole that machine because I saw that the machine was not there, and later on you said it was there." Only God knows it was not true. He said, "You

know, I wanted to tell the police that you did it, but I didn't because I felt so sorry for your husband." Oh. It was like killing me. Only God knows that Sam stole it, and I was the one who got it back.

One day Ana Maria was lying there on the sofa, as she liked to do, and I was still so upset and so mad. I asked Sam if he remembered when he did that. I would never tell Ana Maria that her father had done that, because I would feel bad. But I didn't know she was there, listening. I told Sam about the letter, and that only God knew that he did it. I was crying, and he said, "See? I told you not to give it back. I told you to throw it away, but you didn't listen to me, so it's your problem." He just walked out. Instead of saying he was sorry, that it was his fault that I had to go through this, he just said it was my problem and walked out.

Ana Maria was there, and I asked her if she had listened to the whole thing. She said yes. I told her that God knowing was enough for me; it doesn't matter what somebody says. Because it was the truth that I did not do it, and I can sleep very peacefully. I think Guillermo still thinks that I was the one who stole it. How can I explain it to him? Only God knows.

So little by little Ana Maria learned about her father. I gave her a little savings book that I had opened for her. When they asked me what the name of my other daughter was, I wondered what name I could use. I decided on Ana Maria because I liked that name. So from then on she was Ana Maria. Her Chinese name was different. After she heard everything she became closer and closer to me.

Then I put her in a school to prepare her for high school, but she didn't want to study. Now she says, "Mommy, I was so lazy." She has two children, and she says, "Now I know how nice you were with me." She wanted to work in the grocery store with her father. She wanted to be a cashier and handle the money. Her father was very pleased because somebody was helping and he didn't have to pay her. So she was in the store, and at night she would come back to the apartment to sleep.

There was no way I could convince her to go back to school, so she didn't finish high school.

Nathan: Did she learn Spanish at all?

Wong-Vargas: A little Spanish, but not very good Spanish. She could get by. Now she is much better. But she only went one or two years to high school. She was very happy with her father and began spending more and more time at the store. One day she said to me, "Mommy, did you know there is a woman there who always comes to visit my father? They talk and talk." She was Chinese, born in Peru. This was not the woman he brought from China; she arrived in Peru and then married somebody else. He found another woman, born in Peru of Chinese parents, but she didn't speak Chinese at all.

#### Theft from the Office Drawer

Wong-Vargas: Ana Maria told me about this woman and asked why I didn't come over and see her; she would let me know next time when the woman was there. I didn't know who she could be, but I never, never suspected Sam. If Ana Maria hadn't told me, I would have had no way of knowing.

When I had gone to Hong Kong, I brought back some good quality pearls for the man who wanted to buy them for his wife, but he didn't like them because they were too short. So I saved them in my safety deposit box in the bank. I also had brought back quite a lot of cultured pearls to sell--\$30 or \$40 worth--which weren't expensive but quite nice. And I brought back little things for the gift showcase in the restaurant, but I couldn't put them in there, so I saved them in my office upstairs. If someone said they wanted something, then I would show them what I had. Maria had a key to the gift showcase because I trusted her.

Everything that I wanted to sell was there in a drawer in my office. One day my nephew got married. I had a few jewels: a very nice ring--the only one that my father had given me. Of course, he gave me the money to buy a watch, but I didn't buy it. It was a diamond ring, quite big. It was in the safety deposit box. Remember Miss Wong, the nurse? She had also given me some jewels because I had helped her. She gave me a beautiful diamond watch and a gold and black bracelet. I took them out of my safety deposit box because my nephew was getting married. There was also a little jade cross for Martha, Ines, Lita, Susy, and Ana Maria; each one has one. Lita, Susy, Ines, and Ana Maria were wearing theirs. I had a lot of jewels there for the wedding and some to take to the United States.

I was going to visit Martha in the U.S., and I thought that I ought to give some of the jewels I had to her because she was the oldest. The others were too small, and I thought that when I had money I would buy more for them. I thought I would even give the expensive pearls to Martha. I took the jewels from the bank and put them all in my office. Before, when Sam was living in the apartment, he had said, "Don't put your pearls here. Why don't you keep them at the bank? It's very dangerous, because you don't know who might come over and take it." So he saw that I had things there.

Now Sam was spending most of his time at the store, and I knew that he had another woman.

Michael had been at Markham school until the ninth grade, and then for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades he went to a Peruvian military boarding school. He wanted to be a pilot or military or something like that. It was a very good academic school. He came back home on the day Ana Maria came to visit us at noon time. It was Saturday, the day of my birthday, May 16.

On Friday night Mrs. Sam Yee Sham, a lady from Callao, said she had some money, 100,000 soles, that she wanted to put in the bank. She said she could lend it to me, and I would pay her bank interest. I needed money at that time, so I said that was fine. She gave me \$3,300 American in cash, plus 5,000 soles and some to make it 100,000 soles. I was going to visit Martha, and I always liked to buy some business, so this was good. She didn't want her husband to know. Before I signed the papers I asked why didn't she give it to me on Monday, but she said she was there already. I didn't know she was coming to give it to me on that night. One day we had talked about it, but here she was a few days later with the money.

I took the money and put it in my office in the same desk drawer with my jewels. The next day, Saturday, was my birthday. I remember that my kids and I went out to have lunch at the Rancho Restaurant. We had chicken, and it was a very special place, where they had a place for the kids to play. Mr. Lopez had invited us. He came with his cousin Bertha, and I went with Lita, Susy, and Ines. Michael came in late from school. Maria was at home, and it was the maid's day off. I didn't want Maria to stay by herself, so I decided to take her, too. I left so many gifts and things on the sofa--my camera--and off we went.

When Michael came back from school, he would stay at the restaurant; he did not go to the apartment. Ana Maria came around noon. She was with Michael all that time. After 2 p.m. Michael sent the waiter to see if we were back, and the waiter said the door was open. Somebody had come in and stolen everything from my office. Somebody went right to the office and opened the exact drawer where I had everything. I had the check stub showing that Sam had paid for a woman's plane ticket hanging on the wall. Sam wasn't around anymore, so there was no problem. I was going to show my father. That little stub thing had disappeared. Who had done it? The thief didn't take my camera on the sofa or anything else.

I thought it might have been a maid. One maid had left two weeks earlier, and I suspected her first because she was the only one who knew that was my office. And Sam, of course. Oh, you can't imagine. All of a sudden I felt a pain in my back, and I couldn't move. It was the shock. The money, everything gone.

When Michael first came to the restaurant, Ana Maria was with him. She hadn't gone to lunch with us because she said she had to help her father at the grocery store. Michael did not go to the apartment and Ana Maria said she had better wait downstairs; she didn't go up. I called the police, of course, and the newspapers came knocking on the door. I had to tell the police everything, so Mrs. Sam Yee Sham's husband found out that his wife had given me the money. I had to tell the truth; I couldn't lie.

A month earlier Ana Maria told me about the woman being in the restaurant; Michael had just come home from school. I asked him if he could drive me over. I couldn't drive, because I was too upset. I wondered what I would do if I saw her. I would kill him. But if I killed him I would go to jail, and my children--. But I was thinking about how I could kill him. He was tall, and I thought of smashing a bottle on his head. I was thinking like that, because after all the things I had done for him--his daughter and everything--he had another woman.

I went to the store with Michael, but the woman wasn't there. She left. But I told Sam that if he had somebody else, he better stay away and not come back. So he slept at the store, and for two or three months he didn't come back to the apartment.

Nathan:

Are you suggesting that he had something to do with the robbery?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. The police came over and asked where my husband was. I said he was at the store. They asked if he was sleeping in the apartment, and I said no, that for the last few months he had been sleeping at the store. The police asked if I lived there alone, and I said yes, with my children. The policeman said two things: number one, that my husband stole the things; or, number two, maybe I had a boyfriend. Oh, I was so mad at that. A boyfriend here, me? They said this robbery didn't look like a thief did it, because the door seemed to have been opened with a key. It was the back door that was open, not the front door. It must have been someone who had a key, and then they made it look like a thief had broken in.

I knew Sam was like that, because I remembered the cash register. Maybe he wanted to make me mad; he wanted to make me suffer. He was that kind of person. I still think today that he stole everything and took it to the store. Maybe he dug a hole and put everything in it. I don't think he would throw it away in the ocean, neither would he sell it to somebody else.

Nathan: Did the police go after him?

Wong-Vargas: No, because I was scared. You know why? Because he didn't come legally, and if I told the police about that they would have thrown him out of the country. They would ask for his papers, and then they would find out that it was my father who arranged for his entry, and there would be a lot of trouble.

Sam called me right away, the same day, because I called him. He said, "I know. I'm sorry that happened to your money. Don't worry, I'm going to pay the soles and the \$3,300 to Mrs. Sam." He was going to pay? Where was he going to get the money from? He had told me the business wasn't making much money. We had not divorced yet at that time, just separated. He said, "And the jewels, don't worry. Some day, if I have money, I will buy some for you." For him to say that--he didn't even want to send milk from the store for his children. Do you think he was going to buy me jewels and pay back the \$3,300 and the soles to Mrs. Sam?

He did. He paid her back. Where did the money come from? He paid her back the dollars and the soles. So I decided there was a 99 percent certainty that he took it. I can't say a hundred because I don't have any proof, but I'm 99.9 percent positive that he took it. And the bank stub is



in Chinese. Nobody knew Chinese, so who would be interested in taking it back? He is the one.

I still had one piece of jade, a pendant, in the bank; luckily I took it out and was wearing it that day. I had two pieces; I was going to make earrings, but they were too heavy, so I made one ring and one pendant. The thief took the ring, but I was still wearing the pendant. About ten years ago my brother-in-law Esteban and I took it to be appraised in Chinatown and found out it was worth \$4,000 U.S. It was just one little thing, and ten years ago. Now it might be worth \$5,000 or more.

### Separation and Divorce

Wong-Vargas: I separated from Sam. I told the police to forget about it, even though it was a lot of money at that time. The jewels alone were worth about 300,000 soles. The pearls that I was going to sell--everything was gone.

Nathan: Did you ever get any of the things back?

Wong-Vargas: Never. The real pearls, the diamond ring, the watch--everything gone. I was upset not so much because of the material value but because of the sentimental value and the principle. If Maria had stayed home, nothing would have happened.

So I separated from my husband, and I told him that if he wanted to have another woman, I didn't mind and I didn't care. I said we wouldn't divorce; but from now on, he had to support the children. He could support them with the grocery store, even though the grocery store was mine.

Nathan: Did he finally do that?

Wong-Vargas: Never. He said, "No, there isn't enough business. I cannot." I said if he could not support the children, then we should separate, and everything that I owned--the store, the restaurant--that was mine, I would put in my children's names. Because if I died, he would take everything and go with another woman. It wouldn't be fair. I worked hard because I wanted to give the best education to my children. We put everything in their names so that he could not sell it and I could not sell it. It was for the children's future.

He said no, no way would he accept it. Then I prepared for the divorce. According to the law I had to give him 50 percent.

##

Nathan: Maybe you can tell me about divorcing Sam.

Wong-Vargas: I divorced him, and he said I had to give him half, but I said the store was mine; I couldn't give it to him. "You know that it's not yours." Of course, the Peruvian law said that we had to split everything. He was supposed to support the children; he had to, according to the law. But, knowing him, what would he do? He said, "If you don't give me the grocery store, where am I going to go?" It was true. He didn't exactly scare me, but he sometimes acted like a person who was desperate. I knew that he had been in the army, so I thought I had better give it to him, or he would do something to hurt me. He had another woman, you know.

So I said okay, I would give him the store, and he would raise the children. He said no, he couldn't. But he said Ana Maria was his daughter, because he needed her to help him as a cashier. I said to ask her if she wanted to stay with him. Since Ana Maria didn't want to go to school, she stayed with her father. I also thought that, after all, she was his daughter, so she should stay with him. My children, of course, stayed with me.

Nathan: Did you have to give him shares in the other holdings that you had?

Wong-Vargas: No, just the grocery store. The grocery store at that time was worth a lot of money. You had to pay rent, and also the restaurant had to pay rent. Neither was owned by me or by him. So he stayed with the grocery store, and he paid rent. I stayed with my Chinese restaurant, and I paid rent. That's how we split it.

My father was still alive, and he wondered what was going on, but at that point I couldn't care less. If my father said he didn't want to see me any more, that would be fine with me, because I was the one who was suffering; I was doing all the work, and this guy's got to have another woman. I brought his daughter, and he has another woman and another one? No, not me. As I told him, I wouldn't divorce him, but he had to support the children with the property in the children's names. He didn't want to. He said, "You don't trust me," and I said "For a long time I haven't trusted you,

so why continue? It's not worth it." So we separated and finally divorced.

### Buying Land

Wong-Vargas: Less than a year before the divorce, I had already been looking around for a piece of land. Sam used to say, "Why do you want more things to do? You are cooking porridge without rice." He was always so narrow-minded. I said it was my choice, and I would finance it. I liked land. It's better to buy land and build the restaurant, but I didn't know it would become so nice, like it is now. It's a very good spot. I've always thought it was because of what my godmother told me; I learned from her.

I liked to buy land, and I looked around and thought that this must be a very good spot, because Sears [department store] was already a few blocks from there. I knew that where the Americans went, people always followed. Not right away, but later on. I wanted to buy close to Sears, but it was much more expensive. Further away it was very reasonable, around \$25 for a square meter. Altogether I bought 1,700 square meters. I didn't have to pay for it all at once but made a very small down-payment. I financed it with the real estate company. That was my choice, even though Sam said not to do it. After our divorce, little by little, I paid it off in five years.

Nathan: There was nothing on the land? No building?

Wong-Vargas: Nothing. There was just a lot with weeds.

Nathan: Was there water and electricity?

Wong-Vargas: No, nothing at all. In front there was just a small playground for kids, a drive-in cinema, and a small night club. Nothing over there, not even the freeway.

### Studying Interior Design

Wong-Vargas: I always told my children that they must have a good education and get into a good profession one day. I told them that I would have liked to have been a doctor when I was young, but I couldn't. A year after the divorce I felt free,

and I wanted to go back to school, so I did. I wanted to be an engineer, but I couldn't because they had to study a lot of subjects. So I asked myself what was something that would be a little bit easier, and I like arts, so I took interior design. I should have taken fashion design, because I liked sewing. I went to a very nice academic college in Miraflores for three years. I had to show them that I had gone through high school in China, and I did. I had to take it to the Chinese consulate to have the papers translated. So many things I had to do, and I did.

Nathan: What was the name of the school?

Wong-Vargas: Miraflores College of Interior Design. Then I had to take an examination, and I was so scared. This college was not like any other private college. In order to get your graduation diploma the government sends official teachers there. So it was an official private college. It was much more intense. If you didn't pass, you didn't pass. The examination and the final test came from the government, so everybody had to take tests in order to get in and in order to graduate. In some private colleges, if you knew somebody you could just get in and study.

I hired somebody to teach me Spanish, a very nice lady who lived in Lince. That was before the divorce, so my Spanish became better and better. I took the examination to get into the college, and I passed. Oh, it was so nice.

The reason I knew of that college was because of Alicia. She went there for her college degree in interior design.

Nathan: What sorts of things would you learn there?

Wong-Vargas: For example, the first year they taught everything about architecture. Everything was just drawing, drawing. During the second and third years they taught me about colors to decorate houses and offices, and about perspectives. Then we made small maquettes. The first year when I started to study, I told my children, "I am divorced, I have business to take care of, and I have five of you"--although Martha was here in the U.S.--"and I still want to have a degree. You have your mother, who is going to pay for everything; don't tell me you don't want to be a professional and have a degree. You have to have a profession. Whatever you want to do, remember that nobody can take away your knowledge," I told them. I didn't say, "You have to be a doctor, or you have to be an engineer." No, I said that whatever they wanted to do, I would help them.



Señora Isabel Wong Vargas, demostró que "nunca es tarde para aprender", graduándose de Decoradora de Interiores. Actualmente se está perfeccionando en los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica.

"Nunca es Tarde para Aprender"

## MADRE DE CINCO HIJOS SE GRADUA DE DECORADORA DE INTERIORES

Un caso de esos que ocurren muy de tiempo en tiempo, es el caso de la señora Isabel Wong Vargas, atareada ama de casa y madre de 5 niños. Demostrando que "nunca es tarde para aprender", acaba de graduarse como Decoradora de Interiores.

La señora Wong, dice que pese a sus estudios nunca descuidó los quehaceres de su casa ni el cuidado y educación de sus hijos, ni su actividad comer-

cial. Supo organizar su tiempo de tal modo que no se interfirieran sus clases con sus obligaciones hogareñas y comerciales.

En los exámenes finales que rindiera en la Escuela de Decoración de Interiores de Miraflores, obtuvo las más altas notas. Su tesis mereció un especial elogio del Jurado nombrado por el Ministerio de Educación.

Pero lo dicho no es todo. La señora Wong intervino en

un concurso promovido por su centro de estudios, ganando un premio que le dió oportunidad, conjuntamente con dos compañeras de estudio, encargarse del decorado de los modernos bungalows del Country Club del Bosque.

Culminando con éxito su carrera, se ha dirigido a los Estados Unidos de Norte América, donde le aguarda más conocimientos que adquirir. Le deseamos una feliz estadia y muchos éxitos desde aquí.



They saw how hard I worked. After the restaurant, at night, I did my homework. Sometimes I never slept. Maybe twice a month I didn't sleep at all. Minimum twice; sometimes more than that. [telephone interruption]

Nathan: Did you get a degree, then?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes. Sometimes Maria would tell me to go to sleep, and I would tell her that I couldn't; I had to finish, because the next day I had to take the finished homework to school. If I didn't do it at night, when? I had to go to the market in the morning to prepare the things for the restaurant.

Nathan: Were there both men and women in this class?

Wong-Vargas: No, only women. I always pray to God to help me. On the drawings, you had to study them like European history, also the famous painters and everything. Then there was flower arrangement once a week. There was a lot, and it was very interesting. I really liked it. Of course, it is much better to study in the United States, one can learn so much more. For example, we don't have that much curtain fabric as you have here.

#### Winning the Prize, and Decorating the Country Club

Wong-Vargas: I remember the second year we had to project sixty small vacation bungalows in a competition. They gave us a five-by-seven-square-meters piece of land for each bungalow and asked us how we would build with it. Then we had to think how we were going to decorate them. I won the third prize.

Nathan: Good for you.

Wong-Vargas: One was a design for bungalows in the Country Club el Bosque in Chosica in Peru. It was about thirty minutes' drive from Lima. They came to our college and said that to whoever drew the design for the bungalows they would give first, second, and third prizes. My project was for a bungalow for six people to live in that small area, thirty-five square meters. Another project was for two people, and another was for four people. I finished my project with every little detail, and then I came to California to visit Martha and to New York to visit Susana, my half-sister.

Nathan: Was she here at Cal?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, she was here already. I found out I won the third prize after I got back to Peru. My schoolmates said, "Oh, did you know that you won the third prize?" Well, I thought they were joking. A friend of mine, whose last name was Paiva, won the first prize. She was a very clever woman, but after she graduated she went to Brazil and was in a car accident; she died very young. The second prize was won by Tina Jara.

You see, the three of us had to decorate the whole country club. Not only had we won the prize, but we were going to decorate all the bungalows in the Bosque Country Club, and we did.

Nathan: You actually did it?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I had to find out what was needed, what materials to use, the colors, chairs, beds, lamps, everything. I had done a lot of research in doing my project, so I knew these things, and we earned a lot of money.

Nathan: You chose the furniture and everything?

Wong-Vargas: Everything for that particular room that I designed. The three of us decorated the sixty bungalows. I had twenty, and the other two each had twenty. We also decorated the clubhouse. With the money we earned, my friend Paiva bought a car, Tina bought something else, and I put mine into the business--the La Caleta land.

We earned about U.S.\$5,000 each. You could buy a lot with that at the time, because it was a lot of soles. For our project, whatever we purchased at the store they gave us 15 or 20 percent off, so we were very pleased with what the three of us earned. I was so pleased and relieved after I completed the third year. I thought, "I will never go through with it," because it was very difficult with the children, business, and learning.

I met a lady from Australia who was brought up in China and spoke beautiful Chinese; she only spoke Chinese but didn't know how to write it, because she never went to a Chinese school. She was living in Peru, married to a Swiss man. Her name was Tracy. She had three children, two girls and one boy. She had divorced her husband, and she always came to look for me because she was single. She worked with Bucks Johnson and Johnson Peruvian Beer Co.; now we call it Cerveza Crystal. She worked there because she knew English,



of course. That company was owned by English people, not Americans.

She would always come to see me at the restaurant, and she'd say, "Let's go out. Let's go dancing." I'd say I couldn't, because I had to study and I had to take care of my children. I remember she said, "Now, come on. They are very rich. If you marry a rich Englishman here, you can hire a decorator. Why do you bother to study? Don't waste your time." [laughter] I said no, that nobody could take knowledge away from you. I wanted to graduate some day so I told her not to bother me. But she always came to look for me, I still remember. I don't know where she is now.

I didn't like to go out. I liked to study and be with my children, and I liked to sew, so I sewed my daughters' dresses.

Nathan: Was it a three-year course?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. When I finished I got a certificate. They gave you the official diploma only when you had done your graduate work. We were about twenty-five girls altogether. I was the mother there, because everybody was so young. Only three of us did the graduate work. The others didn't bother, because they said they had the certificate anyway, and they got married. They were young and didn't care. But Ana Maria La Rosa, myself, and Graciela Laffose did. Paiva, the one who won the first prize, didn't do it because somebody hired her to go to Rio, and she left. I don't think Tina, did it. The graduate work was very difficult. You chose your own topic.



**IX DEVELOPING LA CALETA, AND SELLING THE CHINESE RESTAURANT****Planning for La Caleta**

Wong-Vargas: My graduate work was my restaurant, because I was going to build a Chinese restaurant where La Caleta is now. I had never thought about a seafood restaurant, because I had started out with Chinese food. So I did a project for that land all in Chinese style, with a dancing floor, water with a small bridge. It was beautiful. I had to make little chairs and tables--a maquette. It was very difficult to finish the whole thing. I also had to do research on how much it was going to cost.

You know where I slept during that time? Not in my bed but on the sofa, because my bed was full with a maquette, little tables, chairs, papers, etc. I couldn't move them every night.

Nathan: In the kitchen, did you plan on a Chinese stove?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I did. But later I had to remove it because I changed it to a seafood restaurant. We have an International Fair once a year in Lima. People from all over the world would come to show their merchandise. I liked the Chinese pavilion. I bought the whole thing--the wood decoration, everything--but not the merchandise, because I was going to decorate the place. It was quite nice, and I said I was going to build the restaurant little by little. I had a beautiful architecture book from China, and I always liked to copy things from it. I already had in mind what I was going to do, like in the garden and even the dancing floor.

Nathan: Wasn't it wonderful to learn all that?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I know. My friends would say, "No way would I work hard for three years to finish, and I wouldn't do the graduate work. No way." My graduate work was so nice that they kept it at the school. I made a lot of beautiful art things that they also kept there because they thought they were nice.

I finally finished, and I wrote a few words for my children at the graduation. You had to write something in Spanish and thank your parents, your grandparents, or whatever. I didn't thank anybody but myself, but I had to say something for my children. I wrote it down, and I'll tell you next time (I have to think about how to translate it into English). It was something like "It's never too late to learn." Also that there is no age limit to learning.

They had something like a cocktail party for graduation. I didn't go to that party because I had come to Martha's graduation in UC Berkeley. My friend Ana Maria La Rosa liked me very much because we graduated on the same day, and we both took our maquettes. They said we had to wait until the government sent someone to look at them; they had to be engineers to see if the models were correct. Ana Maria had made a mistake. She had forgotten the scale in the dining room, so the chair was as tall as the table; how could you sit on it? I told her she had made a mistake, and she said no, but then she realized it and took the chair out and cut off the legs, and I also helped her. She put it back before the officials arrived. So she was very grateful to me. [laughter] I was not at the graduation party, but she spoke very highly of me. Even the newspapers said so. She used me as an example. It was very nice: something like "Mrs. Sam"--that's what they called me--"the mother of five children, and yet she accomplished all this." I think I still have that article.

#### Mr. Chu's Chinese Restaurant

Wong-Vargas: I was still working at Chifa Na-Mey in Lince and working on my project at La Caleta. Mr. Julio Chu was living in the north of Peru at that time, in Chiclayo. He said that he had gone to the same school as I did in Hong Kong, but I didn't remember him at all. He always said he admired me, and that wherever I went he would follow me. So when I bought the land for my new restaurant, he bought another parcel with a group of friends, more than 5,000 square meters--much bigger than mine--across from me. He said he knew I had good



Ruth Enciso

Isabel Wong-Vargas, dueña del restaurante "La Caleta", donó una cena para cien personas en beneficio de una cuna jardín.



Isabel Wong con el ramo de flores que le obsequió el ministro de Salud. Abajo, Ena de Carrillo, Isabel, Felipe Carbonell y la nueva generación Avilés.

Ruth Enciso

**ISABEL** Wong-Vargas, la fina y distinguida "gourmet" del conocido restaurante "La Caleta" brindó una gran cena-show a beneficio de la construcción de la cuna jardín para los hijos de los trabajadores de los Institutos Nacionales de Salud. El íntegro de lo recaudado en esta concurrida comida fue donado para tal fin. El propio ministro de Salud, Carlos Vidal, estuvo a la cabeza de numerosas personalidades que acudieron para apoyar esta iniciativa. Los comensales disfrutaron las especialidades de "La Caleta" como la corvina gratinada con camarones y sus famosos adobos de cerdo con arroz y choclo. El restaurante atiende en Dionisio Derteano 126, San Isidro, durante el día, pero en las noches sólo previa reservación al teléfono 423970. ■



Ruth Enciso



CADA SEMANA



UN RESTAURANT

# La Caleta



**DINERS CLUB  
INTERNATIONAL**

Se aceptan  
Diners y demás  
tarjetas de  
crédito.



**CENTRO** gastronómico especializado en mariscos y pescados.

- Nombre: La Caleta.
- Dirección: Dionisio Derteano 126 (San Isidro). Teléfonos 40-5590 y 41-5940.
- Propietario: Isabel Wong Vargas.
- Cheffs: Delfín Luna y Pedro Tirado.
- Maitre: Edgardo Carlo.
- Especialidad: Pescados y mariscos.
- Abierto: Todos los días de 12 a 12.
- Carta de vinos: Chilenos, peruanos, españoles, franceses, alemanes, argentinos, californianos e italianos.
- Admite tarjetas de crédito de toda clase.
- Precio medio de una comida: 22 a 25 mil soles, incluido impuestos.
- Clasificación: Cinco (5) Tenedores.

**I**SABEL Wong Vargas, hija de chino y española, es una mujer con mucha clase. Y esa clase la ha volcado en el restaurante "La Caleta", que abrió hace 19 años, con una visión comercial realmente fantástica y que hoy es uno de los clásicos de la capital peruana, apreciado por los limeños y por los turistas que nos visitan.

Isabel, a su regreso de Hong-Kong, donde pasó su infancia, trabajó como decoradora de interiores, profesión que había abrazado en la isla de la Bahía de Cantón y que ejerció inicialmente en Lima.

Sin embargo, llevada por su dinamismo y su inquietud, compró un terreno con la idea de poner un chifa. Pero alguien se le adelantó en las proximidades y decidió cambiar de cocina, por lo que nació este templo de la gastronomía de pescados y mariscos, en el que el servicio y la calidad forman un conjunto único.

La Caleta es la lucha de una mujer para sacar adelante el negocio y a sus cinco hijos. Y el triunfo ha sonreído en los dos campos a esta dama exquisita. Porque, si el restaurante es ya una realidad de buen comer, Martha, madre de tres hijos, Miguel, sicólogo, Inés, abogada, Lita, ingeniero industrial, y Susi, economista, los cinco hijos de Isabel, están ya encauzados en la vida, aunque estén lejos de la madre, ya que residen en

San Francisco, ciudad en la que piensa ella poner un restaurante peruano no tardando mucho tiempo.

La comida es exquisita. Y tiene platos realmente deliciosos, como ese caucau de conchitas o el ceviche frito, creación de la casa.

Y no hay que olvidar los tamalitos o los crepés de mariscos, y menos ese adobo de mero, que se sirve los jueves, la parihuela, la corvina y el lenguado relleno de mariscos y almendras, que entran en lo exquisito.

A ello se añade una fina atención, ya que la mayoría del personal lleva desde el comienzo del negocio. Y a ese personal, le ha imbuido Isabel su exquisita personalidad, el carisma, el encanto que ella tiene, además del lema: "hay que pensar siempre en el cliente".

Un cliente que se siente muy bien atendido en "La Caleta", con muy buena cocina y un ambiente de comodidad, que han convertido a este restaurante en uno de los mejores de Lima. ■



**FINA** atención y ambientes cómodos para que el cliente disfrute un buen momento.



**PLATOS** exquisitos para el buen paladar





vision, so he was following me. He was also going to have a Chinese restaurant. Oh.

The name was Lung Fung. They were able to start building right away because they were men, first of all, and they had a lot of money from the north, and there was a whole group of them: he and his father and somebody else. One thing really hurt me badly, but what could I do?

When I was talking with the architect, Lay, I showed him my Chinese architecture book which showed how I really had in mind to do my restaurant. He asked if he could see it, if I would lend it to him for a few days. I said sure, I'm always like that, and I gave it to him. He copied it [for the Lung Fung restaurant], because he could never get a book like that at that time. Now maybe one could get it. I bought it because I loved those kinds of designs and art in China, and I was in China for so many years.

He copied it, only he made it much bigger because they had so much more land. He did the design for their restaurant. I didn't know at the time that he had copied it. After I knew about it, it really hurt me. They built a beautiful restaurant across from my land, the Lung Fung Restaurant. It's still there. It can seat about a thousand people at one time. I think it has a hundred tables. It is big, beautiful, and with a Chinese garden.

I didn't have money to start, but I had started only a little bit. Remember that I sold the cinema that I purchased with Mr. Loi and Mr. Lee? At that time I met the owner of the cinema property, Manuel Castagnola. He was a huge gentleman. His son when to Markham school with my son, Michael. He has a construction company, and I talked with him about how someday maybe he could help me to build my restaurant. He said, "Of course," so after I bought the land for La Caleta I visited him and asked him how much he would charge to build what I had in mind. I already had the plans, and I also learned how to do that one year in college.

#### Down Payment for a Contractor

Wong-Vargas: He said any construction I would have to pay off in three or four parts. In Peru it's like that: you don't have to pay the total amount at once but just prepare the whole amount in order to pay off when the job is done. I didn't have that

much, so I asked if I could give him a down payment and then pay him in five years with interest. He said he had never heard of such a thing. At that time in Peru they didn't do business like that. For land, yes, but when you build something you have to have money ready for it. I told him I couldn't pay off in three or four parts, and he said he would make an exception and do it for me with a down payment, and he would accept monthly payments in five years with interest.

Nathan: So you went ahead with La Caleta in the same place?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, an international seafood restaurant, La Caleta, but not the Chinese restaurant, because I knew that I could not compete with the huge restaurant, Lung Fung.

Before I decided about the other plans, I asked Mr. Castañola how much the complete construction with the concrete base for four floors would cost, and the amount scared me. I didn't think I could do it, because the monthly payment would be very high. Then I thought I could just put up the concrete foundation frame with complete roof, floor, window frames, electric connections, water installation, etc., etc. I could do the glass for the windows and the decorations later on. I would make the down payment first and then pay for the rest in a few years. Mr. Castañola accepted it and said okay. This was not my graduate project plan, but I did the whole design of La Caleta.

Unfortunately, I didn't have enough money to buy good materials for every item, so I just chose *fierro* (iron) material for window frames (I still have them now) and a few cement sinks. I remember Castañola asked why I would like to build the base for four floors. Why didn't I just do the first floor, because it would cost much less? I said no, because after I paid off the loan and everything else, I would like to continue building the second, third, and fourth floors, even if I had to do it one by one.

[Interview 9: July 17, 1989]##

Nathan: We were talking last time about your new restaurant. What does La Caleta mean?

Wong-Vargas: La Caleta means a small pier or a small island where fishermen catch fish. Before I chose that name I wrote down a lot of names, and I kept asking people what they thought would be a good name for a seafood restaurant. La Caleta had a lot more votes than the others, so that's why I chose it.

Nathan: So it is primarily a seafood restaurant?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I don't think meat goes very well with that name, but fish, yes.

Nathan: So although someone else had stolen, or borrowed, your plan, you went ahead and built?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I went ahead and built my restaurant. I think I told you last time that I bought a cinema with two friends and that I had met the owner of the cinema; he is Mr. Castagnola (he's of Italian descent). I knew that he was a builder, too. Also I told you that I went to see him, and I told him that I didn't have enough money but wanted to build only the first floor, but with a base for four floors. At that time four floors seemed very high; and after four floors you had to put in an elevator. I didn't think I would ever be able to buy much more. He was so nice, and he accepted my offer; he sent his nephew-in-law, Mr. Jose Charme, to supervise the construction.

Now there is a lot of building around there. There is a very beautiful bank with seventeen floors. About six years ago, it cost about \$1,000 for a square meter.

Nathan: Is this within the city limits of Lima?

Wong-Vargas: No. They call it San Isidro. It's like a suburb. At that time nobody liked to live or have businesses there. I was all by myself, with the Lung Fung restaurant across the avenue.

#### Building a Seafood Restaurant

Wong-Vargas: So he got started, and I paid him some money for down payment. Then I had to pay the rest in five years, little by little. I built it without floors on the basement and without window glass--at the restaurant there were a lot of windows--just the shell, and that was it. I decided to have a bar, and behind the bar I wanted to have some beautiful stones. So that was included. It had water and electricity and everything, basically. He didn't want to build the whole thing because it was too expensive, and I couldn't pay that much, either.

I remembered his nephew-in-law, Jose Charme, a Chilean engineer. He said he wanted to invite me to a nightclub one night so I could see the stone and could choose which type I wanted. Then I could tell his motives, that he was not sincere. I told him, "I don't like to go without my husband, and he is busy," so I couldn't go with him, but I was lying. I knew that I didn't like people like that. Instead of taking advantage and going to see, I told him I didn't want the stones any more.

They took the stones out of the contract and I had to pay less, but in the long run I had to pay more because I had to find them all by myself later on. It was a lot of work and a lot of money, but I preferred to pay more and not fool around with him or anybody like that. That's me. And he was a married man, but even if he weren't married I wouldn't like to mix up the business with personal affairs. I am very serious about business. Business is business.

He said, "I've never met your husband. I was told that you are divorced." I said he was busy, and I was not divorced. I always said that [laughs]. Thank God, people knew I was divorced, but they always respected me, even if I was all by myself, a woman and half Chinese. At that time there was still some prejudice against Oriental people. But I was so lucky. Really, I was.

I couldn't get any money from my father, because he didn't want to lend it to me. I did ask him one time to join me as a partner, but he said, "No, no. I don't like the restaurant business. Why don't you come to help me in the hacienda? That would be much better." The hacienda was earning much, much better at that time--millions of soles. But, again, I didn't want to go because I wanted my children to have a good education in Lima.

#### A Nightclub, and a Drive-In

Wong-Vargas: I finished the building, but I didn't have money to finish it and to open the restaurant. But a gentleman named Charlie, I remember, came to me and said he would like to rent my basement to open a nightclub. My basement was supposed to be a place for dancing; I had very good plans for the Chinese restaurant. I told him I hadn't finished yet, and he said it didn't matter. He asked me when I would be finished, and I

explained that I didn't have floors, windows, or doors. He said he would pay me \$500 rent a month.

Well, that was good money, so I asked him when he wanted it. He said in two or three months. The good thing is that I told him the truth. I said, "Look, I'm going to finish this, but I have to borrow some money to do it. Are you sure you want it? If you don't, I will have finished it with nobody to rent it to." For the business, I should finish the upstairs first for the restaurant.

He said he was very serious. He was going to put a nightclub there called "Charlie's Whiskey-a-Go-Go." He was very sincere, and I told him the truth about having to borrow some money; otherwise I couldn't finish it. He asked, "But are you going to open your restaurant there?" I said, "Yes, I promise;" even if I had to sell sandwiches, I would do it. There was nothing else around there, so if there was a Whiskey-a-Go-Go, there would have to be a place for people to eat something. I promised him, so I concentrated on the basement and the outside of the restaurant. I wondered what I should put there, and I thought, why not a drive-in, coffee-soda fountain? There would be a big parking lot, and I could serve them there or take-out. So I concentrated on a park-in: sandwiches, grilled chicken, hot dogs, sodas, ice cream, coffee--a soda fountain. I hired another architect, Lam, to help me design the soda fountain, what I should buy, and so forth.

I didn't have money; that was the problem. Then I went to my father. I wrote him a letter and explained about the situation. I urged the need to finish the basement in order to rent it to Charlie's nightclub. I begged him to lend me 200,000 soles (it was less than \$10,000 U.S.) for four or five years, and I promised to pay back the same as the bank interest. I told him that I needed an immediate answer and to please call me. I sent Maria with the letter. After a few days he didn't call me, so I called him and asked about it. He said he didn't have time to open my letter. Then I realized that he had opened it and did not want to help me. From that time I made up my mind not to ask him again.

Then I went to Mr. Lau Leon, a rich man. I didn't know if he had lent money to anybody else, but I knew he was very rich. I went with Maria, my housekeeper, and she sat in the car waiting for me. I asked Mr. Lau Leon if he could lend me 200,000 soles; the rate was about 27 soles to the dollar at that time, but it was a lot of money. I told him I could give him my property as collateral; it was a guarantee if he

would lend it to me. He said, "You must be joking, because your father has a lot of money." He was a very old man. I said I knew that, but I told him my father had so many obligations. I didn't want to say my father didn't want to lend it to me, so I couldn't borrow from him. I told him it would be much easier if he lent it to me, because I could give him my property as a guarantee and he would know that if I couldn't pay, he could sell it.

I told him I was going to rent the basement, and he said, "No, you must be joking. I don't believe that your father won't help," and so on. So I left. What else could I do? He just kept saying I was joking. I didn't have time to go there for joking, you know?

So where could I go? I knew that in the little town where I was born, Chepén, there was a gentleman with the name of Sito Pong. He loaned money to everybody, but with very high interest. I went to talk with him one time when he was visiting one of his family in Lima. He knew me, of course. He said there was no problem, that he could lend it to me, but the interest would be 24 percent. I'm very grateful to him, even though it was 24 percent. The bank in Lima at that time was about 10 percent, and you had to pay every three months in advance--24,000 soles every three months.

But I was very happy. He lent me about 400,000 soles, and I borrowed a little bit more because I had to do something inside, too--windows, closets, the floor, and then paint. At 24 percent, I calculated that I had to pay each month about 8,000 soles. I would receive the rent of \$500, which was about 13,500 soles. So I would pay 8,000 soles and still have some left. I prayed to God that Charlie wouldn't change his mind. If he didn't rent the basement, what would I do? I would have to give back the money, or--I was so worried, you can imagine.

I was very thin. I couldn't eat, and I couldn't sleep. I was worrying, and there were the children. God was so nice always there to help me.

Nathan: Did you still have the other restaurant?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I still had the Chinese restaurant (later on I sold it), so I could manage. Otherwise I could not.

So Mr. Sito Pong gave me the money, and I finished the basement and the soda fountain. But I couldn't finish the

inside on that 400,000 soles. For a soda fountain I had to buy coffee machines and toasters, cappuccino machines; there were so many things. Inside I only had a floor. Before opening I bought some paint for the store, hired a man in Lince, and took him there to paint. When I came back, he had left with all my paint. He stole everything. Oh. I went to see him I don't remember how many times, and he hid. I never could catch him. I didn't have money, and then again that man stole the paint from me. Oh, it was very sad.

I was all by myself. Not even a brother; and friends--I didn't have friends at that time. I didn't have time to make friends. I don't know how I did it. I just kept going. Even if it killed me, I had to do it.

After I finished the basement, I had to do something about the soda fountain; but I didn't have the machines yet, I had to get electricity, and so many things. Then Charlie gave me two months' rent in advance to guarantee it, and later I had to give that \$1,000 back. Then every month he paid rent. I was so happy.

#### Lotus Park-in, the Coffee Shop

Nathan: Did people come to his nightclub?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, he was famous. Yes. You know what I did? My cook made won ton in the other restaurant, Na-Mey, and I took it to my coffee shop to sell. I also sold some sandwiches, grilled chicken, and so forth. They liked won ton, of course, but I didn't have enough equipment. I had to buy a freezer to put cakes in. I didn't have experience at the beginning, and I didn't know what to do. I had to go copy people, see what they had. I saw that they had roast chicken, so I bought a rotisserie, too. Later on I bought some little boxes to put the chicken in. I learned every day. I would go out and look around, but nobody helped me. I don't know how I did it. I was young at the time and desperate to pay this and pay that account and support the children.

Nathan: You were paying for the children's schooling?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, everything. Even before I divorced, my husband never paid anything. He never even bought a pair of shoes. Never, poor man.

I opened the coffee shop, and I remember I had to invite a few friends.

Nathan: Did the coffee shop have a name?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. When I started building I was going to put a Chinese name, Linfá, Inc., or Lotus, Inc. (the translation of *linfá* is "lotus"). I liked the name because a lotus is a flower from China, so white, and pink also, that grows from the mud. No matter how dirty the place where it grows, it never loses its color. It is so beautiful and so clean. Later I changed my mind about the Chinese restaurant, but I still had the name Lotus, Inc. Later I changed it to Linfá, Inc., La Caleta, but when I had the coffee shop I called it Lotus Park-In, like a drive-in cafe.

There was another very nice drive-in cafe in Lima at that time, the Tip Top. It was huge, and I could never have anything like that. Mine was a little thing; but people liked to go to dance at Charlie's, a go-go night club, and then they came for coffee and things like that. I had to buy about two dozen trays to put in the car windows. I still have them.

Little by little I finished the inside. I still had some money from the restaurant Na-Mey, and Charlie paid me the rent promptly at the first of each month. I wondered what I should do next. At that time I was still paying 8,000 soles a month. The first month I paid 24,000 soles because Mr. Pong collected three months in advance, the scumbag, but I was still grateful because he lent it to me when I needed it at the time. I couldn't get any money from anybody at a low rate, so I am still grateful to this day. He has died, but his grandson came lately to La Caleta. I noticed him, so I didn't charge him. I told him in front of his friends that the restaurant existed because his grandfather lent money to me. Oh, he was so proud, you know, and his face was beaming. It was true. I didn't mention the high interest part, because that I really didn't count. One day my father said something, "Well, that's his business." I said he could have said no, so I was grateful.

I needed some more money to finish the restaurant. I had a friend, Cecilia Wong. I will never forget her. She's in Vancouver, Canada, now. She was a nurse in Hong Kong. When I told her I needed money, she said she could lend it to me; she volunteered in order for me to finish the restaurant. She was going to Vancouver, Canada, and said she had about 300,000 soles--over \$10,000 U.S. at that time.



So many things happened at that time. Did I tell you how I had to come over for Martha's wedding? Did I tell you about how I got the visa here?

Nathan: No, not yet.

Opening a Seafood Restaurant: La Caleta

Wong-Vargas: Let me finish with La Caleta first. So Cecilia lent the money, and I signed a note in Chinese. That was in soles. I promised to give her 10 percent, like the bank interest. So I started the seafood restaurant. As I said, I decided a seafood restaurant would be much better than a Chinese restaurant because those people were building the Lung Fung Chinese restaurant across the street from me. They had close to 6,000 square meters. Mine was about 1,700 square meters, including parking space. Theirs was huge, and I knew I couldn't compete with them; that's why I changed my mind. Meat? No, because on the next block there was a restaurant whose specialty was meat. So I decided on seafood.

Where could I hire people? I went to the seafood restaurant Todo Fresco ("Everything's Fresh"), the first one in Miraflores. I went there to have dinner with a friend, Corinna. The maitre d' was very charming; he knew how to sell the food. I asked him if he by any chance knew of someone who wanted to work in a seafood restaurant that I was thinking of opening. I gave him my Na-Mey address.

Then one day he came. I asked him if he had found somebody, and he said yes, himself. "You?" He told me all the problems he had where he was. I said, "You are the maitre d', but I also need a cook and so forth." He said he could introduce me to somebody, and also I could put in a newspaper ad. Oh, yes, so I could; you have to have ideas. He told me I could do this and that, and I said, "Good ideas." I had put an ad in the Chinese newspaper for a Chinese cook, but I had to put an ad in the Peruvian newspaper for this restaurant.

He recommended two chefs to me, and I hired one. I told him the truth, that I was not really prepared to open, and that I would have to do it little by little. He said he could help me go to the market. He was quite nice. I said, "All right." He also said he could recommend an accountant if I needed one, and I got one from the same firm. From the

newspaper ad I got a few waiters and this and that. He told all the waiters this was a good thing; they were all his friends.

I worked out how much it was all going to cost. I had already built the kitchen for Chinese food, and I had to remove much of that. I had to buy a different oven. For Chinese food we use a wok, but for seafood I needed an industrial range. At that time you could make a down payment and then pay every month.

Next to Na-Mey I had a laundry, and I sold the machines, so that was a little more income to do things with. Oh, it was terrible--here, there, here, there. I never bought clothes for myself, never. I just liked to sew in a very simple way for myself. When we are young it doesn't matter, you know. [laughs] You look good in anything.

#### Purchasing: How and Why

Wong-Vargas: So I started to have a seafood restaurant. But it was very slow. The maitre d' helped me. He went with me many times to the market. He said I should go every morning to the wholesale fish market in Lima that opened at 4 a.m. He went with me a couple of times so I knew where to go and how to get there; otherwise it would have cost me much more, because I would have gone into Chinatown, which was more expensive. (At the fish market the prices were wholesale.)

I remember the first time I went with him. You won't believe this. I bought some fish, and the rude lady said, "How much do you want me to put on the receipt?" I asked what she meant; I was paying such-and-such amount. She said, "Maybe you want to put more. Maybe you want to have some for yourself." They thought I was working as an employee. I realized that, my God, I could never send anyone there. I learned from that, and always I went myself. I knew their trick. They didn't have to pay income tax or anything, and they would just write down whatever you wanted.

##

Nathan: Did that mean that you had to go to the market for everything? Not just fish but fruits and vegetables, too?

Wong-Vargas: There was a separate wholesale market for fish, seafood, and lobster--everything from the sea. I never went to the meat market, because I didn't need to. There was another wholesale market for vegetables only. They did the same thing there with the receipts. Also there was a fruit market and a flower market. Everywhere they asked you about the receipt. If they didn't ask you, you could say, "Could you put maybe 20 to 40 percent more?" And they would do it.

I learned that I could not send anybody to buy for me, because even if the person didn't ask for it, it was offered. Maybe the first time one would say no, and the second no, but the third time one would say, "Well, okay, maybe 10 percent," or something like that. So I said, "No way," and I made up my mind that I was going to be the one who did the purchasing. I learned that in the restaurant business you had to be the buyer yourself. In this country, I don't know. But Peru, even now, they give the receipt to you. They don't do the right thing, especially the wholesalers. Oh, they have so many receipts--one for you and one for the government, and nobody was going to check them. I didn't like that.

Nathan: Were there other women doing the buying the way you did?

Wong-Vargas: No, I never saw one. I remember when I did buying for the Chinese restaurant it was all men. Now I think it's different, but at that time, no. They always said, "Oh, Isabel, she's a very hard worker; she works like a man."

Nathan: Did you carry things?

Wong-Vargas: Sometimes, yes, I did, but sometimes I hired people. For example, I would buy chickens from a very nice woman in the central market in Lima. I would ask her if I could leave my things there, and she would say okay. So everything I purchased I left there, and when I was ready to leave I hired a boy with a little cart. I put everything in the cart, and they would take it to my car. But I did have to buy each item and then store it in the one place; I couldn't carry it all out by myself. I didn't realize I should have bought rubber gloves to protect my hands, so they got a little roughened. They are much better now. I didn't think about myself or my health or my beauty at that time. I never purchased creams or lipstick, never ever.

After I came to America I decided it was a good idea to buy some creams. A friend of mine, who is now close to eighty years old, told me to use some cream, because I would see when I got old and ask myself why I hadn't used some

cream. I thanked her. First of all, I didn't have luxury money to buy cream. Second, I didn't have time. [laughs] Third, when you are young, you don't realize you are going to get old. Now I'm much older; I started using it, but I think it is too late.

Nathan: Your skin is perfect.

Wong-Vargas: Thank you. I keep saying to my daughters now, "Buy some cream; put on some night cream." Maybe they listen to me, and maybe they don't. I really think it helps during the day and to go to sleep with some cream on. Eventually you age anyway, but it helps a little. Why not, if you can do it. When Maria was doing the washing I would tell her to put on gloves. Even now I sometimes forget, because I like to wash with my hands because I can feel it. Sometimes I remember and sometimes I don't, so my hands are not very pretty.

Nathan: Did you learn how to buy food? Could you tell what was fresh?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I would purchase fish, for example, and the chef would tell me, "When you buy fish you have to open the right or left side of the fish head and see if it is red; if it is red, it is fresh." I already knew how to do that because it was the same in the Chinese restaurant. The vegetables you can notice right away. The chef told me how to buy bigger or smaller size seafood, and little by little I learned. The most important thing was to go in the morning to buy fish, vegetables, fruit, everything.

In order to go to the fish market you had to have a permit, so I had that, which made it a little bit easier. I would go three or four times a week, because I liked the fish to be fresh. I was told I should have a big walk-in freezer. A lot of restaurants had them. When the fish was cheap, they would buy a lot of them and store them in the freezer. But I didn't like that; I liked the fish to be fresh. If the price is high, then I would have to raise the restaurant price a little bit and they would understand; but it had to be fresh, so I never had a walk-in freezer. Even now I have only a regular one. Sometimes you have some fish left over that you can't sell, so you have to put it in there. My idea is to store fish in the freezer for one day and at the most two days. Longer than that, no.

Nathan: Did you serve wine or other alcohol?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I had to apply for a license for that, and we had to pay a special tax for that kind of license. They asked me

what time I wanted to close, and I said 2 a.m., because the Charlie's bar closed at 5 a.m. I never really stayed open until 2 a.m.--maybe 1 or 1:30. It was a special license that was taxed separately every month.

Nathan: Were you open for lunch and dinner?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, in the beginning. I hired all these people, and then I remembered that the maitre d' had said I should put in a carpet. I said I was sorry, but I couldn't then; maybe later on.

#### Expanding into the Big Salon (1974-1975)

Wong-Vargas: Little by little the business was good. The chef was good, and I was very pleased and happy. Much later I removed the soda fountain--tore down everything and sold the machinery at a very low price--and applied for a license to enlarge the restaurant. They allowed me to, so I built that part also. We call it now the big salon. I think that was in '75.

People asked why I wanted to enlarge it: "It's much better smaller; you can see everybody, and it's full of people. If you make it bigger it will seem empty." But I needed more space. Sometimes people wanted twenty or thirty seats at a time, and the small one could only seat about eighty. If I sat a party of thirty, then the other customers would go away. So why not build onto it? This area was empty, and if it stayed empty, I could always build a dancing floor.

In 1975--I'm jumping ahead again-- we had a military government, and the money and everything was different. Everybody liked to take their money out of the country because the military took over, but I didn't. Instead of taking it out, I said I wanted to first improve my restaurant. I did, and I'm so happy. Of course, the most important thing was the education of the children.

By that time I had already sold the Chinese restaurant, so that's why I could do a lot of things.

In 1965, Martha graduated from UC Berkeley here, and she wanted to go to France. She had gotten everything arranged already, and I sent her the money to buy a ticket to go to

France to the Sorbonne University in Paris to study for her Master's degree.

Nathan: In what?

Wong-Vargas: At that time she was interested in international relations because her French was good. She had a lot of French friends over there, so there was no problem. But I was worried.

I was beginning to get a little bit sick myself because I was working so hard. I couldn't sleep at night. I would come home at 1:30 in the morning and get up sometimes at 4 o'clock to go to the fish market, sometimes at 6 o'clock. Never at 7; 6:30 at the latest. The children went off to school. Oh, I don't know how I did it. That was also the time I enrolled in the interior design course. So many things to do at one time. (I'm jumping around from one year to another now.)

I began to feel sick. When I was walking around the area of La Caleta in the beginning, I felt a little bit dizzy and sick. I remember one of the employees asking me to sit down. I felt so weak. Maybe because I was worried, I don't know. Thank God, but I don't know how I am still alive. I was so weak, and I didn't know that much about taking care of myself. I only wanted to work like a machine, but even a machine needs some oil once in a while, you know?

#### Visas, and the American Consul

Wong-Vargas: Before Martha came back to the United States in 1965, a lady from the north of Peru in Chiclayo (the whole family moved to Canada, and she passed away just a few years ago) had a daughter who wanted to go to the United States to study. She knew that my daughter was here, so she asked me how I did the paper work. I said it was easy, and I would help her if she wanted me to. I always offered to help people. The mother, Mrs. Maria Yep, said, "Oh, please, yes." Her daughter wanted to study in Washington State. I did help her; I did all the papers and everything for her.

One Thursday the daughter and her mother came by to say goodbye. I said, "How nice. Where are you going to be in Washington State?" We were talking about where the city was, and the mother said, "No, she's not going to the United States; she's going to Canada." Canada, why? I had done all

the papers for the United States. She said, "Yes, but the American consulate didn't want to give her a visa." I asked why, because the family had a lot of money and wanted their children to go to good schools like I wanted for my children. Of course, I didn't have as much money as they had. I asked her if she wanted me to help her try to get the visa.

The next day was Friday, and the government offices were closed on Saturday. The daughter was to leave within the next two or three days. I said I would try to help her the next day, Friday, and she said that would be nice because she really preferred that her daughter go to the United States. So I went with her daughter to the American consulate. It was difficult, but much simpler than now; now it is very difficult to go to the American consulate. I told the daughter to give me her passport and to sit and wait for me while I talked to them.

I went to the window and said to the receptionist that I wanted to talk to the consul general. She asked what it was for, and I said it was personal. I didn't say anything about a visa. When I am helping people, I am very strong and I can do it. But for myself-- I can't speak for myself because I think I had better not. Somebody has to speak for me.  
[laughs]

The girl looked at me, and probably thought, "Personal?" She asked if I had an appointment, and I said I didn't, implying that I didn't need one. She said okay, I could go in. The consul was so kind and nice. He was about in his forties. He asked what he could do for me, and I told him the whole story about how the visa had been denied, even though they could pay for everything. He believed me, and he looked at the passport and asked, "She wants to go to the United States instead of Canada?" I said yes, and he signed it right away. [laughter]

I told him he was so kind. He asked if she was a relative, and I said she was the daughter of my friend. I told him that my daughter [Martha] had just come back, and I was worried about other peoples' daughters, too. I told him my daughter wanted to go to France, and I was worried because I didn't know anybody there. I already knew several people in California, because my godmother was in Sacramento. I preferred the United States, and that's why I understood my friend wanting her daughter to go to Washington State instead of to Canada.

He said, "Oh, your daughter went to the United States?" And we started talking. I told him how she graduated from UC Berkeley, and how she was going to go to France, and how expensive it all was. He asked about me, and I told him I was divorced and had five children to raise. "But I have a seafood restaurant," I told him. "I just opened it, and I would like to invite you because you were so nice to help this girl." He said that unfortunately he didn't like seafood [laughter], but his wife did. I told him I could make chicken or meat, or something special for him.

We were talking about restaurants and children. I told him I loved the United States and that I wished someday I could open a seafood restaurant there. I said I didn't know why, but I loved San Francisco. He asked if I had relatives there, and I said I did, but they were not close relatives. I had my godmother in Sacramento and a few friends. Of course, my daughter, after three years in California and one year back East, made a lot of friends and it was much better for her. But with a student visa I had to pay a lot, I told him, and four years was not easy. Perhaps in France it would be a little bit less, and maybe she could work part time.

He asked if I wanted my daughter to go for her Master's degree in the United States, and I said, "Of course." He said he could give her a resident visa, so if I wanted to go over and open a restaurant, I was welcome to, because the United States would like to have someone like me who liked to work. I asked him if he meant it, and he said yes, he could help me. If I wanted to take the whole family, he would help all the family. Can you imagine? Oh, I was so happy.

I told him about Maria, my housekeeper and he said he could help her, too, but I would have to apply from the United States after I got there because she was not my family. But he promised to help me with her visa.

Nathan: Do you remember his name?

Wong-Vargas: I do. Mr. Burke Garrett. He was so nice. But I couldn't believe it was true. It was hard to believe he could be so kind. He did not make a mistake, because we are honest people. I came to this country and never took advantage of the government. I like to pay taxes, because it means I have a business, you know? If I don't have money to pay, it means I have nothing; I prefer to have and pay. Also in Peru, I always liked to be correct. I paid my taxes, and I could sleep peacefully.



Nathan: Nothing under the table?

Wong-Vargas: No. Well, sometimes you had to pay under the table in order to get faster service for a license or whatever. But taxes I like to pay exactly, because then you can sleep peacefully and you don't have to worry about it. You have to obey laws like that. I would just charge a little more if necessary, because I don't want to lose my capital money.

So I told my friend's daughter she could go to the United States, and she was so grateful. Then she got married. I don't know where she is now. I think she is in Canada, because the whole family moved to Canada when the military took over in Peru. So many people moved to Canada then. Mrs. Yep has now passed away.

#### A Berkeley Wedding

Wong-Vargas: When I got home I told Martha that she could go as a resident to the United States instead of France, and she did. She came back in 1966. It was much easier, because she was a resident and already a graduate here. Before, I paid full tuition for her, as did every foreign student. Martha had already met Paul [Hertelendy] at that time. They liked each other, but their bond was not strong, maybe because she had no visa. Maybe she thought he would think she wanted to stay with him because of the visa problem. I don't know. But now she came back with a resident visa, and in a few months Paul called me long distance and said, "I would like to marry your daughter." They wanted to get married on July 9, 1966, so I came in June. I took all the family--Lita, Susy, and Ines.

Michael was already here in his first year at Sonoma State College. The American consul was so nice. I told him I still had one son in the United States, and he asked how old he was. I said he was nineteen, and the consul said, "If you want him to be a resident, you have to apply for him after you get there, because he is a minor." He taught me how to do it. He said I had to send him back to Peru and he will help him. I did that and Michael went to Peru. He got a residence visa and then came back. I will never forget Mr. Burke, the American consul.

Helping a Family from Chepén

Wong-Vargas: Before 1966 I had already decided to sell the Chinese restaurant. This is the problem I wanted to tell you about. There was a Chinese gentleman, Mr. Carlos Keom, and his wife, Cecilia Keom, whom I had helped so much. They were living in Chepén. First of all, he gave me two checks which I cashed, and they bounced. They were for 5,000 soles and 2,000 soles, which was a lot of money at that time. His wife was religious, and I was religious, too--Catholic--so why not help each other? I didn't lend him the money, I just cashed the checks, and I never thought they would bounce. He never paid me back for that.

I was still married at that time, and my husband was so mad at me. Then this man's wife was sick once in Chepén. She came to Lima, and I helped her pay, 50 percent, for an operation to have her tonsils removed. A lot of things I helped them with. They told me they wanted to come to Lima from Chepén because they had two children in school. The children were in Maryknoll English School in Lince. It was a very good high school, taught by priests and nuns.

I told them they could stay in my grocery store, and they could buy whatever they wanted from the grocery store and just sign for it. My husband thought they were going to pay me, but they never did. I thought that since I was the owner, it was my business. I didn't want my husband to make trouble, so I had them sign for their purchases. He thought they were going to pay back, so he let them have anything they wanted, like butter, milk and so forth. I am very generous, but my husband was like this [tight fist].

They had been living there for quite a long time, and I had to find a house and a job for them. The husband found a job for himself, working in a bank. I found a job for her in Chinatown, selling in a gift shop. They moved, and I was so relieved, because I had helped them so much already. I had paid the van to move everything from Chepén to Lima; it was a lot of money. I was not related at all; they weren't my sister or my cousin or anything--just a friend.

It's a long story; he thought he was Michael's godfather, but he wasn't. I wanted him to be Michael's confirmation godfather. They had a hacienda at that time, but he never answered me saying yes or no. I thought he was busy with the farm, so I wrote down my half-brother's name instead for Michael's godfather. Then the day before the

confirmation, they came; he thought he was going to be a godfather. They told me the story then of how they had lost the hacienda, and they had nothing.

I thought if I said no, he would say it was because they had no money now that I didn't want him to be godfather, and they would be hurt. It really was because he didn't answer me. The husband said he couldn't be in the church that morning, but he did promise to be Michael's godfather. Since his name wasn't on the certificate, I didn't care if he felt in his mind that he was the godfather. I was helping him because he was a friend and needed help.

#### Buying the Property and Arranging to Sell the Chinese Restaurant (1965)

Wong-Vargas: The husband was working in a bank, and one day he came to see me. He had never paid back anything he owed me, but that was already past. Thank God I had managed okay, and my business was all right. He said he had a friend who wanted to buy my Chinese restaurant, Na-Mey. The property was not mine; I rented it for 4,500 soles a month for two spaces. He said they wanted three spaces so they could enlarge the restaurant. The third space sold things like radios, toasters--electrical equipment. He told me they wanted to purchase the property, or otherwise they didn't want the business. Because I was selling good will; the name was good.

It was he and a group of friends who wanted to make the purchase. He was my friend, and I had helped him so much. I thought it was okay. He came with his future partner, I talked with him, and we negotiated about the price. The price at that time was close to \$40,000--the goodwill and all the furniture, equipment, etc. It was difficult to find a place like that. I was very happy that someone wanted to buy it, and I thought I would send the money to buy a house here in the United States.

Then I went to talk to the owners of the property, who were from Bolivia, Mr. and Mrs. Humberto Peinado. They were very nice. One time they gave me a \$5,000 U.S. check when I was building La Caleta. He said if I needed money he could lend it to me, but he said I would have to pay him back in dollars. I did not want it in U.S. dollars, so I gave him back the check, but I will be grateful to him all my life.

I told him I wanted to buy the property with my associate, but I didn't say I was going to sell the business. I didn't lie, but I didn't say I was going to sell it, and he didn't ask me. If I had told him I wanted to sell, he would have said no, because it was rent, and all the goodwill would go down. Of course, then I would not sell anyway.

So I told him I wanted to buy the property with a group, and we negotiated a price. I told the group the price, and they said okay. They would have to pay it off in three years at 13 percent interest. That was okay. We wrote up the note, but I still couldn't say that I wanted to sell my business.

##

Wong-Vargas: To make it short, we had already named the price; everything was already arranged. The Chinese man, the partner of Carlos Keom, gave me the check for 100,000 soles for a down payment. The second would be 200,000, and then he would pay off everything. He said he had his own cook, so I had better tell my cook to find another job. Also the cashier. They did find their own jobs. I cashed the check for 100,000 soles and paid them off.

In one month they were supposed to give me the other 200,000, and they did. They came over, and he said, "But be sure, because I want to buy the property. If not, you will have to pay back the money." I said all right, and he suggested I go to a lawyer and make it legal. They gave me the 200,000 soles, but he told me not to cash it that day; to wait a week or a few days. I said that was all right, no problem; sometimes I did things like that, too. When they gave me the 100,000 soles I gave them a receipt, but I forgot to give them a receipt for the 200,000 soles.

I decided he was serious, because he had already given me 100,000, and now he was giving me another 200,000. So I went to talk with the owner and suggested that in order to make it legal, why didn't we go to the lawyer and sign the note that he was going to sell it to me at the price we already discussed. He said fine, sure, and we went and signed the note--he and myself. I represented the group.

After a week, I waited another two days, and I took the check to the bank. The bank told me they had no money. What? Then I thought maybe they forgot to deposit, and I went to find them. You know what he said? "We don't want it any more." "You what? I already signed to buy it." I

wanted to sell my business, and instead of selling I'm buying property. Can you imagine? This was close to 1967, and I had to come over here to the United States. Since in 1966 I got my resident visa, I had to return to the U.S. before one year had passed. I had no chef because he left, and the cashier didn't want to stay because he had another job close to where he lived.

I said, "You must be joking." He said, "No. I want you to give back to me the 100,000 soles." I had already paid my employees to leave out of that. Oh, I was sick. I don't know how I'm still alive, believe me. My whole body was hurting because of the shock, you know? I didn't believe it. His wife didn't want to see me. You know, you don't do that. If you are not serious, you don't play around like that.

#### Lawyer's Proposal

Nathan: There was no legal redress?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, there was, but the receipt I gave them for the 100,000 soles was only for the amount. I did not mention redress for an injustice refund. He didn't sue me, but he gave me letters from the lawyers saying he wanted the money back. I told my lawyer the whole story, and he said, "Don't worry, you only have to pay them back the 100,000 check you already cashed because they have your receipt. The 200,000 they don't have your receipt for! We can put them in jail, because we can say that they owed you, and they gave you money they don't have." I said that would be lying; I have to tell the truth. He said, "No, you tell them they owe you money; this is your money. They gave it to you. After you receive the 200,000 soles, you give them 100,000 back, the money already spent, and give me half of the other 100,000." In other words, he would keep 50,000 for his fee, and 50,000 would be for whatever I have to pay, and he would help me.

I said I couldn't do that. If I lied, I couldn't sleep; no, I couldn't. I wanted to give back the 100,000, I didn't know how, because I was saving to buy something over here in the United States. I would give it back to him, and I didn't want to see him any more in my life. I gave back a check for 100,000 soles. I didn't want to sue him, nothing. I also gave him back the 200,000 check. I'd like you to know that that's me. I said to myself that Mr. Carlos Keom would never be free in his mind because he had done that to me. After I had helped him and his family so much, he paid me back like that.

Nathan: Did you take the restaurant back?

Wong-Vargas: Of course. It was still my restaurant; I didn't give it to him yet. The lawyer said I was foolish, and that was why he took advantage of me. I said I didn't care; I didn't want trouble. I hate suing.

My cousin David Wong's wife, her name is Flora, was a very good friend of theirs. When I talked to her about this, she said, "Oh, but you are clever and you are strong. They don't have money," instead of saying how sorry she was. She was the one who recommended them to me. Also, she was the one who had been very nice to me and stayed with me when I had my babies at the clinic. Because of this case, I didn't want to see her. Now that has been so long ago, and I do visit her when I am in Lince.

So instead of selling the restaurant and coming here to the United States to buy a house, I had to buy the three shops in Lince. I still have one now.

#### Helping the Cook to buy the Restaurant

Wong-Vargas: I still had to come for keeping my resident visa, and I wondered who would cook at the restaurant. I knew one cook who used to have a restaurant, but he sold it. He was working with a tiny beer place, and I went to ask him if he could help me for one month. I asked him how much he would charge me, and he said, "No problem, I'll help you. Don't worry about money. When you come back, ask the employees how I worked, and then you pay me." Such a nice man. He did come to help me; he was the chef in the kitchen. Maria was there, and I asked her to come down and help me by keeping an eye out on things and watching. *Pobrecita*, poor Maria.

When I came back after my trip, I asked the cook if he wanted to buy the restaurant. He said, "Me? I never could buy this restaurant." I could help him buy it, I told him, but he would have to work there, because I already had La Caleta, and I couldn't be in two places. He asked, "How?" I could have kept it myself, but it was too much work. Then I knew that I wasn't very healthy. I went to the bank (I had purchased the property already) and transferred the thing. Oh, it's a long story, but to make it short, I helped him to borrow money from the bank and helped him purchase it. I told him to pay me little by little. He paid off the whole thing in three or four years, in soles; he didn't pay me in

dollars because of the devaluation of the soles. I lost a lot of that.

Nathan: Because you could not bring soles into this country?

Wong-Vargas: No, I could buy American dollars with the soles, but only with the little payments every month; this man had no money to pay off at once, so I lost a lot. He was very grateful to me. You know why I did that? Because I was grateful to him; he helped me one month and said not to worry about the salary. That made me so comfortable, and I could come over here. I was grateful, and I said, "This man is nice, and I would like to help him."

To have the restaurant, he needed money, but he didn't have it. So I did the whole job for him. I could stay with the restaurant and hire him as chef, but then I would have to be there and in La Caleta, and I had made up my mind to move to this country. I wanted to sell everything, so I told him to pay me monthly. But I didn't know the soles were going to devalue so badly over the three or four years it took him to pay me.

That was only for two stores. I still kept the other one, and I also bought the apartment upstairs. I sold that, too, because a Chinese man asked me how much it was (and also because of the soles devaluation). I said it was approximately \$10,000 US. He said, "\$10,000? Yes." Then he calculated how many soles that would be at that time. After a couple of months he came back and said he had the soles, but I told him that the dollar was already up. Instead of selling it for \$10,000, I would be selling it for about \$8,000.

I told the man I had asked for dollars. He said, "Oh, what am I going to do? I sold this and that in the north. I came back and thought I would buy the apartment." I was concerned about his situation. Maybe he had borrowed some money for it. So I sold it at \$8,000. Can you believe it? That's me, you know? I was thinking, "Oh, poor man," because I could have had the same problem. Other people wouldn't have done it. But nobody knew that the sol was going to go down like that.

My friends all told me I was so dumb. I said I was putting myself in his shoes, and his situation was very difficult. He was very grateful. Thank God, He always helped me to help others and made my business successful. His help was most important.

More on the Keom Family

Wong-Vargas: I never again saw the Keom family who backed out of the sale. I was so good to them. They were so bad off that one time that they couldn't pay for their children to finish high school. I paid a whole year for the two children, not just their tuition, but everything. Their uniforms were so old, you know what I did in one night? I turned the uniform jackets inside out. The inside was still good; it was wool. I moved the insignia; oh, you can't imagine how I did that for her daughter. This is the kind of thing only a mother would do for her children. But that was the way they paid me. Oh, my God, you learn to know people every day.

This last time I was in Peru, in '89, I knew that Carlos Keom had died, and his wife was now very sick. The children are not very nice, never call their mother or anything. I just learned this recently, when I was there in March. You know what I did? I called her. I said I never wanted to see these people again, but I called, and I wanted to help her if she needed any help from me. But she was not in, and I was returning to the United States. The next time I go back, I think I'm going to call and see if she needs something. I will help her. Because I am upset for just a very short time, and I don't believe in revenge [laughs]. If I can help her, I will help. That's my nature. I don't like myself like that, but that's me.



## X HOME BASE IN BERKELEY (1966) AND LINKS TO LIMA

Nathan: You came to Berkeley for Martha's wedding. Was that the time you decided you wanted to live here or move here?

Wong-Vargas: No. When I moved to Peru in 1950, after eighteen years in China, we stopped over in San Francisco for a few days, and I liked San Francisco. I don't know why--it has that beautiful bridge. I loved this area, so I was always dreaming that someday I would like to move here, but I knew it was very difficult. After the consul gave me the visa, in June of 1966, of course I would have liked to come over here, but I had to invest, so that's why I really made up my mind to sell my Chinese restaurant. That money would be a down payment to buy a house over here. Then I would be working with only one restaurant, and I could send money to pay down every month. That was my idea. Well, maybe that's the way it should be. So I helped the cook buy the restaurant and sold the apartment.

### Houses in Berkeley

Wong-Vargas: Anyway, when I came over here in 1966, I had looked around at the houses already. I saw this house, and I saw so many houses, in Piedmont and elsewhere, that were so reasonable. But Susy had a little problem of allergies. There was a beautiful home on the top of a hill, with a swimming pool and everything, and a beautiful kitchen. It was the price of this one, but I said no, because there was a lot of fog, and Susy would start coughing.

This house was much better, because within one block you could buy everything you wanted, and Maria could be here. It was close to the University of California, because I thought

all my children would want to go to UC Berkeley; it was a good university and so beautiful. That's why I chose this one. But this house was an estate sale. You had to go to an auction. I told Martha that I liked this one, and I told her to let me know how much it was, and I would send her the money. Of course, I thought the group was going to buy my Chinese restaurant and the property.

Nathan: This is a very lovely house.

Wong-Vargas: I love this house. My only dislike at the time was the kitchen. I've been here twenty-two years, and I haven't fixed the kitchen yet. But I'm going to do it. [laughs]

Martha called me and told me we had bought it, and I had to send \$10,000 or \$12,000 for escrow and everything, and then we had twenty years to pay. I said okay, but I couldn't send it because the group backed out of buying my restaurant. Paul, my son-in-law, was very nice, and he lent me the down payment. I came back here right away to see the house, and I told him what had happened.

In 1967 I came back here with Maria. Before that I told Martha to apply here for Maria, and in Peru the consul helped me. When Martha got married in 1966, Ines stayed here. I told Martha that I wanted Ines to stay here, because it was very expensive to take her back again to Peru. The round-trip ticket was very expensive; I don't know how I did it.

#### The Wedding, and Living Arrangements

Wong-Vargas: When I asked Martha where she would like the wedding reception, she said the Claremont Hotel. I said okay. I did bring some money from Peru, but it wasn't enough. But the reception was beautiful, and I made a dress for her. Their wedding was in Newman Hall Church in Berkeley.

We rented a house on Hearst Street at the beginning, for her wedding. The uncle from Sacramento lent me some money to pay off the bill [laughs]. Of course, I sent it back right away; that I could manage. But the down payment on the house, I couldn't. Paul said not to worry, that I could pay him in a few years. I told him he had to charge me interest, and he said no. I told him that if he didn't charge me interest, then I couldn't accept. So he respected that, and

I paid with the bank interest, which was 5 percent at that time. I paid it off, of course, later on. He was very kind to lend it to me; otherwise, I don't know what miracle I would have had to do in Peru to manage it. I was so grateful to him.

Martha married in 1966, and Ines stayed here. I thought she was going to live with Martha and Paul. They were renting a place on Hillegas. They went on a honeymoon, and I took Ines to Sacramento to stay for one month. After a month I went back to Peru, and she went to stay with Martha. After a couple of months Paul wrote me a letter and said that from now on I had to send \$90 a month to Dr. and Mrs. Spidell, where Ines was staying. Later on I learned that Paul knew him, and that he had a daughter, Mary. Dr. Spidell wanted to have a foreign student stay with them, so he said Ines could stay with them.

They charged me \$90, but I always sent \$100. Ines stayed at the Spidells'. That was Paul and Martha's idea, of course, but I didn't like it. I liked Ines to be with my daughter Martha. Recently Ines was here, and we were talking about this. She said, "Mommy, I thought you didn't like me, so you left me here, and you left me at the house of this doctor. I didn't know it was Paul and Martha's idea." Maybe it was a good idea, because they wanted Ines to learn to be independent. But on the other hand, Ines didn't have that freedom in Peru. I was crying when she told me.

Nathan: How old was Ines at that time?

Wong-Vargas: Close to fifteen. She never told me before. She said, "Mommy, you can't imagine how I suffered, because Mary Spidell was a beautiful girl. They had an airplane and everything, and I was like a *serrana* from the Sierra, and I was a little fat, too. I was so ugly, and I had glasses. I was so sad, and I was crying that Mommy didn't want me. She took Susy and Lita back to Peru and didn't take me."

#### Illness, Worry, and Prayer

Wong-Vargas: She didn't know that I didn't have that much money. I spent here for the college education, I spent here for the wedding. I worked very hard, all the time. I didn't care about my health. I would really like my children someday to know [emotionally] that I was so sick, and I thought, "If I die,

what are they going to do? Who's going to take care of them, who's going to pay for their education?"

I prayed to God. One day I really prayed, and I said, "God, if you want to take me now"--because I was sick; sometimes I couldn't breathe, and the whole body was cold. Maria always was there sitting with me.

Nathan: Did you get any medical help?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, but they said I was fine. I think it was overwork, but I don't know. I really talked with God in my own way, you know. I kneeled. I hope my children know someday. [voice breaks] I thought I was going to die. So many times I couldn't breathe. At that moment I would have to lie down, and I was so cold all over. I would just pray and pray. Then I could walk and work again. This happened very often. I went to the doctor so many times, and they said I was okay. This was in Lima.

I remember one day I really prayed to God, kneeling, "God, please listen to me. If I were to die now--don't take me now. Take me when my children are already grown and they don't need me. Even if you took me now just peacefully, without any pain"--because I couldn't breathe, and felt like I was going--"what are they going to do? I prefer a chance. Let me die from cancer. Everybody knows it is a terrible disease, but let me go from cancer or whatever your decision is. But let me finish my job with my children. Don't take me peacefully now."

I didn't have time to go out or look for a friend or anything. I just wanted to work and work [voice breaking] to give the children a good education. I hope they know it. Michael went to Markham, and you can't imagine how hard I worked to pay his tuition. Martha went to Villa Maria, and I bought a piano for her. You can't imagine how much I sacrificed. It's easy when your husband or family helps you. At least there is someone there to say something. My husband was mad: why did I buy a piano? I said it was my money, and I worked for it for my daughter. I wanted it for her because she loved the piano; she loved music. Through music she met Paul, you know.

I fought with my father, also, because of my children. I didn't want to take them to the north to go to those little schools. I wonder if my children know? I know all parents

love their children, but the way I did--I don't think so. Up to now I never met any lady who gave her life for her children like I did. Believe me. I know so many people who love their children, but they also have to think about themselves. For me, I never cared for myself, only my children, to this day. If they are happy, I am so happy. I am never jealous, never, never. When I visit Martha's house, I always say Thank God. Always.

Now Ines has a house that is very nice also.

Nathan: Does Ines live here?

Wong-Vargas: Very close. She comes to visit and sometimes for swimming. She is expecting a baby now. Oh, yes. Susy is also expecting a baby. This is beautiful.

Nathan: This is your reward. Did Susy go to UC Berkeley?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Susy and Lita went to Cal for some classes when they were in high school. They had very good marks, and the teacher said they could attend some extra classes at UC Berkeley.

Nathan: Oh, yes. That's advanced placement?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Michael went to UCLA and then got his Master's and Ph.D. at Harvard. He got a scholarship, and of course I helped on the side. He is very clever.

### Rebellion

Wong-Vargas: Ines I had a problem with. That's why yesterday we were talking about it. She didn't want to study. Oh, you can't imagine the problem I had with Ines. After she was here for a year we moved here, in 1967, with Maria, so of course she came home and lived with us and went to Berkeley High. She said she didn't like me at that time, because she thought I only like Lita and Susy. And she said that Martha and Paul didn't like her because they put her in that doctor's house. She said she went through some *rebeldes*; she wanted to join the hippies, she went to play frisbee with the group. She wanted to do something that would hurt me. And she did hurt me.

I knelt and prayed to God, "Please help me with my daughter Ines." She liked to go out by herself. I was always worried and crying. Where was Ines? I never knew where she was. Oh, I was so sad. She had always been the first in her class in Peru, all during elementary school. Yesterday she told me [she was acting this way] because she thought I didn't like her.

Children's Nature and Education##

Nathan: You were saying that Ines turned out to be a good lawyer?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. She is a good lawyer. At that time I didn't know what to do. Finally I decided to take her back to Peru for one year, then brought her back here, and she finished high school in Holy Names High School. Then she went to UC Santa Cruz to study, and now she is a very good lawyer.

Nathan: Did she go to Hastings?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, she went to Hastings Law School. Yesterday she was crying, you know, because she is expecting a baby. She said, "Now I know a little bit about what you always were thinking about us, because now I'm thinking of my future baby." That's the way it is. So I'm very happy. She said, "Then I know that you really love me, Mommy." I told her I didn't have money enough, and I didn't ask Martha to take her to Dr. Spidell's house. Maybe they thought she should be on her own, because Americans are like that. She was only fifteen, and I would have much preferred that she stayed with Martha and Paul. Then she would know the sister's love, because she always admired Martha and still does now.

Ines is very sentimental. She doesn't care about money that much. For her, she wants to be happy. When she loves someone, even if a person has nothing, she would marry that person. Just happiness. She never thinks about whether he is a rich person or not. No, never. All my children are like that. I think when Martha married Paul she didn't know whether he had money or not; she was just in love. That's important. You love the person, not the money.

But Ines is extremely generous--just gives it away like this [gestures].

Nathan: Now, where do you suppose she got that trait? [laughter]

Wong-Vargas: Some maybe from me. When she was in Peru, she went to La Caleta and borrowed some money and bought a refrigerator. She gave it to Corinna's son Humberto because he had a baby and didn't have a refrigerator to preserve the milk. So I told her she was different from me, because I am generous with my own money; you are generous with somebody else's money. [laughter]

Lita is very clever, and Susy also. They both graduated from Holy Names High School here in Oakland. Lita won a scholarship to Stanford. She was very smart. Of course, I helped her later on in getting her Master's degree. Susy went to UCLA, and for her Master's degree she went to Harvard University. I also helped her. At UCLA Susy worked and had some scholarship. They are both clever, and they really wanted to do something in life.

I don't know if they still remember or not, but I remember one time, when I went to study interior design after I got a divorce, I told them that I had a business, I had children, but I still wanted to have my profession. And they had their mother here, who was going to pay everything for them: "Do you mean you are not going to be a professional? There is no excuse." I told them, "I don't need you to help me in the restaurant, because anybody can work in a restaurant." It's not necessary to go to school for that. Of course, if you go to school it's much better, for cooking or things like that. If one of them had liked the restaurant business, maybe I would send them to Switzerland to learn how to be a good chef--that would be like a profession--or hotel management, but none of them did. Martha's major at UC Berkeley was political science, and her master's was in education for underdeveloped countries. Michael had a clinical psychology Ph.D. at Harvard; now he's an M.D. Ines is a lawyer, and Lita is an industrial engineer with a Master's in engineering at Stanford. Susy's B.A. is in international studies, and her Master's degree at Harvard is in economics.

So none of them is a restaurateur, but now Susy is doing wholesale wine and French restaurant business in Sydney, Australia. Economics is also business, right?

When we moved to this area, Maria was taking care of the children, and I went back to Peru--back and forth for

twenty-two years. I got my visa in 1966, and in 1967 I bought this house. So I've had this house for twenty-two years, and I've had the visa for twenty-three years. The children were doing very well, and they all graduated. I was so happy. Maria loved Susy very much, so later on, I asked her to be Susy's confirmation godmother. Both of them were pleased.

### Managing La Caleta to Stay Longer in Berkeley

Wong-Vargas: I didn't tell you about how I could manage La Caleta and still come over here and stay a little bit longer. Lita and Susy, when they were little, were always crying. When I had to go back to Peru, for a week before they would both sit at the top of the stairs (*escalera*) over there and cry, "Mommy, why do you have to go?" Both of them crying, and especially Lita; she cried so much. Well, the youngest is Susy, but Lita cried more. I used to tell Maria, "Oh, I wish I could sell the business and stay here for good," but at that time nobody wanted to buy it.

When I had my Chinese restaurant, Mr. Lopez had been very kind to me, and I remembered him. We became friends. His wife had died.

Nathan: Is he the one who is the manager of La Caleta?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, later on. He was a friend, and he seemed very honest. I helped him, indirectly, pay some of the doctor bills for his wife, and then she died. I also helped his son go to the Maryknoll School, because I promised his wife I would help her son. I told her I would talk to the priest, and later on she died. So I had to keep my promise. I did; I talked to Lopez and told him I could help him. I took this boy every day for three months to Miss Betty's house to study English in Barranco. She was a teacher at the Maryknoll School, so I took him to her to prepare him to pass the examination. And he did; he passed, and I paid for it. When Mr. Lopez asked me how much it cost, I said nothing, because I knew he was poor. So I helped this man to work at La Caleta. He was very nice at the beginning, and he helped me. When Susy was sick, he said he had a cousin who was a doctor, and he took Susy with Miss Wong (the one who lent me money; the one who lives in Canada--Cecilia). They both took Susy when I was busy with the restaurant.



I asked Mr. Lopez one day if he could help me in La Caleta, and he said he knew nothing about restaurants. I said, "You work until one o'clock in the afternoon, then you go home to have lunch, and by five o'clock you are free." He said yes, and then I asked him what he did at night. He said he didn't do anything, just stayed at home. I said, "Okay, then come and help me at La Caleta. I will pay you, and you can keep an eye on the people," because he was supposed to be my friend.

He said, "Of course I will do it, and you don't have to pay me." I said I had to pay him. He seemed so honest and so clean--so clear inside. But the power of money is so bad, even worse than a poison, I think. My, this man changed later on; you can't imagine. He was so nice when he had nothing. When you have something, and you are still nice, that's really a nice person. When you don't have money, it's easy to say you can help someone with \$1,000, \$2,000 if you had the money; but when you have money, would you be willing to do it? That's important.

So Mr. Lopez was very nice and said he would help me. The maitre d' (who came from Todo Fresco seafood restaurant) was Oscar Romero, and the accountant was Augustin Arce. I remember their names because they really were very mean later on. They had experience, and Mr. Lopez had none. So I lied a little bit and told them that Mr. Lopez had lent me money one time--like he was not poor--and I was very grateful to him. I told them that he knew nothing about restaurants, but he was going to help me at night--from 6 o'clock until closing time at 11:30 or 12 o'clock. So they thought he had money and had lent me some at one time. But he never did; on the contrary, I helped him. I took his brother out of jail two times--oh, I helped him.

His mother--poor old woman, I think she died at 105 years old, just last year--she liked to knit. She knitted a beautiful table cloth and a lot of things. She said, "I need money. Could you please help me sell these?" I said sure, and I bought them all. You know, I still have everything from her, because, poor lady, she was old, and who would buy those things? Where would I sell them? At the restaurant? No. So I bought everything that she made, and I still have them.

So I helped the whole family. They used to like me. I don't know about now. The daughter came to see me--it's a long story--when she was young, and she said, "My father

spent a lot of time in your restaurant." I said yes, but I paid him; he was earning money.

Martha was maybe a little jealous at the beginning because of this man. He was older than myself, but he was very kind, doing things like taking Susy to the doctor. I am still grateful and always remember how nice he was to Lita and Susy. Lita was heavy, and he would carry her; it was not easy. Sometimes he invited us to have tea and things like that. He was really kind at the beginning. I trusted him, and they liked him, so it was okay. Then I could spend more time with my children in California, and I was so relieved.

### Working as a Secretary in San Francisco

Wong-Vargas: Then I found a job over here as a secretary in San Francisco. I couldn't sit home doing nothing, so I looked in a Chinese newspaper. They were looking for a secretary who knew Chinese and English. Of course, my Chinese was much better, but anyway--[laughs]. I went for an interview, and they hired me. The name was Hopkins Development, on Stockton close to Washington Street in Chinatown. They paid me \$6 an hour, I remember. It was good. I had never worked as a secretary, but I knew that they had buildings and remodeled houses. I thought of my interior design, and I thought maybe I would have time to do something with it on this job.

I accepted the job, but on the first day I was ready to quit, because it was a lot of work. I thought I was only a secretary, but I had to collect rent, because they managed houses. I had to do a statement in Chinese and English every month; I had to deposit money every day. They had eight or ten salesmen--it was also a real estate office--and I had to do the payroll. I said, "Payroll?" I learned how to do that in Peru, but it was different from here. I didn't think I could do it, and I thought I would quit after one week. But after a week, I thought better I should stay one month. I stayed longer and longer, until I was there quite a few years with them.

I talked to them and told them that I had to go to Peru for at least two or three months out of the year. They asked which months I wanted to be gone, and they suggested I choose June, July, and August, because they had a niece at the

university. She was on vacation then, and she could do my work. So that's what I did. I worked for them for three years, I think, and I became good friends with all of them. They always said, "Why don't you study real estate?" I should have done that. I said I couldn't because I had the children here, and I liked to sew their dresses and to be with them, and I had to go to Peru; you can't do everything.

I wanted to buy something, and I purchased an old house on College Avenue. I renovated it, and then I sold it. I didn't want to sell it, but nobody helped me at that time. I was going to rent it. But the children were small, and Martha was busy. No, I couldn't. I remember Martha told me one day that Paul didn't think real estate was a good investment, but I always liked real estate.

I was talking about Lopez; I was going back and forth between the U.S. and Peru. Paul was very nice; he gave me a roundtrip ticket two or three times as a gift. At that time it cost about \$300-\$350; it was very reasonable. I am really so grateful to him. Paul is a very good man, a very good Catholic, a very good husband and father to the children. I think he is almost perfect; I think he's about 95 percent perfect, believe me. Some people who have money, they aren't concerned about others.

I do that, too. I don't think I could tell you in two hours how many people I have helped with money, and they never paid me back. But it's okay. I'm grateful to whoever has helped me. Are people grateful to me? I don't know. Maybe they are; you can't tell. But at the moment when I help, I just want to help, and that's it. I always told my children that they have to remember Paul, because he has been more than a father to them. Not even their father was so nice to Lita and Susy. Paul always worried about them and asked them if they would like to play the piano or violin. One time he paid for piano lessons for several months. I began to feel bad about it, and I said if I could do it, to let me pay for them.

I took my two daughters to Japan and Hong Kong in 1975. I didn't take Ines; she was at Santa Cruz at that time. I purchased the tickets in Peru and joined the tour in San Francisco. So Lopez--well, we were talking about Lopez. Lopez had to pay for the tickets for us with the soles from my restaurant, La Caleta. Since that was the tour, he also bought his ticket to join us in California.

La Caleta and the Ownership Scheme

Wong-Vargas: I went back a couple of times to Lima, and then the military took over. Lopez said, "You know, when you are not here, they are asking for the owner all the time. So why don't we do something under the table, like saying you are renting the place to us." He had become friends already with Romero and Arce. Because I was not there, they did whatever they wanted to do.

I would ask them how the business was doing, and they would say it was more or less okay. Then I had to pay this and pay that, because in order to open La Caleta I had to buy things on credit; I couldn't pay everything at once. So I was not losing money, but earning a little. I had to pay the employees, too. I would look at the books, but I didn't have time to go over them one by one. Even now, I can't look at the receipts one by one. You have to trust people. I trusted him; believe me, I really trusted him.

You have to trust your employees. I trust Maria. If I have to worry about what she's going to do, then I couldn't sleep. I trusted Lopez. He suggested this idea of saying I was renting to them, and a lawyer wrote it up like I was leasing to the three of them. They were the owners of the business, in other words. It was 1,000 soles symbolic payment, you know. I was also a little bit clever, and I talked to a lawyer. I told him the restaurant did not belong to them; it was mine. The lawyer said I could do another document, a contract, saying that they had nothing, that I was doing this because of the political situation, and they were my employees. The three of them signed that, too.

When people came around, then, looking for the owner, they would say they were the owners. I was scared the other two would throw Lopez out, so I said there was one condition: if one person for some reason went out of the business, the contract would expire. If, for example, Lopez didn't want to work any more for some reason, the other two couldn't do it. I didn't know that Lopez was with them.

To make it short, do you know what they did? They recorded the document that I signed to make it legal--behind my back. That I will never forget. I forgive them, but I still remember. So it was legal, but I didn't know it. At that time I didn't know that I had to register the La Caleta

name. I had never registered it, because I thought La Caleta was my restaurant. Arce, the accountant, went to register La Caleta in his own name. Since he was one of the owners, they accepted it, of course. And I signed the symbolic contract. It was my fault, too, but I thought it was just something to be kept under the table in case somebody came by looking for the owner. I would never, never think that they were going to make it legal.

### The Contract, and La Barca Restaurant

Wong-Vargas: See, they took advantage of me. That's very bad. About six months later I went back, and Lopez told me I was going to be a godmother. I thought somebody had gotten married or something, but he said no, it was a new restaurant. I asked whose restaurant this was, and he said, "Ours. The maitre d', Oscar, and myself, Lopez." I said, "You mean you opened a restaurant? How come?" He said Oscar went back to his village and sold the land. I wasn't going to find out whether this was true or not, but I did believe it. That's my problem, too; I really believed that he sold the land. Lopez would not lie to me. I could see that he and his family were very nice to me when I came back. As a good friend, he would never do that to me.

After I became U.S. resident in 1966, I went back to Lima. I had more time, and Lopez taught me to dance. We went with groups to parties, and I realized that I really liked to dance; it was good exercise. I hadn't had any other opportunity. Oh, I did in Hong Kong one time, when my cousin David taught me, but I didn't think that I liked it then. But now I thought it was really good, because it was good exercise. That's my Latin part, I think. My friends invited me to parties when I went back, and time would fly, and then it would be time to go back again.

When I went to Lima to see my restaurant, I lived with the Señora Corinna Chang at that time. She is Lita's godmother. Corinna's daughter Alicia is in Germany now. I hadn't purchased my apartment yet. Why should I purchase an apartment when I was just a few months over there?

Nathan: Yes. Let's get back to what happened at La Caleta.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, Lopez. I asked him what kind of restaurant he was opening, and he said a seafood restaurant. I said, "Seafood restaurant?" He copied mine exactly. He could have put a meat restaurant or something else. I asked him, "How could you do that to me? Why didn't you write to me and let me know? I was here a few months ago. I don't think you put the whole thing together since then. You must have been planning it a year ahead."

He said, "Well, in the beginning we were just talking about it. And then I knew that you have children, and I didn't want to bother you with this thing. Besides, if I didn't join Oscar, he would find somebody else 'even worse'. Then I couldn't keep an eye on him. At least now, if I am with him, I know that he will not take your clients to his restaurant." It was in San Isidro, but a little bit farther away.

I didn't like it. After he said I would be the godmother, I prayed to God. I knew that Oscar was a very good maitre d'. People liked to see him. He looks a little bit like the tango person who died, Rudolfo Valentino ; he even combed his hair like him. He was tall and handsome, and attends you very well. I thought he would take all my clients away.

I bought Jesus of the Sacred Heart as a gift, and I went for the opening. I saw that they had copied everything--the same chairs, the same style. The only difference was that they had a carpet. They always told me to put in a carpet, but I didn't. I put in only a cheap carpet, what we call *tapison*. Later on I put a carpet, but at that time I only had *tapison*. The chairs were exactly the same model. They called the restaurant La Barca (The Boat)--La Caleta, La Barca.

I went to the opening with Corinna, and I left. I didn't even want to eat anything. I asked God to please not have them take my business away, because what would I do?

Nathan: Were you a partner in La Barca?

Wong-Vargas: No, no, no. It was only Lopez and Romero and a waiter from the same village of Romero who had some money. The third one, Arce, went with somebody else in Miraflores to open another one.

Oscar Romero was now--well, you can imagine him going from being a maitre d' to being an owner of a restaurant. He bought a second-hand car. You know where the money came from. Oh. (Lopez would drive my car, because somebody had to drive it, and I had no garage.) Romero was so happy, and he drank so much, that he died in a car accident one month after opening his restaurant. I was so sorry, because he was a nice man. The viuda (his widow) came to tell me everything that I'm going to tell you now.

What they did, with that little contract they went to the bank. They said, "La Caleta is going to open another restaurant--the second La Caleta, but the name is going to be La Barca." According to the contract, they were the owners, and I wasn't there, so the bank believed the three of them. They borrowed over a million soles. They gave part of it to Arce, who went with another group, and the other two thirds went to Lopez and Romero. Ah, I could kill them, but anyway--I don't know how I didn't die with the anger. They would buy something and pay every month with La Caleta's money. I know they paid the advertising with La Caleta money, because I accidentally saw the receipt.

Then I knew the whole situation--that everything for La Barca is from La Caleta. It was not from Lopez, who said he was retired and not working with city hall anymore. He said he had a lot of money from city hall, and I didn't know. I'm not the kind of person who goes and finds out, because I trusted this man.

I told Lopez that Romero's wife told me everything, and I asked him how he could do that to me. "I helped you so much, and you do this to me? You could have told me and borrowed from me." I had helped him to buy his home before this. He moved to a big house, and I paid the down payment for him and then discounted it from his earnings at La Caleta. He lives now in that same house. How much must it be worth now? I helped him buy that house.

##

Wong-Vargas: The contract said that if one person was leaving or missing, the contract was expired. Believe me, if it had not been my own property they would really have gotten me out, because I had already signed a lease to them, and they just kept paying rent to the owner. But since I was the owner of the property, I could say no or give them maybe one more year and then have them get out. They could have taken everything,

and I would have nothing. Can you believe that? So that is why I don't have only one manager now, and I don't give any power of attorney to anybody in Lima any more.

You know what Lopez said to me? He said, "I've been in love with you for so many years, and I'm a poor man; I have nothing. So I thought that with this thing I could have some money that I could offer you in the future." I said, "You mean, you open my handbag, you steal my money, and you buy me flowers with it? You better just go out and give me one little leaf that is really from you." I said, "Even if you are an ideal man I had married, after you did this to me I would divorce you right away. I don't believe such a poor and vague excuse as you have. You stole--" Of course, he didn't actually take the money, but he went to the bank and did the legal maneuvers. I asked how he could do that to a friend who had helped him and had helped his family in so many ways. Oh, you can imagine the way that I was upset. I could have lost everything.

#### Power of Attorney

Wong-Vargas: I went to a lawyer, and he asked me why I had signed the contract. I said it was because I trusted this man. I also gave him my power of attorney. That was my problem, too. The lawyer told me that you don't give power of attorney like this one even to your son, because he might marry, and you never know what his wife might be like. Maybe you know your son, but after he gets married he will be with his wife. Like Lopez, he never had money before, and now he was around money every day and it didn't cost him anything. He would open his eyes--money, money, money, and that's it.

In Peru some men have a woman here and a woman there. His wife had died, so why not? I gave him an opportunity to work in my restaurant, and he had money to spend with women. So it was my fault to sign that contract, and also my fault to give him power of attorney. I learned a big lesson, and since then I have never given power of attorney to anybody.

Romero's widow told me I had to pay her something, or otherwise she wouldn't sign the contract back to me. Oh. Lopez signed it back, but the widow didn't want to. She said I had to give her a certain amount to pay off the debt, because they had to pay the bank every month. They had already paid a lot, but later on who was going to pay? Romero died, but she still had to pay to the bank for Romero's share. So I did have to pay her.



Buying Back the Name of La Caleta

Wong-Vargas: Then I learned that the accountant opened a restaurant in Miraflores with somebody else. I don't know what trick he did, but they put him in jail because he owed money. He found a lawyer to sue Lopez and involve La Caleta. La Caleta was in my name, but I had to explain how had I signed the lease to them, but that I was the one responsible for La Caleta.

Then I learned that when the three of them were together at La Caleta, if they sold a million soles, they only registered 700,000. They took one hundred thousand for each, so only 70 percent was registered. I never did that, but they did because they wanted to cheat me and the government. And this man wanted to sue La Caleta for cheating the government. Can you imagine? He sued Lopez, not La Caleta.

So I had to find a lawyer to help Lopez to stay out of jail, because La Caleta was mine. I was the one who had to pay Arce the money to buy back the name of La Caleta, because he registered it in his own name. I think I paid close to half a million soles to buy back the La Caleta name; otherwise I would have to change the name. So I had to pay him and pay the widow. I told Lopez he'd better go. But if he went, how could I leave my business and come to the United States? So I told him to wait until I came back the next time. So he was there, and I put my cousin Julio in there to help me keep an eye on Lopez, because he still had his own restaurant.

They took away my second chef, and they took away my second bartender when they opened La Barca. I had two very good waiters who had been working with me since the Chinese restaurant, and they fired them before opening the restaurant. They fired them on purpose so they couldn't tell me the things that they were doing. Oh, it was terrible.

I had to come back here to see Lita and Susy, and then I went back to Peru. I said to Lopez, "That's it. You have your own restaurant; I'm sorry, go back to your restaurant." When he told me he did all this because he loved me, I told him that I liked him--not like falling in love. He was short and from the Sierra, but he was so honest. I told him, "I was thinking, because you were so nice to my children and

helped me with my business, that someday, when they are all grown up, maybe I would join with you." It would be like just good friendship. "But after you did this, and everything to me, our friendship died here." I didn't want to see him anymore.

Nathan: Were you able to put La Caleta back together?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, because they signed back. The widow signed because I paid her the money, and the man signed also, and I bought the name back; so everything was in my name. Lopez left, and I hired another person. Then it was back and forth between here and there for twenty-two years. The Lopez unfaithfulness affair happened about eighteen years ago.

I never liked to register less sales than I took in. Also the whiskey, Black and White has to be Black and White. But some businessmen are not like that. Even my bartender said, "Why don't we change the labels on the bottles?" I said no. So they know me. The name is more important than anything. My restaurant, La Caleta, after twenty four years still has a good name because I am honest and never cheat. If we don't have something, I'll tell you, and that's it. Everything has to be correct. It has to be good, and good quality. I don't mind if I don't earn that much; I don't really care about it. I like to see the place full of people, of course; I don't want to lose my capital.

Business was very good because of the food. A lot of businessmen, people from the government, and politicians came. Also, Lima is not very big. It has had so many new restaurants, but my La Caleta is still there; the name is still very well known. One time the Pan Am World Guide mentioned my restaurant. They really respect the restaurant. For example, the president, Belaunde, would always come there, but not during the presidency, because he was so busy. Right now a few very high-level politicians come, not the president, but the ministry.

An Apartment in Lima

Nathan: You keep your property there in Lima as well as whatever you have here?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and a few years ago I purchased an apartment in Lima. Corinna moved to a very nice area in Monte Rico, which is far away from Lima. I had to be there to close the restaurant; at that time I always worked until the last minute, 12:30 or 1 o'clock at night. It was dark when I went home, even though it was a very nice area. I made up my mind to purchase an apartment for myself, and I did. It's in the Avenida El Golf, San Isidro, a very nice area. It's on the twelfth floor, and I have a beautiful golf club view. If I'm not there, I just lock it up. We have 24-hour security.

When I stayed with Corinna, I wanted to learn to play the guitar or something else. She said, "Why do you want to learn this?"

Nathan: Did you learn to play the guitar?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, a little bit, but I didn't have time to practice. Now, with my own apartment, I can go home and relax and do whatever I want to do. When I stayed with Corinna, they wouldn't accept payment, but I always paid it in some way; I would buy them some carpet, or this and that. I couldn't live there without paying anything. That's me.

Nathan: Do you have a maid?

Wong-Vargas: No. But when I'm there I hire someone once a week to help me. One time I was there close to four months, quite a long time ago, and I took a course in restaurant management. I had never taken a course like that, so I took one for four months. I met a lot of people who had restaurants. I learned my own way, but if you take a course it's so different. They told us how to calculate sales. I do it my own way, but when you learn about it, the prices have to be much higher. If I did it the way we were taught, I would have to raise the price; otherwise you don't earn that much. But for me it doesn't matter, because the restaurant is always full. You might earn 20 or 30 percent, but the restaurant would be empty. I prefer it to be full of people. They have to make a reservation to get in, always a reservation for lunch.

In 1975 I expanded the other side and made it just like one big restaurant with carpeting. It was also full and required reservations. It seated over two hundred people. In the beginning there were only about eighty seats. Over two hundred seats full at lunchtime. Believe me, it was so nice. Dinner wasn't that full, but lunch was always full.

Now it's very different. We're full on Mother's Day or Father's Day, perhaps. Before, Fridays were always full, and Sundays also. But now the situation has changed so much. You don't want to go out; it's very expensive--the devaluation. Last year, 1988, there was over 1,000 percent devaluation. And I was told that inflation was 1,800 percent. It's too much.

#### Supporting the Asilo

Wong-Vargas: I've been jumping around quite a bit. You asked me about the *asilo* [asylum] for the older people. That was a few years ago. I always helped the nuns. I changed accountant quite a number of years ago. I use a Chinese-Peruvian, and he also takes care of the nuns of the *asilo*. They call it the *Asilo de los Ancianos de Desamparados*. These are the old people who have nobody to take care of them. It's very well known in Lima. The principal one is in Lima, and there is one in Callao. The one I am helping is in Chacayo, close to Chosica, as if you were going to the center of Lima. The weather is very warm there. The nuns are from Spain and Peru, and they are doing a very good job.

My accountant takes care of them, and he asked me one day if I wanted to help them. I said sure, and he helped me to donate some money to them. This was eight or ten years ago. One of the nuns is Sor [Sister] Susana, and she wanted to meet me. She is the Mother Superior. One day she came with another nun to see me. She asked me to come and visit, because I had never seen the place when I was helping them. I thought it was a good idea, so I went with my accountant to see them. It was beautiful. There were all these old ladies there on the women's side, and everything was very clean. There were a lot of them, and some were very old. Some might have had families who paid a small amount, and some didn't pay anything. The sisters all worked there giving them food, and there also was a little clinic.

The other side was for men. I saw two gentlemen sleeping close to the garage door. I asked why they were sleeping there, and they said it was because they hadn't finished the men's side. The women's side had been there for a long time. The Monsignor, Carlos Maria Jurgens, started to build (around 1979-1980) another side for fifty men. Money was donated here and there, and they had already built a shell, but they needed wood for windows, doors, and floors, tiles, paint, closets, etc. They needed a lot of things. The Monsignor died, so nobody was doing anything. The nuns didn't know how they were going to finish. I asked how much it cost, to at least tell me how much it would cost to finish. The nun said, "Do you mean it?" Maybe I couldn't do it, but I had friends who might like to help. So she told me. In dollars it was about \$40,000 altogether. I said, "No way; I couldn't help that much." That was a lot of money. She said she understood, but I had asked for their needs and she gave them to me.

I said I would talk to people, and I asked which thing they needed to pay the most, because she had to pay some things that they hadn't finished paying, too. Some flooring had already been ordered, but they had to pay for it in order to get it. She told me which one was most important, and I said I would help them pay that one, and I did. Later on she told me that she prayed to God, "Please, God, help me find somebody to help me pay for this." She told me that God had sent her to me.

At that time I had two checks. They called it like a CD, but you had to change it every three months. We call it a *certificado*, a certificate of money. My name was on the certificate, of course. I had two certificates that had already expired, so I had to go to the bank to change the date again, because they give you interest every three months. Then they add the interest to the principle, and then they give you a new certificate. My two certificates were for \$50,000 that I had in savings, earning interest in Peru.

I sent my secretary to the bank, and when he came out of the bank someone stole the money--everything, including the \$50,000. I called the bank right away and said to stop payment, so the thieves could never use the certificate money. I couldn't believe it. Then in the afternoon somebody called and said, "I found some papers. I think they belong to you." Nobody could use them anyway, so the man brought them back. There were also soles, but the soles were never given back. The two certificates were given back to me the same day. I asked the man who returned them what he

would like; would he like money or a watch? He said he would like a watch, so I gave him a watch in gratitude.

I decided I was going to help the *asilo* little by little, and I did. I helped them finish. I didn't want anything, I just wanted to help. The accountant said I must be crazy. I said I liked to help them finish, because I remembered the old men sleeping in the garage. I was thinking about the old people who have nowhere to go. I helped them finish the windows, the floor, and I always went to wholesale factories to purchase everything. I went to choose the tile. The nuns always like something like blue, and I said no, why not something different? So we bought a champagne color for the second floor. It was very nice. We went to wholesale factories, so we could reduce the cost of the project.

They were so grateful, of course. I told them to just come over, and I would pay, not at once, but little by little. It's very nice. They have a little private room for the people who can pay. It's like a big closet, but it is private. The people who cannot pay stay eight to ten people in a room.

They asked me to be the godmother, and a doctor was the godfather. I went to the inauguration with a friend, Mrs. Li. I remember one of my children was there, but I didn't ask her to go because it was just the opening, you know. I didn't even take a camera or anything; I just went to be a godmother. A lot of people were there from that area. They opened the first floor with a little curtain in front of a picture. The godmother and the godfather pulled the curtain to open them, so everyone could see the picture of the Monsignor. He had passed away, but they remembered him; he was the one who founded it.

Then we went to the second floor, and there was another curtain over another picture. We pulled it open, and there was my picture. I was scared when I saw a picture of myself. It said "For gratitude." My picture is still there.

Nathan: Was it a photograph?

Wong-Vargas: It was this big [demonstrates]--huge. Then they put, "Isabel Wong," etc. I asked where they got a picture of me, because I was a little bit fat in it. They said the accountant went to my restaurant and got a little picture which they enlarged.

Nathan: Oh, that's wonderful.

Wong-Vargas: I told them that, first of all, I'd like to change the picture. [laughs] Secondly, I'd like to add "Vargas" also. Because I am Wong-Vargas. I remembered my mother, you know. They promised to do that, but it's still the same; I didn't give them another picture, and it still says "Isabel Wong" on the second floor.

I also donated chairs, so they have a little hall. I have been there quite a few times. I always visit them when I go to Lima. The Mother Superior is still there, and she always remembers, "Isabel, you helped us." I just like to help, because God helped me. I always prayed to God to help me to be able to help other people who might need my help. I'm always so happy when I go there: "Oh, the godmother is coming."

There is an old lady there who is blind, and she plays the piano beautifully. She knows that I like music, and when I go there she always plays piano for me. Her name is Zoila. It's very nice to be able to help. Next time I will tell you about helping the children. I like to help them, too.

#### Some Personal Ambitions

[Interview 10: July 31, 1989]##

Wong-Vargas: When I was young, my wish was that one day I would like to sing. I loved the song "Ave Maria," and I said that some day I would love to learn how to sing. I don't have a good voice, but I love it. I loved to play the piano, but I couldn't even touch it because the school wouldn't let me in the room. The school had a special room to teach piano to students, and if you were not a piano student you could not get in, so I couldn't even touch the piano. Now I have a piano, and I'm starting to learn. I took a few lessons, but I didn't concentrate. I'm going to. But sing, yes.

When I was young I wanted to be a medical doctor, but I couldn't because the Japanese took over Hong Kong, and I had to stop studying. Education is very important. I like music, I like art. I also like embroidering. I promised also to God that someday I would embroider the Sacred Heart--the face. When I do that, I'm going to pray to thank

Him for everything. This is my desire, but I have not done it yet.

When I was in Peru a few years ago, I went to learn how to paint "mosaicos"--tiles. I did paint the Sacred Heart. I also learned how to sing. In the beginning I didn't know about my voice, but when I got there the teacher, a friend, realized I was a soprano. I have a very high voice when I sing.

Nathan: Your speaking voice is low.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, very low. She tested my voice, and I couldn't sing when it was low, but when it was higher it was very natural for me. It's unbelievable. I told her I wanted to learn first the "Ave Maria" of Schubert, and then Gounod also. In my first recital, in a small hall in San Isidro with a group of my teacher's students, the first song I sang was "Ave Maria." When I was singing, I just felt like I was praying; I was not afraid at all. So many people were there, but I just wanted to sing "Ave Maria." My teacher introduced me very beautifully. She told how when I was young I wanted to sing "Ave Maria," and now--it was very nice.

Now when I go to Peru for only one month, I don't have time to go to classes. I'm so busy, and also in the last two or three years it's a little difficult because of the security. If I left my car outside there, somebody might steal it, so I did not go. In San Francisco I went a few times to a very good voice teacher, and then Maria got sick; she couldn't talk. So how was I going to sing? I had to practice at home; I would be singing, and she couldn't even talk? I didn't want to do that. So for almost two years I haven't taken singing lessons, but I still like to sing.

Nathan: Do you think that you will go back to it?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I will, because I enjoy singing. This is for me. I would also like to go to work for at least one year with the Peace Corps, wherever they send me--maybe India, I don't mind.

Nathan: With your Spanish language, do you think they might send you to Latin America?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, maybe so. Or China also. Whatever, I'd really like to do that for myself. Of course, I also would like to meet somebody who is nice and Catholic, a friend that I could go



out with or travel together. But a good friend is difficult to find. This all depends on God.

For my children, the most important thing I thought about when they were young was a good education, to be at least a university graduate, and of course much better would be a Master's degree. Much better than a Master's degree would be a Ph.D. The second thing I thought about was that I would like to take them to China and to the small village, Mausan, where my father took me. I wanted to explain to them where my father took me, and for how long, and yet now I am here, but only with God's help.

Then I'd like to send them to Europe, because Europe has a very rich culture--art, everything. I'd like them to go to Europe to at least know another world. These were my wishes for them. The last thing was to help them buy a house or apartment. I don't have that much savings, but what I have I'd like to use to help them with the down payment. A house is very important. If you own your own home, you can rent a room to somebody. At least you have a place to go. Otherwise it is very difficult, because if someone kicks you out, you don't know where to go.

Thank God, I've done everything I wanted to for my children. And for myself, I'd like to write a book. [laughs] That's the last thing I would love to do.

Nathan: What would it be about?

Wong-Vargas: The story of my life. Everybody has their own story. My story is about Peru, China, and here in California. Most importantly, I'd like my children to know about it, and also my friends and people in general. If you do the right thing and work hard, you can raise your children like I did. It was not easy. When new friends come to visit me, they think my husband gave this house to me. My work. You can't imagine my sacrifice, my health. But thank God I passed through all those difficult times, and now I'm in good health.

Nathan: Do you consider your home to be here in Berkeley now?

Wong-Vargas: I guess now it's in Berkeley, because all my children are here, and they are my family. For me they are my only family. The other family I have is my stepmother, stepbrothers, and stepsisters, but that's different. I've been here in Berkeley for twenty-two years already.

Land and Money Tied Up in Lima

Nathan: When you came here, did you feel you wanted to do some investing to buy real estate, or a restaurant, or some venture?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. For twenty-two years I've wanted to open a restaurant here; then I would sell my restaurant in Lima and concentrate on this country. It's very difficult spending a few months here, a few months over there; I can't do anything here nor over there. When I am in Lima, I feel I have to get back to the United States; when I'm here, I think about the business I have in Peru.

But whenever I go to Peru, I realize that I bought the land for my restaurant and everything little by little--just like you are knitting your sweater. You don't want to give it away just like that; even if it is old, you save it. But if somebody gave it to you, or you just purchased it, you don't feel the work that you put into it yourself, so it would be much easier to just sell it at any price. But mine is different. I will not sell it so cheap, so I keep arranging, decorating, maintaining, so that the restaurant has become very successful.

A few years ago I almost sold the business, but, again, I was very sentimental. I don't know why, but if I had it to do again, I think I would change. They would have paid me a very good price. When I bought the land twenty-seven years ago, it was about \$26 a square meter, and I paid it off in five years; over there they give you three or five years to pay, but never twenty years, like over here. Then I built on the land, little by little, and paid that off in three years also. Here it is so different.

Now the land, five years ago, costs \$1,000 a square meter. Twenty-seven years ago there was nothing there; it was just like the hacienda, nothing. The only thing there was a drive-in cinema in front. But now it is a beautiful area and is in a very good location. We have a beautiful bank across the avenue, Continental Bank. I have 1,700 square meters, so there's \$1,700,000 right there. But I didn't want to sell it. [laughs] The Arabian bank wanted to buy the land to build a bank.

On the other hand, the Peruvian bank, with a group of builders, wanted to work with me. I would give them the land, and they would put in the money and I wouldn't have to put in anything. Then my restaurant would move to the second floor; the whole floor would be about a thousand square meters. I would maintain the employees there, and that would be nice.

Then I was thinking they would build some apartments, but in a very professional way, not like doing it little by little. They were going to give me the second floor and five other floors free--floors 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. The seventeenth floor would be another restaurant, mine also. They would give me cash also. In the long run it would be the same as if I sold the land outright.

So I signed the contract with them, but after a month the situation changed completely. Belaunde was the president, and the economy changed. The bank asked me if I wanted to continue, or we could just void the contract, because the situation was very bad. If we built, nobody would buy it. Next door there are two empty buildings that nobody will buy because of the situation.

Nathan: Is it the inflation?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and the fact that people don't trust anybody any more. A lot of things. There's no buying or selling.

Nathan: The political situation?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. So I decided maybe it was better to void the contract, but we already had the plans approved by the city of San Isidro. Plus I bought a house close to La Caleta in order to store everything, a lot of decorations, chairs, and everything. I bought an empty house.

That's why the money is all tied up there. I still can't sell my property. I wish I could have sold it, because then I could have done something over here. Five years ago it was very easy to buy something here, but now prices have increased so much in this area. In Peru, the prices are way down--maybe \$800 or less per square foot instead of \$1,000. But even at \$800 or less no one wants to buy it because of the situation. So I'm going to just keep it another year, and perhaps next year will be a good time to sell. I don't want to just sell it like that.

That's why it's so difficult to have an investment over here, without a lot of cash to move around. I have bought some stocks of different companies through Merrill Lynch. My son-in-law helped me with it. I know nothing about stocks--what kind to buy--and I'm not interested in learning it. I don't know why. Real estate I like, but not this. We've been lucky so far.

## XI FAMILY: TRAVEL, EDUCATION, BUSINESS

Wong-Vargas: My children, one by one, got very good educations, and I am very happy. As I said, every daughter has a Master's or other degree. Lita, Susy, and Martha have Master's degrees; Ines is a lawyer from Hastings College of the Law; Michael has a Ph.D. and now is an M.D. from Guadalajara, Mexico.

I already sent them to Europe. When Lita and Susy were about to graduate from high school, I sent them to Europe with a professor, a student group. So they gained some knowledge, and when they came back they really were different because they had been to those places. It's easy to say Paris, London; but when you get there, then you know what the country is like.

I also sent my son and Ines over there. Martha I did not send, because she has been there many times with Paul. She went to Europe before anybody else; she was very lucky.

### Pilgrimage to China (1982)

Wong-Vargas: In 1982 I took them to China--Martha, Michael, Ines, and Susy. Lita couldn't go because she had just started working. I took the four of them to Hong Kong and to China. That was the first time, after so many years of divorce, that I saw my first husband. His sister, the one who lives in Sacramento, must have written to him, so he came to the hotel to meet his children, Martha and Michael.

I wondered at the time what he was thinking, because when I divorced him he said, "I will see you hungry and in debt, with the two children." That's the worst thing you can

say in Chinese: you are going to die of hunger if you don't have money. I answered him at that time that he should wait and see further ahead, that even if I had to wash dishes I was going to help my children to have a good education.

So when we went back to China, Michael already had his Ph.D., and Martha had her Master's degree. He was sad. I had been so mad when I divorced him, but when I saw him there, so sad, because he could hardly talk. His voice was very low, maybe because he smoked too much or drank too much. It was very difficult to hear his voice. I don't like revenge, I never have. When I saw him I felt sorry. I forgot all about how he treated me like a slave. I felt sorry for him. Anyway, God knows.

By the way, Chang just died in June, in Hong Kong. I was with Martha in May, and two weeks after we left there we received the notice that he died. Sam died last year, on July 29. It's been one year already; how time passes. So both are dead now, but life goes on. I feel sorry for them. Only sorry, and I pray to God for their souls to have peace.

But I miss Maria. I cry so often for Maria. It's so different, she was my companion. I never thought that I'd miss her so much.

Nathan: She was with you a long time.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, thirty years, and she was very loyal and helpful.

Nathan: In going to China, did you feel that your children understood the situation?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, they understood. I took them to Canton and to Mausan. In Canton I wanted to see the house where the bomb fell. The Communists had already made over the big house into five small houses. They put walls in and converted it so that five families could live there. One of the families is Chang's brother, and Chang was there, too, because he knew we were going to Canton. The house had changed so much that I couldn't tell where my room was, but they told me. I saw the kitchen where the well was. Martha saw it all, and she met her father's nephews and nieces. They all lived in a very small room. It was sad.

We went back to the hotel and met a group at the hotel that was mostly Americans. Martha was excited and said she wanted to invite them for a drink. She said, "I want to thank my mother, because otherwise I would be living there." [laughs] If I had left the children with their father and

gone back to Peru by myself, she would be living there, because that's where the family was. Do you think her father would be taking care of her? Never.

Unfortunately, Chang's second wife died a few years ago, the dancing girl, the one he was living with before he divorced me. She was all right. She died of cancer. He had a few children with her. I know that two of the kids, the boys (I don't know about the girls), were stealing money in Hong Kong and were put in juvenile hall for quite a long time. Do you know why I know? Because the brother of my friend Rebecca works at that juvenile hall, and he told me, "You know who is here? I'll take you to see them." He took me to see them, and I felt so sorry for those kids. So Chang's conduct was not very good. That's the kind of father he was; he didn't even care about his children at that time. I think he had five children by his second wife.

A few years ago I went back to Hong Kong, and one of his sons got married. The wife worked in a clothing factory. I happened to meet her, and she was very nice. So it's sad.

Nathan: I was thinking about the situation in China.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I took the children to Mausan and to the little city, Kung Wuo City. My uncles and aunts used to have a very big store in Kung Wuo City, selling rice and rice meal and so forth, but there was nothing left. The Communists took over, and everything is a rice field now. I couldn't see the city any more. There was nothing. But Mausan was there, and I was so happy to see some of the old family. I have a picture with them. Again my children said that they admired me, but even more because how could I have gotten out of a place like Mausan?

##

Nathan: I wanted to remember to ask you: when your children were going to college, did they work?

#### Paying for College

Wong-Vargas: Yes, they all did, a little, for their pocket money. Martha was the first one who came over here, and I didn't want her to work. I sent her not much but enough money for living and so forth. She was a foreign student, and that costs much more than a resident. Martha started her

Master's degree at San Francisco State University, and then she got married. She finished her degree afterward. She got her B.A. from Berkeley. After she got married, I told her not to forget to finish her Master's degree in education, and she did finish.

Michael was also a foreign student at that time, the same as Martha. I sent him enough for everything. Later on he became a U.S. resident. I did help him, and he got a scholarship for a couple of years. Then he went to Harvard. I always helped them on the side.

Lita got a scholarship for Stanford University and also some help from me on the side, and I helped her with her Master's degree. Sometimes you help on the side, but it is still a lot. When Lita and Susy were small they liked to babysit and things like that. They liked to earn some money, but they weren't like other students who work and study, no. They were full-time students.

Nathan: So it was their choice, if they wanted to earn some extra money?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I never wanted them to feel that they had to work. Whatever they needed, it was there. I never said no. I worked hard and borrowed money from here and there, and I gave it to them. Maybe I did wrong, I don't know, to give so much for the children. Sometimes I think I did too much.

Nathan: It's always hard to know, but you have wonderful children, so you must have done something right.

Wong-Vargas: Thank you. Yes, they are very good children. Thoughtful. I remember when I first arrived, Martha bought me a sewing machine, because she knew that I loved to sew. She gave it to me as a gift. It was in '67, twenty-three years ago; I bought this house in '67, and that was when she gave me the machine. It was getting difficult to repair, so ten years ago I took it with me to Peru. I didn't want to sell it because it has sentimental value, so I still have it in Peru. Yes, all my children are wonderful; they are very thoughtful.

### Languages

Nathan: Do you encourage your children in international interests? You've had so many all your life.



Wong-Vargas: Yes, and they are very clever. For example, Martha speaks beautiful French. The most important thing was that I wanted them to learn to speak Chinese, Cantonese. The five of them speak Cantonese. Martha and Michael understand much more, Martha especially, because she was older, and she was born in Canton. She was almost seven years old when she went to Peru, so she still remembered the language. I think she is very clever in languages.

My son doesn't speak French but very good English, Spanish, and Cantonese. My four daughters have very good ears for language. The four of them speak French: Martha, Ines, Susy, and Lita. Lita once won a prize for French in high school. I never heard her speak it then, because we always spoke Spanish or Chinese at home. I have heard Martha a few times, and she speaks beautiful French.

They can get by in Cantonese. If they went to Canton or Hong Kong by themselves, I wouldn't worry, because they could go shopping, to a restaurant, or anywhere and get by. When they were in elementary school in Peru, I always took them to summer school to learn Chinese. I almost forced them. I mean, I said, "After your class, let's go to have dim sum Chinese breakfast," so they would like it. I think maybe at the time they didn't like it. They had to repeat the same year every summer. There are two Chinese schools in Peru that teach Cantonese.

Nathan: Are they interested in Mandarin?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, Susy is very interested in Mandarin. She was taking Mandarin in Sydney, Australia. She's in Sydney right now. She has very good pronunciation. My five children have very good pronunciation in any language. It's amazing.

In 1982, when I took them to China, one day Ines called me up from another room. I thought it was somebody else Chinese--completely different, but exactly like the Chinese way they talk. You can tell American Chinese, but Ines's voice was exactly like a Chinese girl--the sound, the tone. I said, "I think you have a wrong number," and she started laughing. "Mommy, that's me." [laughs] They have a very good ability to learn languages.

My son says he would like to learn German, and maybe some day he will. It's close to English. I think I would like to learn French, because I'm going to have grandchildren in Paris. Two of my daughters have married Frenchmen, so I will have to learn in order to speak to my grandchildren at

least. I love Paris, so some day I'd like to go there for a couple of months. I think it's much easier to learn the language when you are in the country.

Someday I would also like to learn Japanese. I hated Japanese during the war. I could have learned so easily, but I didn't like it. I was so foolish, because I should have learned it. I said I didn't want to learn the enemy's language. That was my mistake. I think I should have learned in order to understand the enemy, you know? At least I would know what they were saying. But I was young and so upset that I didn't want to learn.

Now I think I would like it, because the Japanese written language, the *kanchi*, is exactly like Chinese. Spoken Chinese we call *honchi* in Cantonese. *Kanchi* means the writing of China. The writing is exactly the same. In China you start learning *kanchi* even when you are in elementary school. The Japanese learn *kanchi* when they are at a little bit higher level, because it is more difficult. So I can communicate with Japanese without saying anything, only by writing. It's not exactly the same, but 70 or 80 percent is the exact same meaning. The pronunciation is different, but meaning of the writing is very close.

I don't want to learn German; I don't like German.  
[laughs]

### Seeking Ah Sham's Tomb (1983)

Wong-Vargas: In '83 I took Lita to China. I asked Yue Hou my niece and others where my Ah Sham's tomb was. I wanted to pay my respects to her when I went with my children in '82. They told me they didn't know, because she died when the communists first arrived in Canon. If you had money you maybe just bought a coffin and took it to bury. My grandfather on my father's side was very rich, and we had a whole hacienda with I don't know how many acres of rice and lichee fruit. It was huge. There was a little hill that belonged to us. The second, third, and fourth uncles and aunts died and were all buried on the hill. My poor Ah Sham, they didn't take her to the hill. They just threw her somewhere, I don't know where it was. I was told by them that there was a place where they threw the poor dead babies. That was the place they threw Ah Sham without a coffin.

I asked them to please find out, because I wanted to know. I said I would pay them to help me find her bones. Some of the old people were still alive, and they remembered that she was thrown in with the children who had no families. So when I went back in '83 with Lita, I took her to Mausan. They had written to me during the year that they had found the site, and I sent them some money to make Ah Sham a little marker and take her to the hill. That was where she belonged. I asked them how much money would be needed to make a nice tomb for her.

In '84 I went back again with Susy, because we were starting a fur business. I've been back and forth to China almost every year since 1982. They told me they had already found the bones and made a tomb on the hill; and there was a tomb. I saw the tomb, and it was very nice. I wondered if the bones were really hers, because you never know. Anyway, for me she is there, and that's Ah Sham. Susy took a picture, and I was surprised when I saw it. I think I have it here, I always carry it with me, "My mother and Ah Sham." Do you see something in the middle there? Something red colored?

Nathan: Yes. It almost looks to me like two figures, or two faces. There's a face here, and then it looks like a lower face.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. You know what was there? Nothing. Only the gray cement, with her name in red. But when I saw the picture, I saw the face. Every picture came out with a face. So I thought maybe Ah Sham was there. Maybe she was trying to tell me that she was there.

Nathan: Isn't that interesting? Now, who is this? [looking at picture]

Wong-Vargas: That's my mother, and that's me. She died soon after that picture was taken. And this picture is the building I was supposed to build in Peru.

Nathan: Oh, isn't that spectacular.

Wong-Vargas: I know. That's why I didn't sell the land. Because I would like to build, and I can't build myself. So why not do something like this with the bank?

Nathan: Maybe it can still happen.

Wong-Vargas: Everything has been approved already by the city of San Isidro, but I don't think I would like to invest there anymore.

Nathan: Your life is here?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. But I always keep this picture. God only knows. It is destiny. There is some reason the business deal did not go through. I always feel that if you don't do something, there's a reason for it. Maybe under the basement of La Caleta there is some Incan gold hiding in there. You never know.

Nathan: Yes. I'd like to ask about your reference to doing some fur business in China.

Wong-Vargas: That was because almost five years ago Susy was working at the United Nations.

### Meeting People

Wong-Vargas: The children all love me, but Susy worries so much about me. She loves me very much and is always trying to find a companion for me, always trying to fix me up with potentially nice gentlemen. She doesn't want me to be lonely in life because she thinks that I sacrificed my youth and companionship for my children. That was also true of Martha in 1966. When I first arrived, she wanted me to meet some nice gentleman. She always tried to find somebody for me. I am a shy person. Even now, I'm not a person who likes to talk and flirt. No, I can't. I like to work and look after my children--work and children, and I didn't have time for myself.

I never went out with a boyfriend when I was in high school, not even one. Then I married with Chang, the way they married me, my uncle took me when I was sick and everything. So I have had no experience, at my age. I feel uncomfortable with somebody who is single, and I am single. I don't know what to do. It's just as if I were young. My feelings about falling in love are very young, but by my experiences in life I think I am a hundred years old. I matured so fast, maybe twenty years ahead of myself, but as to meeting people, I have no experience at all. I don't know what to say.

Nathan: But you don't give that impression at all.

Wong-Vargas: If it's business, and there are a hundred men over there that I have to talk to, I go. I talk very naturally. But if

there are a hundred single men there, and I have to meet them, I can't. I don't know what to say, believe me. That's me.

Susy still hasn't given up. She says, "No, Mommy, I have to find somebody for you." Not to marry, but a good friend. I don't believe in living together; I don't like that. But just a good friend who would call me, or I would call him, and we would go to a movie or maybe go for a walk. There are some sports that I like, and I like to hike. I like to picnic. All outdoor sports I like very much. I took tennis lessons a long time ago, and I'd like to continue. But all by myself, there's no motivation.

The children are already grown and have their own families and their own lives. I don't want to tell them I'm lonely and need someone to talk to. No. They always ask how I am, and I say, "I'm fine. Don't worry." But inside, after Maria died, I really feel very, very lonely. I feel like I should rent out or sell the house, because it is too big for me.

Susy came back, and she wanted me to sell La Caleta and invest over here. I said okay. She had taken a year off from her work to help me. Seven or eight years ago I joined the Ferry Plaza Restaurant; I had an investment with them, a small amount. They ran it very badly; they didn't know how to run the business, believe me. If I really ran the business and did something over there, I'm sure the business would be okay, because it is important that you have good food, a good chef, and good service. Also the decoration has to be changed.

#### Purchasing a Restaurant--Almost (1984)

Wong-Vargas: Five years ago we almost purchased it. Susy came back, and we were almost six months back and forth with the lawyers, the accountant, my partners. Finally we agreed on an amount of money. I went to the bank and told them I wanted to assume the loan. Because we built the building, the company did; I'm a limited partner, and they are a general partner. I was lucky, because I had a letter from Bank of America in Lima. I talked to Mr. White at the Hong Kong-Shanghai bank

here, and it was almost approved, but he said I had to have the property appraised. I paid about \$5,000 for the appraisal, and I signed the contract--oh, it went back and forth. Finally, we were agreed on everything and the chairman of the Ferry Plaza Restaurant didn't want to sign. He left for Hong Kong.

Susy and I got sick, emotionally sick. Oh, I was so upset. We lost close to \$20,000. Just the appraisal was \$5,000; lawyers were \$100 an hour. It was supposed to be \$150, but Ines was working with them, so they gave me a discount. You know how many hours we had been working with the lawyers? And the accounting--you had to give them \$1,000 first, in order for them to help you. All that money was gone. Of course there was Susy's time--she had left work to come and help me--and my time, too.

I could have sued them. The lawyers told me to sue them, but I don't like suing. I hate suing. First of all, we were friends. I didn't really think it would fail to work, after they promised something. I was on the board at that time. If you promise something, you have to keep the promise. I had been through so many things already. They didn't say no, but he just disappeared; the chairman just didn't want to sign. Later on I learned that somebody said, "It was very cheap. I can find somebody to pay maybe a half million more." So that was why they didn't want to sell.

### Business in China

Wong-Vargas: Susy and I were very upset, so we went to do some business in China. We were going to import fur from China. We went that year to Beijing and Shanghai, but then we realized that from China it would be a little bit difficult, because it was far away. The factories were not the same as Hong Kong; Hong Kong was much better, much more reliable and responsible. If you say something is not correct, they will change it right away. So that's why we decided to do it from Hong Kong. We went to China to look around at silk and fur and everything, but about fur I think they still have some more years to go to learn.

Nathan: Did you feel they were willing to deal with women?

Wong-Vargas: In China? Oh, yes. They've changed so much. When Mao took over China for the Communists, the good thing he did was for women. Women's level is up, not compared with men, but

almost. A lot of women work for the government. Before Mao took over, women in the village were nothing. So Mao was okay to a certain point, at least as far as women are concerned. He forced women in general to learn how to read and write, I was told. But during the Chiang Kai-shek time, unfortunately, no. If I had been there during Mao's time, maybe I would be a doctor; because I loved to study, and maybe they would have helped me. But at that time, my uncle didn't want me to learn, so where do you go? So Mao was okay for women, but for others, no--no freedom, nothing.

I dealt with the Chinese, and they were very nice. I had a very good referral from friends in Hong Kong.

Nathan: So you established your connections on the mainland, but then you did the business through Hong Kong?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. In China I told them I was researching; I didn't tell them I was going to do it with them. They said okay, and to let them know when I had made up my mind. They were very nice. I gave them some samples in silk to make up, and when they sent it back to me the size was wrong.

Nathan: Were these garments?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. But Hong Kong was different, because they have a very good professional designer from Europe. China did not, but maybe now they do.

Susy wanted to go visit her boyfriend, Jean, who was in Sydney, Australia. So she went to Sydney, and I came back here by myself. We started to do some fur business, and then Susy (it's a long story) decided to stay in Sydney to do business with Jean. I always want the best for my children, and do whatever they want to do.

### Sharing with the Children

Wong-Vargas: Remember I said I helped my children to make a down payment? I kept telling Lita to buy an apartment, and she said, "Mañana. I don't have time." So I found one for her, and it turned out to be a very good apartment. I'm very happy. Michael and Ines both found their own. But Susy asked me to give her the down payment so she could invest it in some business in Australia. I did send her an amount equal to the other children. I was thinking about Martha, who has a beautiful home; she doesn't need to buy a house. But I'd

like to give her the same amount of money, to be fair. I gave her the same amount and told her to do whatever she wanted with it. I told her that if I died, I wouldn't know what they did with the money. But if I give it to them now, they can do whatever they want and I can see it while I'm still alive.

Nathan: Was the business in Australia the restaurant?

Wong-Vargas: A wine center and also a restaurant. I think Jean's partner talked Susy into the business, and then he left. So Susy was forced to stay there, and she couldn't come back to help me with the fur business. I had to pay corporation tax every year--at that time it was \$200 a year--without doing anything, because Susy was the one who was really doing it. I didn't know how to sell. I couldn't go to I Magnin's, because I'm not that kind of person. Susy, yes. Susy, Martha, Lita, and Ines could do it, but I could not. I can work, and I can organize, but I'm not a good salesperson. I'm very serious and honest, yes.

So last year my accountant suggested I cancel the corporation, because I wasn't doing anything except paying tax. I sold one fur coat to a friend for the same cost price. Susy was mad. And I sold one to the consul general's wife. Susy asked me how I could do that, and I said it was because I knew them and knew that they couldn't afford to pay more. I could order another one. Of course, I didn't charge anything for the shipping, either. That's me. So I don't know how to sell.

##

Nathan: Would you ever think of going back to China to do some business?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, maybe some day. Recently I went with Martha, because I brought some alpaca from Peru to Hong Kong. That was a few years ago. The idea was to combine alpaca with leather to make women's suits. I have two here that are samples, and I took them with me.

#### Business Problems

Wong-Vargas: They had already made about ten or twenty suits out of the fabric over there, and they sent that first shipment to me.



That was two years ago, I think. The United States didn't want to accept them and sent them back, and I had to pay for it. They said there were quotas, and I didn't know that. You have to purchase the quota in Hong Kong. Susy wasn't here, and I was all by myself and had to go to Peru. The garments are still over there; they can't get into the United States.

Last year I went to Germany and I talked to my niece. She has a fabric shop, and I asked her if I could send it to her from Hong Kong. She said sure, and that's why I went with Martha this year. Last year I couldn't go because of two weddings, and back and forth to Peru. Then Maria was sick, and I had to take care of her. So this year I had to go. Martha also went because of some other personal business.

I couldn't do anything, because a few days after we arrived we heard about Maria, and we came back. I'll have to go back again. So that was the start and the end of the business.

### Interior Design in America

Wong-Vargas: I'd still like to continue doing business, maybe import-export, but not as a corporation, no. A corporation has a lot of tax. I'd like to meet somebody who is an interior designer in this country. I would like to associate with that person, and then I could learn, because in Peru it's different; here it's much better. Here you learn so much. In Peru you also learn, but the fabrics are different. We don't have that much variety of fabric in Peru. In this country there are so many kinds. If you ask me what quality something is, I don't know, because I didn't learn here. In Peru I know, because I know the three or four fabrics. But here there are so many, not only from the United States but from all over the world. So I have to learn. I'd really like to meet somebody and work together. It's easier.

It's not like a restaurant; a restaurant is difficult. But merchandise is different.

Nathan: Are you especially interested in interior decoration--draperies, upholstery, and that sort of thing?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, like in a house, I know that this color goes well with that color, and you could put the sofa over here or over there--those things. Yes, to design the ambience--the living room, dining room, or a restaurant or office--everywhere, but interior design. There are so many things to learn, all the beautiful things you have here. In Peru we don't have all that.

Nathan: You already know so much.

Wong-Vargas: No, no. I'm learning it. You learn every day. For example, in the restaurant I have thirty-three years' experience. Lita's going to be thirty-three years old, so that's why I remember [laughs] the first restaurant. And yet, I think I learn every day. You can't say that I know the restaurant business. No, no. You learn every day.

#### What the Restaurant Business Requires

Wong-Vargas: First of all, the location, I have it in Peru, but I don't have it here. Here I'd have to learn again. Maybe if I opened one in Berkeley I would know, but if I opened one in Walnut Creek it would be different, because the area is different. Maybe the clients from there would want something different from the clients here. So you learn every day. You can't say, "Oh, I know this." You can't, because every day there is something new. It's important to keep up to date. I like to buy magazines, because you learn a lot from them. You get new ideas and combine these with the development of your own ideas.

I've always wanted to have a restaurant in this area. You know why? Because I have faith in a restaurant. First of all, it's a service. Having a good chef and good food--everybody likes to go out to eat. In my restaurant in Lima [La Caleta], I once in a while--not every week--talk with the kitchen help. I talk especially with the person who has to wash the vegetables, and I tell him that he has to wash them very carefully. I explain to him that it's very important, because you eat the vegetable like a salad; if you don't wash it, you will get sick.

In Peru especially, when people wash dishes they don't have that much education, and they don't understand; they don't know. You have to teach them. The vegetables here are very clean. In a supermarket when you buy lettuce, it's so

clean. But in Peru it's not like that; some of the lettuce comes right from the earth and they sell it to you. There is a lot of dirt on it, so I tell him you have to do each leaf, one by one. I tell him, "If you eat it dirty like this, you will get sick. Would you like that?" I explain it to them. Whatever you don't want somebody to do to you, you don't do it to them (the Golden Rule). That's the way it should be.

So I'm very safe when I eat in my restaurant. But some other places, I don't know, especially the vegetables. I always tell the people in the kitchen that if they feel that the meat or fish is not very fresh--it's okay, but not fresh enough to sell--then the employees should eat it, but they should never, never sell it. You have to give the clients the best. If the staff feel that even they could not eat it, then they should throw it away. You have to have it fresh; otherwise, don't sell it. The clients pay for the food, and you can't give them something that is not fresh or is second-rate. That's my point of view.

So my business is very successful in Lima, but now they tell me that during the daytime it's not full any more. At night it's very low now, because people don't want to go out. I think I'm planning to close at night, because people are afraid to go out. But daytime is fine; no problem.

Nathan: Do you have any concerns about herbicides or pesticides on the vegetables?

Wong-Vargas: In Peru? No, we don't have those kinds of things over there. They can't use it because they don't know how to use it, and that would be even worse.

Nathan: It's probably just as well. We are so afraid of that here.

Wong-Vargas: We purchase fresh vegetables two times a week from the market. They send it to us, and it's very fresh. There is no problem. Fruit we buy every day, and some vegetables we have to purchase every day, too. Potatoes and onions we buy two times a week, Monday and Friday. If the business is slow, then we only buy on Monday and sometimes Friday. But every day there is something to buy, like for decoration of the dishes and fruit. We have a van, and somebody goes to buy it. Not just one person goes; two people go. One person pays, and one writes. I've done it so long, I'm organized in my way.

I never went to school to learn to manage a restaurant. Well, yes, for a few months. They teach you how to organize

things, yes. But at the beginning I organized it myself. I have so many books, and you have to write down this and that, control. You control this one, and he controls you, something like that. I don't have a manager right now. I told you about Mr. Lopez. I feel sorry for him.

If I trust someone, I would never think, "Is he stealing?" I trust him, and that's enough, but if I have some doubt, then I don't want that person to help me. If you hire a person and you have doubts, then it's very sad. Also, money for me is not so important. That's my way. Some friends say, "Oh, that's because you have it." No, no, no.

When I was young I knew money was very important, but it is not everything. You know, if you are short ten cents, you cannot take a bus. Only ten cents. Even one cent, and you can't. But money is not everything in life. The most important, I think, is good health, then knowledge, of course. Be honest and have feelings for your children, family, and friends. You cannot buy your health, you cannot buy friendship. Money is important when you need it.

In Peru some friends said, "How can you leave your restaurant? The employees are doing a lot of things." I say, "Let them do it, because it's my fault; I'm not there. It's not their fault; it's my fault. I should be there, but I can't." For some reason I have to stay here. So what can I do? You can't have both. You have to sacrifice one thing. Sacrifice money; I don't really care.

Money is important, but not that much. I will not die if the Communists take over my restaurant, for example. That's over \$1,000,000, you know. If the Communists took over everything, mine is nothing compared with somebody who has millions. If the country would really change for the good, then let them have it. After all, I worked. Nobody gave it to me except myself. Of course, I would not like to give it away just like that [laughs], but it's not so important in life.

#### A Restaurant. and Real Estate

Nathan: You were thinking a little bit about your future here?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. My children say I should not start a restaurant, and they are right. For example, the restaurant on the bay, the Ferry Plaza, now they want to sell it.

Nathan: Now they want to sell?

Wong-Vargas: They called me a month ago, but I said, "Too late." It was an even lower price than before. It's too late. First of all, I don't have help. Susy is married and going to be a mother. All by myself, no motivation. Maybe when my children were young, oh, I would have done it. I wouldn't sleep; I would just be there the whole day. But now they are grown up, they don't need my help any more, and none of them would help me at the restaurant.

So why should I again, because it's a very big risk. It can seat about five hundred people; it's huge. But I would like it maybe some day, if I could find a place and purchase it.

Nathan: A smaller place?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I'd like it to seat about a hundred or a hundred and fifty. Maybe I could expand a little bit in the future, but a hundred at the beginning would be fine. Then I would bring my chef, because he wants to come here. He says, "Oh, take me to the U.S.A.," because in Peru it is difficult now.

Some day I would like to buy the property, and then I would like to open a small restaurant. I could sell La Caleta, and then I could buy a property here, even if I had to sell this house in order to open; but I want it to be my property. Because if I don't have help and I can't do it, then I can lease it to somebody.

Nathan: So the property would be the base for you?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. That's like La Caleta. When I purchased it, it was \$26 per square meter, as I said, and now it's \$800 approximately or less. And the name. I'm sure the name would be all right. For me, the name is very important. I don't understand my partners at the Ferry Plaza now. Well, the auction is selling the Ferry Plaza. I don't know why they don't feel embarrassed, you know? Sell it just like that at auction? It means you don't know how to run the business. I don't think I could ever do that. I would work hard, build it up, and then sell it. But I would never auction it off, never like that, no.

I don't like to write a check without money. I would never do that. I never want a bounced check. If I don't have it, I would go say, "Please, wait for me another week," or something. Tell the truth, you know? But so many people

I know, they just do it as if it doesn't matter. In a few days it comes back, and you write another one. You can't do that. The name of a person and the business is very important.

Nathan: Would you be interested in acquiring real estate here in addition, let us say, to a place for a restaurant?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. For example, now I'm studying real estate. Did you know that? I went to the Anthony School. There were fourteen lectures, and I already finished them.

Nathan: Did you get your real estate license?

Wong-Vargas: Not yet. I have to take an exam. That's the problem. My idea is that when I have the license, then I can have more opportunity to see more. I'd like to buy something small. Maybe old houses, and then convert them and sell them. Since I'm an interior designer, I'd like to decorate them and then sell them. But it's so difficult. I didn't know it was so difficult.

The school has fourteen lectures, and each lecture has about a hundred questions, which you answer one by one. But I said no. First I finished the whole fourteen sessions, and now I know more or less what is what. Then I will repeat it again, because you can repeat it until November. So I will repeat the first lecture, and then that week I will take a test. When I finish the tests for the fourteen lectures, then they will send a notice to the State of California. They will then send me a date to go there to take the test. I don't know if I could pass or not, but I will try. Even if it takes me five years, I think I will try. I don't mind. I love it.

Nathan: It's natural for you?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, it's natural. There are so many things in real estate, buying and selling houses. It's interesting, because we learned about when California was a part of Mexico and first became a state. That's so interesting. For me it's new; for an American, I think they already know it.

I finished the lectures while you were away. I started after Maria passed away. So I was very busy during the daytime. The only problem was when I came home at night. When I had a night course I would come home about 11 o'clock, and one night, ayy, I couldn't get in. I was scared, because my purse was snatched a few years ago in front of my house,

close to the door. I still remember the person. Oh, I was so scared. I went to Ines's house and asked her to please give me company. Her husband is very nice, and he escorted me back to my house. He says to call him any time.

Ines and Bernard have been very thoughtful. I call them and tell them when I am leaving from San Francisco, and they wait for me at my door. They are very kind. I am really so grateful.

So now I have to take my exam, but I don't know when. I am going to Peru next month. I'm thinking that after this, maybe one more session, and then I'll go to Peru for three weeks and then come back. I will come back the first week of September.

I have so many things in mind. I'd still like to have a restaurant some day, but with the property. That's important. Otherwise they would increase the rent, and I'd have to leave. That's sad. I want the restaurant to last forever. If my children don't want it when I'm gone, okay; they can lease it. I'd also like to do something with interior design, so I don't know which I'm going to do, either one or both. I'd still like to learn to do something.

Nathan: There is a nice connection there that could be very interesting.

Wong-Vargas: Susy called--she was in Paris a month ago. I told her, "I don't have that much for investment, but I have equity on this house." I paid it off three years ago, and I don't owe anything to anybody; I paid off the bank in twenty years. I said I could buy something somewhere with the equity. I am learning.

I forgot to tell you about the business that Susy started, the wine center, and later the French restaurant. She was very upset, because at the beginning it was not very good. I was sad, too, because at the beginning it was terrible. But little by little it has gotten very good and is doing very, very well. But they are going to sell the business, and she is coming in October. She wants the baby to be born here. Jean, her husband, is coming in November. Then I will have more company, so I'm thinking of fixing up the kitchen.

A Small Paris Apartment, and Other Property

Wong-Vargas: Susy will be going to live in France, and I told her I would like to buy something in France. I'd like to buy a small apartment there, maybe like a one-bedroom or just a studio in Paris. She says, "Okay, I'll look for you." She said I could live with her, but I said no, no. They have their own life. Close is okay, within walking distance to come and visit me, and I could go see them. All of my children like Paris, so they will be there visiting. I don't think we would all be there at once, but they can take turns and go there. Including you, good friend. [laughs]

I'd like to sell something in Peru, and then I could purchase over there. But I've really been thinking about a property, and maybe buying another little house to rent. If I hadn't studied real estate, I don't think I would have thought about it. So that helped me a lot, and I've learned a lot.

They also taught us, for example, that because I'm still living, I can will this house to my five children. If I die, this will belong to them, and they won't have to pay tax. They call it a life estate. When I'm gone, it will automatically belong to them. I can do it at any time while I am still alive. While I'm alive, it's still mine and the children cannot get it from me, but when I'm gone it will be easy for the five of them. They won't have to pay this and that kind of tax. If you don't have a will, then they would have a lot to pay. This life estate is very good. I think I will do that.

Also I'd like to buy my little place. Believe me, I'm not afraid of death. Not any more, because the most important thing was to raise the children, and I've done it already. I'd like to see Michael remarried, because he is divorced, and I'd also like to see Lita married. The grandchildren from them--well, that's too much to wait for. [laughs] Maybe they don't want to have children and indeed I want to sell my restaurant and properties in Lima. I still have very good health to work. If the time comes, the time comes, and you go. There's nothing you can do.

Nathan: It's good for your children to see you vital and interested and doing things.



Wong-Vargas: I like to do things. I'm never bored, never. I really thank God for that. Someone who says they are bored, I don't understand why, because there are so many things to learn.

Nathan: Yes, that's true.

Honorary Consul for Peru

Nathan: Thinking about Peru, how did you come to be named honorary consul?

Wong-Vargas: I always like to help people. Not only a Peruvian; if anybody needs help I'll be there without any personal interest at all. If a neighbor I don't know calls me and asks me to please pick them up at the airport, I will go, even if it's 2 o'clock in the morning. Well, I wouldn't do it for someone I didn't know, but if you know them, why not? So I like to help.

In Peru I helped with the *asilo* for the old people. Fernando Belaunde was the president before this one, about eight years ago. I was recommended to the minister of foreign relations (Ministerio de las Relaciones Exteriores). It's a very high position over there. He was the one who named consuls to the exterior all over the country. He said I should be an honorary consul in Berkeley. I said, "No; how about my son?" Because my son already has a Ph.D. from Harvard. He said, "We know about your children, but we know you. We know you like to help people, and we need someone to help our Peruvians in the United States when they need help, and you are there."

I said no, but then I thought about it. It would be a lot of work for me, but I didn't mind that, and I didn't want to let them down; I wanted them to feel proud of me. I said that the education my children had was much greater than mine. Of course, I had the interior design degree, but that was not like a Master's degree or a lawyer's, and they were much more active than I. Remember, I was telling you I am not a good sales person. I am not a diplomat. I like to help, yes, but I can't go and talk this and that; you know how some people usually say so many things that are not true.

So I said I couldn't. Then I was talking with my friend Guillermina in Lima, the Chinese-Peruvian lady. She said it

was an honor. "First of all, you are part Chinese; you are a woman, you are divorced, and they still want you to be it. You are crazy if you say no. You've done a lot for your children; let someone do something for you." She was right. I am half Chinese, I am divorced; they always look down on divorced women, or at least they are always different, because they don't know why you are divorced. If you are widowed, they know your husband died. But if you are divorced and they didn't know my reason, I couldn't explain it to them.

So I said okay, but I told them I had better be just vice-consul.

Nathan: Oh, they investigate you?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes, they have to do that. Then they say, "Well, I think she is okay." Then they named me. The week before, I went to Ambassador Caverro, and I was so scared. I didn't want to be a consul, you know? I said I preferred vice-consul. I thought consul had much more responsibility, and vice-consul would be under her or him, and that would be okay. I would do my best, but I wouldn't have to be responsible. That's what I thought at that time.

Ambassador Caverro said, "You mean you don't want to be consul?" I said no, I thought vice-consul was okay. Maybe in the future, I said, but he should see my work first. I thought I would have to do a lot of work. So the little paper said "vice-consul," but my passport said "consul." After I was named, they gave me a party and everything. Then I realized that I didn't have that much to do. [laughs]

###

Wong-Vargas: I realized that to represent Peru it sounds better to be an honorary consul rather than vice-consul. Then I thought I was so silly to say no at the beginning. I learned that we had a career consul general from Peru, and also vice-consul, and also secretary. It's a huge group at the office.

They were supposed to name me in Berkeley, but Berkeley is very close to San Francisco. Maybe if it was in Walnut Creek, then I would have to have an office. But since I am

so close here, I don't have to have an office. My position belongs to San Francisco. At that time the consul general was Eduardo Llosa. He was very nice, and he told me about this and that.

After five years he went back to Peru. Sometimes they went back after four years, but the most would be after five years. Also the government changed to APRA. Belaunde was from another party. APRA is like a democracy. It's a little bit close to socialism. This party had been waiting for fifty years to get in office. The one who started passed away a long time ago. The new president--well, he's already been in office for four years--is very young. Next year there will be another election. Maybe Belaunde will come back; I don't know.

So four years ago, when they changed parties, they were supposed to change me, too. But I know a lot of people from the present party, having a restaurant, and they know me, also. Senator Melgar from Peru arrived here four years ago, and he said, "I know that you are honorary consul"--he always said "consul," not "vice-consul." He said, "Don't worry, our new party is here, but you are still in your job. You are doing a very good job," and so on. He was very nice; he called me. Then he came here for dinner because I invited him over with a small group of friends.

The consul general right now is very nice. His name is Humberto Urtiaga. I get along very well with the whole group over there. Maybe twice a week I go to visit them, or if they need me they call me. That's it. Last year I told him that my passport said "honorary consul."

A few years ago I had an opportunity to talk with Ambassador Caverro, and I said, "I should have listened to you, because when you represent Peru it's much better to be a consul rather than a vice-consul." He said he would see what he could do. I think this was before this president arrived. Humberto Urtiaga said he was going to highly recommend me and not to worry, because they could change my title. Later on they told me they changed it. This government upgraded it legally; it only needs a legal procedure.

This new party has so many problems with inflation. I think last year it was almost 2,000 percent. So they have so many problems that they couldn't care less about those papers. I talked with Humberto this year, and I told him the same thing. He said I was all right. He's very nice. Sometimes, he presents me as "honorary consul." But I know

it should be changed legally. On my cards I put "vice-consul," because I don't want to seem presumptuous. But on my passport, yes, I am "consul." So when I go to Peru I will see if they will change it or not; I don't know. I was not pushing, because I represent Peru as vice-consul or consul, or whatever; not even as a consul, I would always help my country.

I do have a few letters from people who wrote to me from the East Coast, from New York. I don't know why they write to me and ask for advice about immigration matters and so many things, instead of writing to their local honorary consul. They put "Isabel Wong, Honorary Consul General." No, no, that's a little bit high. I wrote back and said, first of all, that I am not consul general; I am honorary, etc., and explained it to them. And, second, I refer their case to our career consul general in San Francisco and ask them to write to him in the future. "But if I can do anything for you personally, I will be happy to do it. So please call me any time you want." I got two or three letters [from people in the East], and I don't know who gave them my name. I made copies of their letters and gave them to Humberto. I said, "They thought I was consul general."

Nathan: Do you prepare your own correspondence here?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, at home. Then I take a copy to the office, because I go see them about twice a week. They told me I could sit in the office, but they have so many people there; if they are not there, then I can sign passports. We have consul general, consul, vice-consul--three career officials who are paid by the government--who sign passports or whatever other signatures are needed. If the three of them are going to lunch, for example, then I would have to sign if somebody comes in and needs a signature.

Nathan: Do you feel that you have to be there physically at any particular time?

Wong-Vargas: No, I don't have to, but I like to go there, since I go over there to study anyway. I go to the office two, sometimes three times, sometimes only once a week; it all depends. Now I have a diplomatic passport--not diplomatic, but a special passport like diplomats have.

Before I had this passport, I always liked to buy something for La Caleta to take to Peru, like dishes, knives, spoons, etc. They would say I was taking too much, and I would pay something under the table, and they would let me

go; or I would pay duty. But since I have this passport, I don't want to take anything for La Caleta, not even by paying duty. Because they are concerned, and they are very nice to me. I would not like to take advantage of the passport, so I never, not even one time, take anything for La Caleta.

### Stolen Blenders

Wong-Vargas: Unfortunately, in June in La Caleta, two thieves got inside. They stole the two blenders. They don't have blenders like that in Peru; this is an industrial blender for the bar. They also stole three typewriters and three adding machines. I think they cut the window glass and got in. They also took money, two times in one month. So now we have a watchman outside. We used to have a watchman in the front who took care of two commercial buildings, but now we need a watchman for just our building.

So this time I have to take a bar blender back, and I will of course pay duty. I am like that. Even though I can just pass through, I don't want to do it, because I don't want them to think, "Oh, because you have a diplomatic passport, you think you can buy anything you want." I am the reverse. I can't do it.

Nathan: You don't take advantage.

Wong-Vargas: I never take advantage. I can't do it. If you have such a passport, you have to be more careful, more respectful. If you don't have such a passport, you can buy something for your restaurant and pay this and that under the table. But now, even if I didn't pay they would probably let me through. They would say, "Oh, no, no, it's okay," and then I would feel bad. So I'd better not. I decided to buy a blender in Peru, but the quality is not as good as here. I told them to buy the typewriters and adding machines there anyway. I don't care to buy them here any more, and also the business is not like before.

Things have changed so much. You know, the devaluation--2,000 percent. You can imagine how much we have to charge for the food; it's millions and millions of soles every day. That's too much. Business is not like it was before; before it was much easier. I'm worried about them. If the thieves, whoever took the blender machines, sold them for food, it's okay, but if they sold them for something

else, that is so sad. If they are hungry--what can you do? They have to do something.

I feel that maybe it's one of my employees inside with friends outside, because they knew exactly where the money was. Thieves would not know, because we have four desks at the office. The thieves went to the two exact desks, opened them, and took the money out. The other two desks they didn't even touch, because they knew there was no money in them. So it must be somebody from inside. That's sad, too, but [sighs] what can you do?

Other restaurants have even worse problems; they even put bombs in there. Mine is very minor compared with the others.

Nathan: It must be a very hard time in Peru.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, very hard. But my lunchtime business was always good, and now they tell me it is more or less not so bad. I asked why, and they told me it was because other restaurants around there have closed. They couldn't pay the rent because everything is very expensive. I think about four restaurants close to mine have closed. I'm sad for them. The reason I still have my restaurant is because it's my own property. If I had to pay rent, I don't think I would still have it.

That's why, since I started, I've always liked to buy the property. I feel the same way towards my children; I always want them to have a house or an apartment. It's very important. When you don't own it, they can throw you out. Where are you going to go? When I see so many people lying on the street sleeping, my heart breaks. These people are just sleeping on the street. I don't know them, but I feel so sorry.

### The Dedication

Wong-Vargas: When I graduated from the school for interior design, I had to write a dedication to somebody. I dedicated mine to my children.

At the dedication, in my graduation workbook I wrote my dedication in Spanish, and the professor has it; he has a whole book. The good ones stay there, and mine is there, so mine must be good [laughs]. This time, I had to do the same

thing. I didn't know how to translate into English, but with the dictionary's help I did it. Can I read it to you?

Nathan: Yes, please do.

Wong-Vargas: I put it, "For my dear children"--maybe you can help me decide whether to put dear or beloved children. Then, "With hopes"--or maybe 'with wishes'--"that they will forever excel, urged by the idea that with study"--or maybe 'knowledge'; in Spanish it's 'the study, the learning'--"there's no limit." I wrote to them like that. "And that in the course of a lifetime, it is never too late to learn." I wrote that in Spanish, and I translated it. Do you think it should be "knowledge" or "study"?

Nathan: I will have to see it written out. I think it's very beautifully expressed.

Wong-Vargas: Thank you. Knowledge, or study, has no limits; that's true. I'm still learning, still want to learn. As I was telling you, you learn everyday. Even in the restaurant, every new recipe--there are so many new things to learn, and no limit. And it's never too late to learn. Like languages, at my age I'm going to learn French and Japanese. It's very important to learn. It's so beautiful.

### Singing as a Performer

Wong-Vargas: I was telling you earlier that I am never bored. There are so many things to learn yet. I'd still like to learn how to sing. Yes, I like to sing. The songs I had been learning were all in Spanish, unfortunately. I have already given four recitals in Peru, in different places, with another group. The good thing, and it's unbelievable, is that I'm not afraid or shy when it's a theater or something big. When it's small, I can't sing.

If a few friends ask me to sing a song, I just cannot, because I'm not a professional, I feel embarrassed, and I can't. But in a theater, I can. You don't see anybody there, you know. Of course, I know my friends are there, but I don't know where they are [laughs]. I'd like to learn to be able to control myself so that I would be able to sing for even a few people.

Sometimes I didn't want my voice teacher to teach me. You know why? She was too good to me. She always said, "You're okay. You're okay," but she should have corrected me.

Nathan: You wanted some criticism?

Wong-Vargas: Of course. She is my friend, and I think she would feel bad to say something was not correct, but I don't like that. I want someone to really tell me if it isn't correct. She was here eight years ago. There happened to be an event in San Francisco, so we invited her to sing. We invited a lot of people; they paid for the tickets, but the money went to a fund for Peru. I remember it was eight years ago, because Martha was already carrying Ralph, and he's eight years old now. It was in a room at the Sheraton Palace Hotel. She sang, and she told me I was going to sing, and I did. I was not afraid at all.

At that time Eduardo Llosa was consul general, and my children were at that table, but I didn't see them, so I could sing very nicely. I sang a song in Spanish, "Júrame." It means "Swear to me," and it's a very romantic song. The piano plays, and then you sing again. But I saw my children there; then I smiled a little bit, but I did a good job. The consul said, "You've got a beautiful voice, but why did you smile? You shouldn't have." [laughs] That's why I don't want to see them there. If I know where they are, it makes me nervous. But if there are a lot of people there, I can do it without knowing where they are. I'm not afraid at all.

When I was in Peru it was a fund-raiser recital, and my teacher said it was very good of me to sing with them. One girl, poor thing, when she got out the first five words, she couldn't sing a thing. The piano was louder than her voice, and you couldn't hear her voice at all. Of course she cried; she said she was scared. But I was lucky; I was not scared at all. If you want me to sing somewhere in Berkeley, I will; but here in the house I can't. You have to be a performer.

A few days ago, on July 28, we had National Peru Day. We had a cocktail reception at the consulate. They had a real Peruvian singer. When she was talking, she was one person, but when she started to sing, her face and personality changed. I couldn't believe it. She was a professional. I don't think I could ever do it. Maybe in the future I could get used to it. They say I'm shy; well,



maybe. [laughs] Please let me know if you know a voice teacher.

Nathan: I will think about that.

### Discrimination

Nathan: You said it was unusual for you to be named an honorary consul because of being a woman, being Chinese, and being divorced. Have you come across any feelings of discrimination in your work in the United States?

Wong-Vargas: In the United States, no. But before, in Peru, yes. Being Chinese, especially. I first started the Chinese restaurant thirty-three years ago, and sometimes they made jokes. Well, that's a Chinese problem, too. When the Chinese first came from China to Peru, they didn't go to school. There is no adult school, like we have here in the United States. There is no school at night for the Chinese newcomer, but they can hire a teacher, like I did. I hired someone to teach me Spanish, because I had forgotten Spanish. I wanted to learn, so I made an opportunity. My Spanish is not excellent, but compared to the Chinese there, I'm very good. It's unbelievable, the older-generation Chinese have been there so many years, but they don't learn Spanish, so they always make jokes about the Chinese.

For example, the word rice: we say *arroz*, but the Chinese can never say that word; they always say "alos."

That's really a good question you asked me. The good thing about me, and it's my personality, is that I never feel inferior. I have never had an inferiority complex, never. When they laugh at me, I feel sorry for the people laughing at me, not for me. People might make jokes about or laugh at someone who doesn't speak their language, but maybe it's because the person has no time, no money. Some people are lucky, but others are not so lucky. I never feel inferior. I didn't even in China, when I was a little girl. I told you how I ate all by myself, to one side. I don't blame people who treat me like that; I only blame myself: Why is my luck like that? Why don't I have a mother? Why don't I have a father? I never would say, "Oh, she's mean to me," although of course they were mean to me.

- Nathan: That's very touching. Now that you are a grown up woman, when you do your business here and in Hong Kong, do you feel that you are treated like any other business person?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, I think so. Here and in China also. But in Peru, when I first arrived, it was very difficult. I didn't remember any Spanish, and they really didn't treat me very well. The Chinese family, because I was half Peruvian, didn't consider me Chinese. My Peruvian family didn't consider me Peruvian, because I was part Chinese. But it really didn't affect me at all. I just wanted to learn Spanish and to be able to speak it as well as they did.
- I'm very proud because my Chinese is good. I never went to the university in China. My Chinese is as good as if I went to the university, because I like to read Chinese and I like self study. Also Spanish, and also English. I took English when I was in high school, a long time ago. I would look up words in the dictionary and write them down; that's self study.
- So they do discriminate, yes. And after two divorces, some Chinese people really looked down on me, but they admired me. In the business world, for example, when they had parties there, the men especially were very kind and treated me very well, but women were sometimes jealous, very jealous. That was their problem. When I got near them, if I felt a warm welcome I would sit down with them. If I felt a little bit of jealousy, I excused myself and went somewhere else. I couldn't care less, you know? I had so many things to think about; work, and so many things to do for the children. If they didn't accept me, it was fine.
- Nathan: Are you an American citizen?
- Wong-Vargas: No, I am on a resident visa. In the future I would really love to be.
- Nathan: Then you are a citizen of Peru?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes. I have been in this country twenty-two years already, and I am still a citizen of Peru. I keep telling Susy and Lita they should become citizens. Martha, Michael and Ines

are citizens already. Susy says, "Yes, okay, *mañana*--tomorrow." Finally she did. But I don't think it's as easy as it was before; you have to wait over a year because there are so many people. Lita still is not a citizen, and she says *mañana*. I tell her not to wait until tomorrow; do it now. She says okay. I don't know about her status now.

I love this country, and I'm very grateful. It's beautiful, and my children went to very good schools. I do hope someday that I will have a business here. I have some investments here, but I'd like to have an active business, buying or selling.



## XII SUMMING UP

[Interview 11: August 7, 1989]##

Nathan: Shall we just pick up where it pleases you? Tell me what's on your mind today.

Wong-Vargas: Since today is the last session, really I would like to thank all my children for this beautiful contribution, and for their generosity to continue to fund this project to make this oral history of myself come true. I also thank you for your time and your patience. When I reread it, maybe I will add or subtract some things.

Records, and Real Age

Wong-Vargas: I wrote some things down here. For example, my father took me to China when I was five. The Sacred Heart school received girls when they are ten; they couldn't receive girls so small as five (I don't know about now). So according to my passport I am sixty-seven, but really I am sixty-two. I never changed my documents because I didn't think it mattered. When I go to the movies or on trips I could use it, but I can't; I always pay full price. My passport and my driver's license and everything says that age, but I just cannot take advantage of it [laughs]. When I really become sixty-five, then I will use it. At that time, my passport will show I am seventy.

Nathan: You know how old you are.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, and I feel great. Thank God I feel in good health. Very seldom do I get a headache, for example. Very seldom do I catch cold. Maybe it's because in my early years I worked very hard and it made me strong. Hopefully I can keep going like this until maybe eighty, ninety.

Nathan: And keep learning?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Keep learning and keep very busy. I really love to sew; this I sewed myself [demonstrates].

Nathan: That's a very handsome yellow outfit.

Wong-Vargas: And the jacket also. When I make them, I make three of the same style but in different colors--one in red, one in blue, and this yellow one. I'm always so busy I don't have time to be bored. I like to do things like that for my children and grandchildren also.

#### Four Mothers

Wong-Vargas: One day, maybe in another two years, I'd like to write a book. The name will be "My Four Mothers."

Nathan: Tell me again who your four mothers are.

Wong-Vargas: My own mother, whom I do not remember, but they told me about her a little bit. Another one would be my grandmother, my mother's mother, who raised me until I was five years old. Of course, I don't know that much about her, but I remember her love.

And then Ah Sham. I have a lot of things to write about her. She was so nice, and things were so unfair for her. It is unfair that she died just because of my father, because of his name and that he was rich in the village in China. After the Communists took over Canton, my second stepmother didn't want to receive Ah Sham, and she committed suicide. She did a lot of things for poor people and for Susana my sister, and for me. She was very nice and kind.

The fourth mother is my Amah, my godmother, Sam Shao Wing. I know a lot about her. Her kindness--unbelievable--the things she did, and the help she gave me. She always said, "You are like me." She liked me very much, because even if I don't know a person, if I know that he or she needs help, I help. She was the same way.

Nathan: There is a lot in this memoir that can be the basis for your writing.



Isabel Wong-Vargas, circa 1981.





Wong-Vargas: Yes, that's true. I don't know if I will write in Chinese or Spanish, or maybe in English, but I will have to learn more in order to write a book. The book will be called "My Four Mothers" because they were exactly like mothers to me.

Nathan: I was thinking of the influence that women have had on you, and how you have responded.

Wong-Vargas: Without those four, I wouldn't be here.

### Message for the Children

Wong-Vargas: I told you last time that I wrote to the children, and I'd like to say it again now in Spanish. *"A mis adorados hijos, con el deseo de que se superen siempre, impulsados por la idea de que el estudio no tiene limites y que para aprender nunca es tarde en el curso de la vida."*

In English this is, "For my beloved children, with hopes that they will forever excel, urged by the idea that the study of knowledge has no limit, and that in the course of life it is never too late to learn."

Again, I'd like to mention to my children that this is the most important thing: everything in life has to be with love and honesty. Even if you wash dishes, for example. If you are an honest, hard worker and responsible person, I'm sure the owner of the restaurant will help you upgrade your job and maybe help you to be the cashier and later manager. You have to be honest to yourself; don't feel any inferiority complex; do not fool around. That's why I have been successful, because of honesty and sincerity and hard work. Don't lie. Be yourself, and never take advantage of anything that does not belong to you.

Nathan: Who taught you this?

Wong-Vargas: Nobody. That is what I believed, and God helped me. When I was very small I knew that I shouldn't take something that didn't belong to me. I never heard anyone say that, but if it was not mine, why should I take it? I was always like that. Nobody taught me. I taught my children not to do this and that. They were born with their own personalities and I don't have to worry. I was so lucky that God helped me. I really think that I'm--not a special person, but--.

I never felt any revenge toward anybody. If somebody does me harm, I never think of revenge. Of course, at the time you are sad and you don't like it, but I would never say, "One day I will have my revenge." No, never. That I would never, ever, even think. But for me the gratitude is forever. Even some small thing that somebody does for me, I will always remember it.

Nathan: You've remembered many.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, so many people. For them it was maybe nothing, but for me, I was and still am so grateful.

### Relationship with Father, and with Friends

Wong-Vargas: There were so many people who were so mean to me. I wonder sometimes why my father took me to China. I was a little girl--why? Maybe he loved me and wanted me to learn Chinese or something like that. So why did he never communicate with me, never write a letter? Or maybe he did and my uncle didn't give it to me. This I don't know. I remember I wrote to him when I had almost completed high school in Hong Kong. It was the first letter.

The time I wrote was just before the Japanese took over Hong Kong, and my father responded. I told him I wanted to study; I wanted to be a doctor. I asked him to send the money to the college; he didn't have to send it to me. If he sent it to me, he might think I would spend it. It meant that I really wanted to learn, to study. Too bad I didn't have somebody to help me at that time.

I thought my father loved me, but when I wanted to sell my three-story store in Canton, China, someone had to guarantee it, and my father didn't want to do it. Does that mean loving, caring for me? And he didn't want me to learn Spanish when I arrived in Lima in 1950, because he wanted me to be on his farm in the north of Peru to help him with his business. Is it love?

Nathan: It's very hard to understand.

Wong-Vargas: I don't think he did love me. (I'm sorry, I shouldn't say that.) Because if he did love me, he would care about me. He would trust me. He would guarantee me, and I could sell the stores in Canton. He did not, so Amah guaranteed it.



Left to right: Michael, Susy, Isabel, Lita, Ines, and Martha, 1982.



Pleasures in Helping

Nathan: In your own relationship with your children, it is different.

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes, so different. Not only with my children, even with my friends. If they need money or some guarantee, like the time I needed it, I will help them. I help so many people, you can't imagine. They still owe me, so many. It wasn't that I always had the money; sometimes I even borrowed from the bank to help them.

Nathan: Would these be mostly in Peru?

Wong-Vargas: Mostly in Peru; one or two were in China. I borrowed money from a bank in Peru and sent it to a friend, Rebecca, in Hong Kong. I paid interest at the bank and sent it to her to buy an apartment.

Here, also, A Peruvian man still owes me money and never paid me back. It was over twelve years ago. At first I don't know this person, but I knew that he was from Peru. He and his brothers, the four of them, are musicians who came to this country to perform. For some reason he couldn't get the payment from New York, and they had no money to get back to Peru. They were washing dishes in Los Angeles. I didn't know them personally, but I knew that they were very good musicians.

I knew the older brother, Julio, arrived in San Francisco looking for somebody to lend money to them to buy a ticket back to Peru. I lent it to him, and he never sent back even one cent. I lent him \$2,000, plus 500- in Lima to his two brothers when they arrived in Lima. At that time I still owed money to Cecilia Wong in Canada.

What can I do? I feel embarrassed to ask him when I see him in Lima. Eventually somebody will do something, and I believe that God will justify it. If I borrow some money, I will pay it back with interest, and I'm still grateful because he or she gave it to me at the moment when I needed it.

I don't want my children to have the same problems that I had. The most important thing is education, so I chose very good schools--the best in Lima.

- Nathan: When you speak of education, your children know many languages, as you do, and they understand many cultures. I wonder whether you feel that this the right way that people should be educated if possible?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, and I think parents should help their children go to the best schools. Then encourage them and guide them to learn different languages, music, arts, etc. Elementary and high school are very important. Children should have good teachers when they start growing; that is the time when they will assimilate the education. Also it is very important that the mother or father is always there when they return home, especially the mother. It would be better if they could help them with their homework. It is very important and special, the love of the parents and family.
- Nathan: You can talk and think in Spanish, English, Cantonese. Has that changed the way you think?
- Wong-Vargas: You mean the way I understand?
- Nathan: Yes. It seems to me you understand a great deal, and I wondered whether the knowledge of these different cultures and languages has influenced your thinking.
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, it does influence the way of my thinking, how I express myself in different languages, and try to adapt the manners and customs of the country that I am living in at that moment. It could be China, Peru, or America.

#### The Chinese Way, and the Peruvian Way

- Nathan: What did you learn from, let's say, your Chinese?
- Wong-Vargas: I learned that one should respect the older people; you should respect your parents and teachers and be grateful to the people who help you. You should never forget those things. That's also my way of thinking. In China, the parents think differently toward their children; I don't mean all the Chinese, but some that I know. They raise their children, but they always think of the future; the children have to take care of them.

My brother-in-law, he passed away a few years ago, always said that was the Chinese way. He said that the children are raised with a good education so that in the

future they are professionals in very good positions, and they have to take care of the parents.

Nathan: So it's a responsibility to the parents?

Wong-Vargas: That's my brother-in-law's and the Chinese way. But I'm not like that.

I think besides, that we should love our family and always should be united between brothers and sisters. I think parents should teach their children proper morals and good values and should also practice what they preach. Parents should support, supervise, and guide their children through life at least until they are eighteen years of age. They should help them to find and become themselves. Parents should not wait for nor expect compensation or assistance from their children in any way in the future.

However, children should always remember what their parents did for them, and thank them for all their past love, sacrifices, and actions. Children should love their parents and take care of them, and give them the respect, love, and consideration they deserve so that the parents don't feel abandoned. As they mature in age they need more love, attention, and patience from their children and grandchildren.

In my way of thinking, I just want to help my children to be themselves. Believe me, I would not like to be a burden for my children. I would feel very bad.

Nathan: So you've chosen not to take that Chinese view?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. I don't know where I got this. It's me. The Peruvian way might be the same; some of them do think like the Chinese. But I can tell you that in the Chinese way, especially the older generation, they like the children to take care of them. Some Peruvians do and some don't, but eight out of ten Chinese really want the children to take care of them. I was in China eighteen years, so I know this. I was in Peru also, but I was not raised there. They do like to be close to the children. Some Peruvian families like to live with their children, all together in the Peruvian way. That's very close to the Chinese way, but maybe they don't expect their children to take care of them. But some Peruvians do, and they like to be very close.

In my case, I like to be united, together, with the children. Nobody's perfect. Among five children, they are

not all the same, but I hope my children listen to me and remain united, close. It's very important to be close. I like to live close to my children, but not second floor-third floor. That's too close, because I understand, for example, that they have their own friends. If they have a party or reception, sometimes they don't want to include their parents. That's quite normal and correct. But in Peru or in China, you have to invite them, too. Oh, yes. If you don't, they will say, "My children had a party upstairs and they didn't invite me." They will be upset. I would not be upset, but maybe my children would feel bad because they didn't invite me. I like my independence.

Nathan: If you were living in Peru now with your family, would you be in a position to advise them? Is there more parental authority there?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, there is more parental authority in Peru than in the United States. I don't have to be in Peru or in China in order to advise my children as I do today. I discipline and teach them from my heart not from the ways of the country.

Nathan: And is parents' authority the same in China, you feel?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, the same in China. In China, even now, the parents always have more authority, and always the children obey, maybe not in their heart, but they say yes. They never talk back to their parents. In Peru children also obey their parents and are very close to them and their grandparents. I like that.

In the United States it is different; children are very independent. That I can tell. Perhaps it's because of the distance, or maybe the culture is like that. I recall that quite a few of my daughters'-- Ines's, Lita's, and Susy's--friends told me that they were so lucky when they were in school because everything that they asked for, their mother gave to them. But their friends had to borrow from their parents, and even some parents charged interest.

Another friend in Hong Kong, Eddie Churn, also told me that his father charged him interest. Maybe his father wanted him to have more responsibility or something. In my case, even if I have to go to the bank and borrow money, I will do it to give and to help my children. I never think that the children are going to pay me back, unless it is for business, or that when I get old they will help me. I don't wish that. Of course, sometimes, you never know, and I am sure they will, but in my heart I don't want them to. If I



know that I can't live without their help or care, I'd rather die. I don't want to cause them any worry and trouble. When I help them to be themselves, I want them to be themselves, only for their future, not for me.

Nathan: When you came to Peru from China, was there something that you learned about living in that different country and different culture?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, it was very different. First of all, when I first arrived in Peru, the discrimination was so bad against the Chinese by some of the rich Peruvian people. After the military took over there was quite a change, because they confiscated a lot of land and big houses from the rich people, and they changed a lot. I probably told you that one of the student's parents went and talked to the director of the school, because she wanted Martha out of Villa Maria American school. It was supposed to be a very famous school in Lima for the rich people, and I had nothing; I was just the owner of the small restaurant. But Martha was a very good student, and I punctually paid the full tuition. The mother superior was very nice. She said, "I know they want your daughter out of the school." There was another Chinese student there, but she came from a rich family. They lived just a few blocks away in a beautiful home, and we lived on the second floor over my restaurant.

But honesty works. I didn't do anything dishonest. I told both Martha and Michael, "You are as rich as they are. Maybe you are even richer in your mind and in your willingness to study. You are all the same age; the only difference is your parents. Their parents may have been lucky enough to have inherited money from their parents. You are lucky because your mother is hardworking; the money is even more meaningful, because I worked and I paid." If I had received some inheritance from my parents or grandparents, that would be so easy, and it would not be mine; it would be from them. Of course, I would be lucky, but my money is from my hard work. So I always told them, "Don't feel embarrassed. Better you should feel that you are even richer than they are in your willingness to learn." I always said that to Martha and Michael. I don't know if they still remember.

Michael was in Markham, the best and a very expensive English-speaking school in Lima, but I never said, "My son is in Markham," or "My daughter is in Villa Maria." I never even mentioned it. They knew they were there, and I wanted

them to learn. That's it. It was not for me. It was for the good education of my children.

The American Way: Freedom for the Children

Nathan: It's interesting how you understood life in China and life in Peru. Then you came here. What was different, and what did you learn here?

Wong-Vargas: The United States is a country that offers opportunity to people. Hope exists and one can still be what one aspires to be by working hard. People have rights here as individuals and more important, people are safe and the children are safe in most neighborhoods. The opportunity to have education is also another important factor given to the people.

I have always been a person who has believed in equality of race, sex, color, religion, etc. The United States tries to promote this belief to its people. Freedom is also for the people, but in the case of its youth I think there is too much freedom here. Some parents say that at sixteen years old they are free. It's all right that they are free to drive, perhaps, but I think the parents have to take care of them until they are twenty-one, and especially help them with their education. Sixteen is too young yet. Twenty-one, well, at least they can vote. [laughs] They ought to think.

Nathan: Did you know that the voting age has been lowered in the last few years to eighteen?

Wong-Vargas: Really? I didn't know. I think the parents give the children too much freedom sometimes. I bought this house in '67, and Ines had been with the Spidell family for a year. I think that was the beginning of the hippie movement. There were a lot of hippies around then; now there are still a few, but it has changed so much.

Ines was going through her adolescent years in Berkeley and Berkeley was a city where the Peace and Freedom movement first started.

Ines wanted to go out like all her peers, and I didn't want her to go out without reason. She was still young, just sixteen. Of course, in this country a sixteen-year-old can run. One day she was screaming on the second floor, I remember. My neighbor, Mrs. Lewin, said, "You're in America,

Isabel. You should give your daughter freedom and let her go wherever she wants to go." I remember very well my neighbor saying that.

When the children are small, they don't know; they just follow. In my case, when I was young, it was so different. But you can't give them so much freedom. You can't be too tight, either, but you have to take care of them and not let them go wherever they want to go. I think too much freedom is not good for youngsters, not until they are twenty-one or at least eighteen.

The best education is to take them on travels. If you can't go to Europe or another country, there are so many beautiful places in the United States. Take them around on weekends or on vacation. Drive with a car, by bus, or by train. The children will learn a lot. They will learn from books, but not as much as if they physically see a place. You also will spend more time and share things with your children. That's my opinion.

I understand my children quite well. For example, Martha, Michael, Ines, Lita, and Susy--we are like friends. I'm never like a dominant mother, saying, "You do this." That's me. Never. I can't. Sometimes when I have to correct or criticize them, I would say, "As a mother I would say this and that, and as a friend I'm saying this and that, but in a different way." They will listen or not; that all depends on them. I'm not like some mothers I know who scream about this and that; you can't talk to children that way. Whatever they want is all right, and I will give it to them. I never say no, especially if they want to go somewhere. Of course, that's when they are over eighteen. If they ask me for something, I'll always say yes, and sometimes I would offer it to them. That's my problem, too. I should let them work it out by themselves. But that's me, because maybe I didn't have it before, and I want them to have it. Maybe I have suffered so much, and I don't want them to suffer.

Nathan: Do you have any opinions about whether students or young people should also work?

Wong-Vargas: Part-time, yes. But it all depends on the situation of the parents and the kind of work. If they study full-time, they don't have enough time for work. Maybe during vacations, yes. But during the school time it is very difficult. If the parents can afford it, after school their children can learn music, drawing, languages, whatever. They can work

during the summertime, but during the school classtime I think it's better not to. That's my opinion.

I never wanted my children to work then. If they wanted to babysit or whatever on the weekends, that was fine. Lita and Susy babysat on weekends. They even went to the cinema to sell popcorn a couple of times. That's okay, but on weekends. They learned things that way, too. But during classtime, I'd prefer they learned a language, music, or something. There are so many things to learn and to do.

##

Nathan: In addition to all these things that you are interested in, I wonder if you tried to help your children understand finance and business, how to invest--these things that you also know.

Wong-Vargas: It is difficult, because they are in different fields. For example, Martha is in a different field, Michael is in a different field, and Ines is a lawyer. Lita and Susy maybe, because Lita is an industrial engineer and Susy is an economist, which has something to do with investing. Ines has said she'd like to join with me to do business or something. I thought that was a good idea, because I always told them that if I invest in something here, then I will have to be here all the time. They said they could help me, and then I could travel. So we're thinking about it. Not only Ines and I, but maybe the other children want to invest, too, and that is fine with me. It would be some family business investment.

Real Estate: Canton, Hong Kong, Peru, and the U.S.

Wong-Vargas: I like real estate very much, but in this country it's difficult to pass the test. As I told you, in Canton real estate was different, and in Hong Kong it also was different. In Canton they have a Chinese tea house named How Sum. I learned from my godmother. Early in the morning you go there, and in one section they are all what you call real estate salespersons. In another section are the buyers. The buyer comes over and says he is looking for a house or whatever. The word is passed around, and they ask each other, "Do you have a three-bedroom home?" and so on. It was fun.

I was always with my godmother, so when the deal would go through they would give the commission to me, to my godmother, and of course to the group to which we belonged. So you always had something, not only your own but you got a piece of all the commissions of your group. Amah was the one with the money who was the investor in there.

Nathan: So you shared the commissions with your own group?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. It was a group of six at that time, and then four. My Amah was the main one, and she always cared about me and made sure I got my commission. So I had to go every morning, and it was fun. Hong Kong was different. You don't have to learn to be in real estate there. You don't have to take any exam at all.

Nathan: No tea house in Hong Kong?

Wong-Vargas: Maybe there were a few tea houses for some purpose and also for real estate, but we didn't go there. We went to a kind of office with salespersons and buyers. I don't know about now. You also didn't need a license to do it. Hong Kong is much bigger, and they have ads in the newspapers, etc. It was much more organized in Hong Kong, and you had to go to a lawyer to do the paperwork, but in Canton you didn't have to. Amah or the salesperson did everything. As long as you had your original ownership documents and two people to verify that it was yours, then you could sell it.

Nathan: This was all before the revolution?

Wong-Vargas: Oh, yes, much before.

Nathan: Do you have any sense of whether there is any buying and selling of property now in China?

Wong-Vargas: No, I don't, but I'd like to find out. I'd also like to find out about Hong Kong.

In Peru there is a real estate office, but, again the salespersons don't have to pass an examination like here. If you have money and some knowledge about it, you just rent an office and put up a sign. You do have to have a license from city hall for wherever you belong: San Isidro, Miraflores, or whatever. Then you have a secretary and a telephone, and you put ads in newspapers for whoever wants to buy or sell to come to you. They call, you show the property, they like it and buy it, you earn a commission, and that's it. It's much easier.

Here you have to be a broker in order to have an office and have your sales people with you.

Nathan: Would you ever be interested in becoming a broker here?

Wong-Vargas: In the future, maybe. I understand you have to have a four-year college degree to be a broker. I know somebody who is not, but the gentleman is very old now, and maybe it was different before. Now they require more knowledge and a college degree because there are so many brokers. I have a college degree, so I think I could do it, but first of all I'd like to be a sales person. Let me see if I can pass the examination first. Then, in the future, maybe yes. My ambition is not that high, to be a broker. I'd just like to buy something and rebuild it, redecorate it, and then sell it. If I get the opportunity to be a broker, that would be very nice, but I would rather have more time to travel, and I'd like to have a restaurant, yes. That I'd really like.

Nathan: First the restaurant, then the property to refurbish?

Wong-Vargas: No, first I would like to buy a property and then refurbish it for the restaurant. Also, maybe buy some other property to refurbish and sell it. If I have an opportunity in this area, I'd like to open a good restaurant. My daughter Lita says, "No, San Francisco is better." I know San Francisco is much better, that's true, but it has so many good restaurants, and also the property is much more expensive. Berkeley also has good restaurants, but I don't see any good Peruvian seafood here. I'd like to have not Peruvian food only but seafood--international. It has to be international seafood but with daily specialties from Peru. Of course, it would also have to have very good steak and chicken, because maybe some people don't like seafood.

### Memories and Survival

Nathan: If you want to think about attitudes towards women or girls in China, was there the feeling that maybe it wasn't of value for you to learn?

Wong-Vargas: At that time, the majority of Chinese girls were not given an education in China. A woman's place was always in the home. It wasn't of value therefore to send a girl to school. My

uncle, though, did send his children (female and male) to school but he was the exception.

But how come my cousin could learn and I could not? She was a girl. In Lima, Peru, how come my sister Susana could learn and not me? Maybe my father was selfish and he wanted me to help him. Without knowing any Spanish, I was like a mute and would be going to his hacienda to help him. I'm sorry, but that's my feeling. Because when I was sitting at the table (as I told you), he asked in front of my children and in front of the teacher why I wanted to learn. I felt so embarrassed I had to leave the table. I told myself that some day I had to learn.

Nathan: Maybe that helped you learn?

Wong-Vargas: Do you think so? No, I don't think so, because I had motivation to learn. And I like to learn. People say, "Oh, you're so lucky. You went to China, so you know how to speak and write Chinese." I say "No, I did it myself. I studied very hard and got scholarships and did self study. It was not because my father or my uncle sent me to school and paid the tuition." I think that my father never loved me; he only wanted me to help him in his business, and he didn't want me to learn Spanish or anything. He was very selfish.

I still remember so many things. Maybe it's my mind. I remember when he took me to China. That was cruel, kidnapping me in front of the person I loved, my grandmother, and my cousin Ines.

Nathan: It's very clear in your mind even now.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, it is. I remember my grandmother crying, calling my name. I was desperate, like I was dying. I thought they were going to kill me, because my grandmother always told me that the Chinese killed and ate people. It was cruel. He could have done it in some different way. He could have kidnapped me, but not in front of her, and then I would not hear her voice, which I always remember. She was crying, and my cousin Ines was crying, too, calling my name like I was dying. Then the man managed to grab me, and then running and running until I couldn't hear their voices, and I never saw them again. I think it was so cruel. I'll never forget that.

Also when I was sick in China, my uncles and aunts didn't give me medicine or even water.

Nathan: After all these hardships that you've been through, how did you survive?

Wong-Vargas: I think it is God who helped me and my mother's soul has protected me. I feel so fortunate that I can live, and I'm strong and can survive.

Then there was the second World War and going from Canton to Hong Kong, then from Hong Kong to Canton. But I don't hate or blame anybody, believe me.

At the beginning I was very upset with my uncle number three. If he loved me or cared about me a little, when I was with fever, sick, how could he not send for a doctor to see me? How could he just take me to the Chang's house and leave me there? You don't do that. He treated me like, or worse, than, a slave.

Nathan: And yet somehow you managed to survive.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I survived, not because they pushed me so I wanted to learn or study, no. I could have died a long time ago. Many people in the same situation might have died because they didn't have the strength or the personality that God gave to me. I feel very strong.

I think that's why I want to give too much to my children, because when I was young I didn't have anything. I not only help my children; whoever needs help and tells me his story, I'll help, even if they are not relatives.

Nathan: I read that you were nominated for Woman Warrior in 1984. What was that?

Wong-Vargas: [thinking]. Oh, my son Michael was working in San Francisco, and he talked about me to a friend, who nominated me. He is the Honorary Consul General from Haiti, Mr. Oscar Carcelin. The response was that what you did in your own country didn't count, like what I did at the Asilo de los Ancianos, and helping children, and so forth. But I didn't do them in this country; it was in Peru, and you have to do something over here, so I did not get this award. Other awards, yes, in Peru, but not in this country.

My son worked in Chinatown in San Francisco at that time, and he knew that when you knew somebody who had done things, you just wrote to the group and they chose the winner of the award.



Michael's Scrapbook

Nathan: Who was the group?

Wong-Vargas: I think it was organized by the Chinese in Chinatown.

I never keep clippings in a scrapbook. So many of my friends do it. But my son did, and this one is all about Isabel Wong in Peru. And here are more Peruvian items. This day the president, Alan García, was there, but at that time he was not the president yet.

There were a lot of things. One day I read in the newspaper about a little kid who was almost blind and they wanted him to go Colombia to a very good eye doctor. They needed a round-trip ticket. Somebody had already donated one round-trip ticket, but they needed another one so that someone, maybe the mother, could accompany him. I called the agency, Tour America, right away and said I would donate a round-trip ticket, and I didn't even know them. I told them not to give my name because it wasn't necessary. I don't know how the mother found out, but she called me to say thank you, and she told the newsmen, and they put it in the newspaper. I didn't want it, believe me.

[showing clipping] This article was when I was singing. My first song was Ave Maria, in the Teatro San Isidro.

Nathan: "Isabelita." You look very beautiful in this picture.

Wong-Vargas: Thank you [laughs]. There were so many things. Here I am with the ambassador. This [article] is when Susy and Lita graduated with their Master's degrees. There are also things about the children here. [thumbing through scrapbook] It's fun.

The policemen in la Victoria district (in Peru) have a club where children can come one day a week to learn music, art, and something different. They invited me one day to visit, and I asked where the restroom was for the children. They had to go all the way around to the other side to the police station. I asked how much one would cost, and I built two, one for boys and one for girls. I paid for everything.

Nathan: Was this in Lima?

Wong-Vargas: Yes. Everything I did was in Lima, Peru, and nothing here [laughs]. The kids were so happy, and they wrote this article about me. This is me, like the president's wife. [laughs] Here are the children dancing and singing for me. It was so touching. Every time I go to visit them, I'll buy some pens and pencils, and I give them to them for the kids.

Nathan: I'd like to copy some of these to put in your memoir.

Wong-Vargas: Yes, you can do that. There are so many in the Asilo. But everything is in another country.

I hope some day I can do something in this country. The reason I cannot is that I am always going back and forth to Lima, and I don't have a business here. If I had a business here it would be different.

Benefits for Cultural Center in Ica: Berkeley, then Lima

Wong-Vargas: Ezequiel Amador is one of the first violinists in the San Francisco Symphony, and he is from Ica, a city about two hours from Lima. One day he said somebody already donated land in Ica to build a small cultural center for young people. He would like to raise funds to start construction.

I said, why didn't we do something here, and so we did. I think it was last March. I did it here in my house in Berkeley. I prepared food for fifty to sixty people, and then it turned out to be more than sixty. I paid to have all my furniture put out in the garage. I rented fifty chairs, and I have about twenty chairs here, so we put around seventy chairs. They were all full, but only sixty paid. Ezequiel Amador came with his brother, who plays the piano. So one played piano and the other the violin. Oh, it was beautiful. We charged \$20 for the donation to the cultural center. Ezequiel's wife and a friend were at the table at the entrance to take the tickets and money; I didn't want to touch the money thing.

All the money was sent to Peru for Ica. It was about \$1,200.

Nathan: That seems a small amount to charge.

SUB-DIRECCION ESPECIALIZADA DE MENORES - GC.



PLAN DE PROTECCION Y ORIENTACION A LA NIÑEZ Y JUVENTUD PERUANA - PAPONJP - GC.

DIPLOMA

Otorgado a la Sra. Isabel WONG VARGAS

Colaboradora Filantrópica en bien de la niñez

Por su destacada participación en los Festivales Deportivos, Recreativos y Culturales de Enero a Diciembre.

Lima, 11 de Diciembre de 1987



*[Handwritten signature]*

LUIS GUILLERMO RIOS Y ALMEIDA  
CORONEL GC.

JEFE DE LA SUB DIRECCION  
SUB-DIRECCION ESPECIALIZADA DE MENORES - GC.



STATEMENT

The nominee has achieved exemplary efforts to advance the personal, professional, and social status of Asians (Chinese) in Peruvian society (South America), in the face of much personal and professional adversity and societal-cultural constraints. She provides a good example of a Chinese woman fighting many obstacles: in two societies/cultures to become an active advocate and contributor to human welfare in Peruvian society, and a successful businesswoman. She has excelled in community affairs for the welfare of the Peruvian elderly, and is member of many boards and charity organizations dealing with the promotion of the Chinese-Peruvian. She exemplifies the endurance, perseverance, motivation, and the constant fight for equality and self-achievement, seen in the image of what the "woman warrior" has come to represent among Asian women. The nominee resides in Alameda county in the Bay Area and has also been successful in her business enterprises in the U.S., and in her involvement with the local Peruvian community as Honorary Vice-Consul of Peru in San Francisco

Business/Labor Accomplishments:

The nominee is a successful Chinese businesswoman who is tricultural and trilingual (Chinese, Spanish, English), and who worked her way up to presently be the owner and proprietor of among other things and internationally-known restaurant in Lima-Peru. The locale has not only received many national and international awards (e.g., The Gastronomic Society, Spain), but offers an interesting example of stable organizational cohesiveness and effectiveness, in the sense that all employees receive annual dividends. She is also an investor in The Ferry Plaza Restaurant in San Francisco, and is a member and former Vice-President of its corporation and governing board. She is also president of Lotus Enterprises, Inc., an import and export firm. In Peru, she has been the president of Lima-Panamericana, Inc., since 1962, and of Lin-Fa, Inc., another commercial since 1962 as well, both located in Lima-Peru. The nominee was able to overcome much barriers against women, and especially businesswomen in Peru, a traditional society where there is racial and gender discrimination. She is one of the few Asian (Chinese) women who have been able to accomplish successful paths in Peruvian society, in a manner similar to a Lotus flower, a plant which grows flowers from the mud.

Activities in Community/Social Affairs and in Charitable Organizations:

The nominee, besides being a busy businesswoman, has also been active in the cultural and social activities of organizations in Peru, such as the Chinese-Peruvian Cultural Center (of which she is the honorary member), and has involved herself in many charitable functions dealing with the promotion of the Chinese in Peru. She has a special concern for the welfare of the elderly poor, and in 1980 donated the construction of a special wing in a large asylum for the neglected elderly of Lima (Monterrico) to house their last phases of endurance. She is specially concerned for the Chinese elderly in Peru, many of which immigrated to Peru in mid 1800's as indentured servants and who are now forgotten and attempt to survive in an underdeveloped society which has no public welfare system nor public housing. The asylum is run by Spanish catholic nuns from Spain and houses many of the sick female and disabled elderly.

The nominee has also been a volunteer social worker with the International Institute of the East Bay (Oakland) during her first years as an immigrant in the U.S., and who is now active in the Peruvian community of San Francisco, by being an honorary of both the Committee Pro-Peruvian Children (Comite Pro-Infancia Peruana), and the Center for Peruvian Assistance (Centro de Ayuda Peru). Professionally-trained also as an interior decorator/designer (licensed in Peru), while being a businesswoman, and raising five children, she received an award for her design accomplishments in early 19 given by the Country Club of El Bosque in Chosica, Peru. Three years ago, the nominee was appointed Honorary Vice-Consul of Peru in San Francisco by Peruvian President Fernando Belaunde Terry (1981)

She is the first woman to hold an honorary diplomatic post in the Peruvian Foreign Diplomatic Corps. Being herself Chinese makes this accomplishment especially meritorious and salient in the advancement of the image of the Chinese woman in Peru.

Personal Background/Information:

Born in a province in Peru with a Peruvian mother and a Chinese father, she was sent to China after the death of her mother at age 5. She spent her childhood and early adolescence years in the Mau-San village of Pun-Yue county, in the outskirts of Canton. She was treated as the house maid by her Chinese relatives due to prejudices against her for being Eurasian. During her late adolescence and early adulthood years, she moved to Hong Kong, married and had three children, one of them died in her march to Canton (mass marches) from Japanese-occupied Hong Kong during World War II. At the age of 24, and knowing no Spanish, she moved to Peru and had three more children, and subsequently died shortly after. Her husband was extremely unsupportive, and impeded her in her efforts to be employed, attempts at self-improvement, and domestic activities such as raising five children. She started out in business by operating a small grocery store in Lima, moving gradually to a laundry and a small Chinese restaurant, and finally to a large Peruvian seafood restaurant. She migrated to the U.S. in late 60's, but travels to Peru often to attend to business. She is also an avid amateur singer, having performed in the Municipal Theater of San Isidro (Lima-Peru). Her five children were educated at U.S. Ivy-League schools and are professionals in the Bay Area.



Wong-Vargas: But for Peru it was a lot of money. I told Amador that the next time I was in Peru and he was there, I was going to close half of my restaurant, and I would donate everything. He would sell the tickets, and he would have more funds for the construction. All the money would be for the Ica cultural center. He said, "You're not from Ica. How come you are helping Ica? You're from the north; you're from Chepén." I said, "If I knew someone from Chepén who needed something, by all means I would help. Since I know you, and you want to do something that's also in Peru, why not? In Ica or anywhere, if I can do it, I'll do it. Maybe somebody not in Peru needs something--some help. Anything that I could do, I'll do.

So when he was there in Peru, I closed half of my restaurant to seat about 120 people. Oh, it was so nice. It was one evening. I remember the next day the gentleman who donated the land, his friend, asked how much they owed me. I told him not to ask me. I had paid for everything--the food and the waiters. The waiters wanted extra hours [overtime], and I said, "Look, this is a charity thing. You mean you want extra hours? We are all Peruvian and we have to help." So they said okay and didn't charge overtime. It made a lot of money, close to \$2,000, I think. So they knew me and liked me. All the money went to them. I did tell them to set up a table at the entrance and take the tickets so people wouldn't think the money was going to my restaurant.

Nathan: How did you get to know Ezequiel Amador?

Wong-Vargas: Quite a long time ago I first met his nephew, Hernan Arce.

##

Nathan: So that was how you met Ezequiel Amador.

Wong-Vargas: Yes. He and his wife are very nice people. They invited me to concert rehearsals on two opportunities. Friends who know me know that I like to help, so that's why they talked to me about the Ica Cultural Center. And right away I said yes.

### Volunteering in the U.S.

Wong-Vargas: In this country I have already offered my assistance to many causes, but there is still a lot more that I would like to do for others.

- Nathan: Well, you already do it.
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, I do help this and that as a volunteer, but that doesn't count. You have to give more of your time and do more fund raising.
- Nathan: Yes, but you do volunteer.
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, a long time ago. I worked as a social worker half day, later as a volunteer at the International Institute of the East Bay in Oakland with the Chinese newcomers. I also volunteer on Fridays at the Children's Hospital in Oakland and with the Red Cross visiting the blind people. I've been out of it for four or five years, because I'm just a short time here, then a short time there, back and forth traveling. So I cannot say yes if I won't be here. The International Institute has been calling me so many times, and they send me letters. For example, they wanted me to be there this morning at 10:30, but I know I can't. I'd like to help them one day. The anniversary of the International Institute will be sometime in September, so they are organizing this event. I'd like to help them, maybe selling tickets. The other day they wanted me to be there as a volunteer, but I went with Martha to Ashland, and I couldn't do it.
- Nathan: You went to Ashland?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes. It was very nice, for five days. I really enjoyed it. Martha invited me. She said, "You come." She was very generous. I wanted to pay my own way, of course, but she did not let me. We went with a group, and I enjoyed it very much.
- Nathan: You like the theater?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, I like the theater. I'm leaving on the fourteenth with the Berkeley theater group; they leave on the seventeenth, but I am leaving a little earlier.
- Nathan: Is this a benefit for the Berkeley Repertory Theater?
- Wong-Vargas: Yes, that's correct.



Advantages of A Restaurant

Wong-Vargas: If I have the opportunity, I'd like to have a restaurant here. Then I will have more opportunity to help others. When you have a place, it's easier to organize a fund raising. You have a chef, of course, and then you buy food and things, and it's not that costly. If you have to rent a restaurant and pay for meals, it's expensive; but if you have your own restaurant it's much less. I'd like to help whoever needs it. If they ask me, I will contribute. Yes, I will do that. Hopefully, one day I will have a chance to have a restaurant. Not so big; one hundred is enough.

Nathan: Do you have an area that interests you particularly?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I like Berkeley. But, no, not yet. If it is very expensive, I cannot, because I'd like to buy the property also. If I sell my restaurant in Lima, that's okay. But since I can't sell it, maybe I can sell this house. Why not? I was talking to my daughter Lita the other day, and she said, "Why do you worry? Why do you have to find something to work at the restaurant?" I said, "I have to do something, and I like the restaurant business," or maybe a gift shop or travel agency.

I think the restaurant business is very interesting. First of all, if you provide good food and good service, then people will come. You get to know very nice people, too.

Nathan: Do you find the same people keep coming back?

Wong-Vargas: In Peru? Oh, yes. My restaurant is doing more business with local people than with tourists. I think local business is much more important, because they are there. The tourists may come one time, but the locals know where to go. In order to have them come back, you have to have good quality food and good service. You have to tell the waiters how to do it, because sometimes people don't want to go back because of the waiter. One day I went to a restaurant, and I didn't like the way the waiter treated the customers. I didn't want to go back. It's not the owner's fault, but you see this person who serves you, and you may not like him. So it's very important to train the waiters and the employees.

I know how to treat them, because it's the same way in Peru. I talk with them. I say, "When you go to a restaurant, would you like to be treated like this? You don't like it, right? So try not to."

Memories from China

Wong-Vargas: In Chinese we say, "Don't do something that you wouldn't like them to do to you." One thing I will never forget about my godmother, Amah (the one who died in Sacramento). She said to me in the beginning (and I really liked the way she told me)--in Chinese we say, *Nen yan fu og* (if people are mean to me) *moe og fu yan* (I don't do it to others). It means, "It doesn't matter if people don't treat you well or lie to you; you don't do the same thing to them." It's beautiful in Chinese. Sometimes one word is so different that it can't be translated.

I always follow that; I always remember her telling me that. I even wrote it down on her picture and carry it with me. I say, "You always said this, and I shall always remember it."

Another person I really loved and admired is Martha and Michael's grandfather. He was a very, very kind man. His name was Seen Pac, which means "kind person"--exactly as he was. Too bad his son wasn't even 1 percent like him.

Another son, the first son of his second wife, was a little bit more like him. He is number five son, Nim Yan, and he was very kind. He died about ten years ago. I remember him. When he came to see me, I was in a hotel. It was around 1975, and I had gone to China with a group. It was raining, and I didn't like it because at that time Mao was still alive and they didn't let the local Chinese into the hotel. So he was waiting for me outside in the rain. This was in Canton. When I went out to see him, it was almost like seeing his father. He was fifty-some years old at the time, like my ex-father-in-law had been. He said, "I remember you when you were young. You suffered a lot. I admired you always." [emotionally] He knew that my ex-husband, his brother, wanted to sell the property, and I helped them not sell it because I had promised my father-in-law. He said, "I want to give you a gift in admiration and gratitude," and he gave me a little jade heart. I still have it. He said, "This is only for you, just between you and me."

Then he said that he knew that in '61 I had come back and given some food to his mother and stepmother. He was not

there, but somebody told him. Also when I was with Chang, I was very good to them. And they all knew that Chang was so mean to me (poor man, he died last month).

Peru: Wishes for the Future, and Present Legal Realities

Nathan: What would you like to see happen now in life in Peru, life in China, life here? Do you have some particular hopes?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I do. I love Peru, China, and America. I sincerely hope for peace for the whole world, particularly to these three countries. Let's talk about Peru first, because I was born in Peru. I feel so sorry for Peru now. I'm so sad, believe me, for my country, and not because my business is there; I really worry for my people. Inflation last year was close to 2,000 percent. The people don't have work; it's very poor. Some are reached, perhaps, and so many have already left the country. Some are still there, but not that many. The government did not let people who have money import merchandise from foreign countries, and the people who need work have no work. The best thing will be a change of government next year. If the Communist Party is a winner, it will be sad. People didn't know, so many wanted to vote for the Communists. They thought, "Oh, Communists; maybe we can get our share." It's not like that. When the Communists came over they took everything, I mean, if they are really Communists. (The great rich men of the Communists, like Mao, are really like this [cutting gesture]; if you don't conform, boom, you just disappear. If they don't like the way you are talking, you just disappear.)

In my restaurant I have maybe one or two workers who like Communists. This was a few years ago; now, I don't think there are any. We have APRA Party now, and the president is not Communist; he is a Democrat, close to a Socialist. Yet, we have a lot of problems: the inflation, no work. So I don't think the ones who were Communist before are going to vote for Communists this time.

One of the restaurant workers I really don't like. He's been working with me for over twenty years, ever since I opened the restaurant. He's the only one who has been there so long. One day this man said, "Pretty soon La Caleta will belong to us." Somebody told me about this, and I called him in front of everybody. I said, "You said that this restaurant pretty soon will belong to all of you? First of

all, it's not true. Because if the Communists take over you will not be working here. You will work in another restaurant. Somebody will come in this restaurant, but not you, because they change the people from south to north and vice versa." That's what happened in China. I know that, because some Chinese told me. "And your family will go to the south, and you will go to the north. They will separate your family, if they are really Communists."

I told him, "It's not so easy. Do you think that when they come over they will give you a restaurant? They will give you a home? Without working? No, the Communist government will take over everything. Maybe you will have to give half of your house to someone else, because you have a house and so many people don't have a house to live in."

I finished with, "You're not going to get La Caleta, so just put it out of your mind. But if the Communists really take over Peru and take over my restaurant, and you are lucky enough to be in this restaurant, and lucky enough to be the owner of this restaurant, fine with me. In that case, you should work hard now. Work hard, and in the future it will be yours." So I told him to take care of everything, because in the future it will be his.

Nathan: Why do you keep him, if he is so difficult?

Wong-Vargas: I can't fire anybody. When you hire somebody you have three months to try if he is good or not. The law says that you cannot fire someone after three months unless you have a good reason: if he is stealing money, takes your liquor, doesn't come to work for three days, or something like that. You have to have proof. If he drinks alcohol, you have to call the police and the police have to prove it; otherwise they could say I was just accusing him for no reason.

So many times this man really came back drunk. I told him to go home. I know he is a very bad person, but his children need to eat. It's not the children's fault; it's his fault. I know that if I fire him, the children will starve because there is no work. I'm sure nobody is going to hire him. Poor thing, he is old and sick. He even walks like an old man already. There is something wrong with his feet, and he can't wear shoes. I feel sorry for the family and his children. So I say, "God help him." Maybe he will win the lottery or something and leave by himself. [laughs]

In La Caleta, it's my own property, and I don't have to pay rent. They pay me, but very low. That's okay. God

already helped me to raise my five children, so let them work. That's why I don't fire anybody. I still have thirty-nine employees, including eleven waiters and one maitre d'. This situation is not very good, but I feel so sorry for them. When I was there in March I told them I would give whoever wanted to leave ten times their salary. I was thinking maybe he would go. I have too many waiters, but none of them wanted to go. Two nice men in the kitchen left. I was very sad. They called me to say that two were leaving. Why? Because with the opportunity I gave them they are going back to their small town and work with agriculture. I decided that was okay, because they are going to produce something. I don't think they would have left my restaurant to go to another restaurant, because they were doing very well there.

Then I told them to take the aviso [notice] down, because I didn't want any more people from the kitchen to leave. None of the waiters wanted to leave. I used to have twelve waiters, and I even needed more, but now the nights are very slow. The waiters stay because they earn not only a percentage of commission but also tips. Oh, they are very happy with the tips. So I still have eleven waiters, but I have to hire two more for the kitchen. I'd like to have some of the waiters go and help in the kitchen, but the law says I can't do that. If you are a waiter, you work as a waiter; if you are in the kitchen, you stay in the kitchen. That's not fair, either. If the business isn't very good, why not move the employees around? But they don't want you to do that.

I also have another section for coffee and dessert. Why not have the waiters go to that section? They don't want to go, and you can't force them, because if they went there they wouldn't get such good tips. They like to have tips, and that's natural. I'm going to go and talk to the eleven waiters. I'm thinking of closing at night because we don't have that much business. Sometimes we do have, but we can't guess when it will be. That's the problem.

Mario Vargas Llosa is a candidate in one party in the next election, and the Communists are another party. Both are very strong parties. APRA--I don't know who else is running for president. Vargas Llosa would be nice. He is a writer, very well known. Maybe he isn't very political, but he has a good heart and likes to help people. Two years ago he won the Nobel Prize in Europe, \$50,000, and he gave it all to the people of Peru. I think he would be a good president with the help of the party and the people; the people have to help by voting for him. Then maybe the United States will

have more confidence in him, and there will be more investment. Right now everybody wants to go out of the country. Maybe then they will return to the country. If they work on the Hong Kong people, I'm sure there will be more investment and industries in Peru.

We have some very beautiful resources. Alpaca wool, for example, and silver and gold. We have coffee and a lot of things. They could export coffee in cans. They now export just the beans, but to roast and grind it you need a lot of investment. We have gold and silver mines, but nobody to invest. We need a good government to encourage investors.

Nathan: Do you have the impression that Peruvian people would welcome Hong Kong money and people?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, I think so, as long as they are going to invest. Hong Kong people are educated, they have money; why not? Maybe Chinese or Japanese, American, whoever, from all over the world, if they want to invest they are welcome; if the president has a very good plan for inviting them. The climate is very good, not very hot. I'm talking about Lima. (Hong Kong is humid, of course.) Winter is not very cold; there's no snow in Lima.

I know that nothing lasts forever, and there has to be change. Bad things never last forever, so maybe there will be change for the good. But I would like to sell my business in Peru next year or in 1991, and then invest it over here, because all my family is here.

Besides, it's too far away to run the business in Peru. I can't do anything good over there, and I can't do anything good here. So I'd better stay here or stay there. If I stay there I will miss my children. I would be very miserable without them. Of course, I don't see them every day here, but I know they are close by, so it's okay. So hopefully I could sell everything I own in Peru, but I will not sell my apartment in San Isidro. I have a very nice apartment there, and I like to go back to visit my friends. I like my children to go back to visit, too, and they have somewhere to go--the apartment instead of a hotel. I have a very nice view from the twelfth floor. There's a golf club in front, and you can see the ocean far away and also the sunset. So I will not sell that one. I will tell my children in my will, "Don't sell that apartment." Maybe my grandchildren in the future will go to visit Peru, because it is a beautiful country.

China: The Future and the Present

Wong-Vargas: Now, China, I'm really sorry about the thing that happened lately, about the students [at Tienanmen Square]. I wish they could go back to the way it was two years ago. That would be nice. It's about time to open the door again. Also it would be nice to unite with Formosa, too. After all, they are all Chinese. But not everybody thinks the same way. China is a big country, and there are so many good talents there. It's so sad right now. I'd like to go back and maybe live there for a few months to practice my Mandarin. Maybe next year.

Nathan: Would you want to go to the mainland?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, Beijing. I'd like to go to Canton to visit some of my father's family that is still there, but I'd like to live in Beijing. I always prayed to go to the university when I was in China. In Peru I went to the university in interior design, but it was not like living a student life. Since I didn't get to do it then, I'd like to go back and study for six months and study Chinese, Mandarin. Hopefully everything will be changed by then.

Nathan: A few minutes ago you said that things don't go on forever, that bad things must change.

Wong-Vargas: That's correct. Bad things never last forever; there has to be change for good.

The United States and Learning

Wong-Vargas: The United States is beautiful. I am really grateful that my children are in this country and got their education here. Maria was so sick, and since she was over sixty-five she was covered by Medicare insurance. That's so nice, because when you get old you really need it. When you are young you can work. This country is very good, the people are nice, no discrimination. I'd really like to do something over here if I get the opportunity. The culture is different, and I'd like to learn more about the United States.

I'm so happy to be taking the real estate course. I want to finish the fourteen lectures. They tell me a little about the history of California. I'd like to learn some more about the United States' history. I've studied Chinese history, but not U.S. history. It's never too late to learn. That's what's good about this country; they will give you opportunities to learn. I can go there, and they would never say that I was too old. They will accept me, and even if I am eighty years old I can go if I am willing to learn. But in Peru, over sixty would be difficult to be accepted. Maybe they wouldn't want to learn anyway.

It's too bad that to study medicine is so difficult. Otherwise, I'd like to study medicine, even if it took ten or twenty years--if I were still alive. If I graduated today and died tomorrow, I wouldn't mind. At least I would have learned something.

When I was working part time with the International Institute they were paying me half pay, but then I decided I'd better just work as a volunteer. I knew that to be a good social worker I had to learn, so I went to Merritt College. I took courses about social work. I wanted to get my Master's degree in that. I had a very, very good teacher as my counselor. I think her name was Elsa, and I learned a lot from her.

##

Wong-Vargas: She said I was so sentimental that I could not be a social worker. I said, "Why not? To want to help people is the way you should be." She said no, that you have to be strong; otherwise you would get sick. Everyone had to write something about themselves, how they felt. I had written that when I was working as a volunteer I wasn't supposed to give my client my home phone number, but I did give it to somebody because she really needed it. She came from China and didn't speak English at all. She called me at midnight, and that was fine with me. I would talk to her.

But Elsa told me I should not do that, because I would get sick later on. She said, "You can't do it. You have to be strong." I told her I had to help this lady because she didn't speak English. Oh, it's another story, very sad. Her son wanted to kill her, and the lady had to call the police;



but she couldn't speak English, so she called me, and I called the police for her.

Nathan: Did she call you more than once?

Wong-Vargas: Yes, more than once, sometimes at 3 o'clock in the morning, because she was scared. It was okay. Elsa said, "That's all right if you have only one client, but when you have so many clients, you will get sick." I couldn't sleep, wondering what happened to her. So I called her up to find out, because I got so involved. Elsa said I can't be that way; I'd better not go into social work, because I would get an ulcer or something. She said I was too soft, too good. Maybe now I've changed a little bit, but still I don't think I should work as a social worker any more.

Nathan: I wouldn't want you to change too much.

Wong-Vargas: It's like with Maria; it was not my obligation, but I went to see her every day. If I didn't go, I would feel bad, I would feel sick. I had to go. I'm very sentimental. When I do business, I am very responsible. I have to be, doing business; either do it, or don't do it. So many times I just do business, but I don't even charge for the service, just the cost, because we are friends. But I think that in the long run I am helping others.

Nathan: Yes. Is there any final observation, or anything else that is on your mind?

Wong-Vargas: Not at this moment. Maybe after I read it over. Again, I thank you for your time and patience.

Nathan: This has been a wonderful experience, and I do thank you very much.



## TAPE GUIDE--Isabel Wong-Vargas

[Interview 1: March 13, 1989]	
Tape 1, Side A	1
Tape 1, Side B	8
Tape 2, Side A	17
Tape 2, Side B not recorded	
[Interview 2: March 21, 1989]	
Tape 3, Side A	25
Tape 3, Side B	33
[Interview 3: April 11, 1989]	
Tape 4, Side A	41
Tape 4, Side B	47
Tape 5, Side A	55
Tape 5, Side B	62
[Interview 4: April 18, 1989]	
Tape 6, Side A	70
Tape 6, Side B	78
Tape 7, Side A	85
Tape 7, Side B	92
[Interview 5: April 25, 1989]	
Tape 8, Side A	98
Tape 8, Side B	105
Tape 9, Side A	112
Tape 9, Side B not recorded	
[Interview 6: May 2, 1989]	
Tape 10, Side A	120
Tape 10, Side B	127
Tape 11, Side A	136
Tape 11, Side B	144
[Interview 7: May 12, 1989]	
Tape 12, Side A	153
Tape 12, Side B	160
Tape 13, Side A	168
Tape 13, Side B	177
[Interview 8: May 15, 1989]	
Tape 14, Side A	185
Tape 14, Side B	192
Tape 15, Side A	200
Tape 15, Side B not recorded	

## [Interview 9: July 17, 1989]

Tape 16, Side A	209
Tape 16, Side B	217
Tape 17, Side A	227
Tape 17, Side B	237
Tape 18, Side A	246
Tape 18, Side B not recorded	

## [Interview 10: July 31, 1989]

Tape 19, Side A	254
Tape 19, Side B	262
Tape 20, Side A	271
Tape 20, Side B	281

## [Interview 11: August 7, 1989]

Tape 21, Side A	291
Tape 21, Side B	302
Tape 22, Side A	309
Tape 22, Side B	318

首先，我特別在此感謝我的兒女們及婿等的好意，使我能把過去的經歷，口述生平事蹟完成。同時，我亦向卜基理加省大學內，班高夫圖書館各位理事人員，致謝他們所給予我此機會，使我的生平事蹟在此著名之圖書館永存。

由嫻敦女士轉來大女婿保羅之委託，希我能用中文寫一短文。在此短篇裡，我決意為我慈愛之誼母而寫，以表示我對她永遠的感激及尊敬及謝她所給予我的恩典。

我在這六十多年的生命裡，有不少事值得回憶，然而，最值得記憶的是我誼母之愛。誼母名沈少雲，她不幸已於一九七七年，七月三十日在美國加省，沙加緬度去世。她出生於中國廣東省，受有高深教育，在廣州產科學校畢業。

誼母為人善良，仁慈，愛人如己，辦事精明能幹，忠厚負責。在抗日戰爭時期，當我環境最困難的時候，在廣州市認識她的。當時誼母與友人等合作做買賣產業公司。記得我第一次向人借款就是向她借的。誼母很慷慨立刻借給我，且不收分文利息，只囑我依期償還。到我要還回債款那天，恰逢整天下雨不停，我只好打了雨傘到她家去依期奉還。從此日起，誼母對我特別關注及愛護。後來介紹我入他們的產業公司工作，並把她對於經營地產之經驗一一指示，且時常鼓勵我，要我努力學習求上進。有一天她對我說：「素蘭，妳年輕但

辦事誠實負責，且你很愛兒女，使我很感動，因我亦十分掛念遠在上海之兒女。你雖然不是我親生女兒，但你的性格很似我。你的兒女還年幼，且你目前環境不佳，我一定會照顧你，放心罷，好好地撫養兒女，待他們長大成人，你就安心無憂了！」誼母又常說：「一個人要飲水思源，做事要忠誠負責，對人尊重敬愛，寧人員負我，我不負人。」誼母的一番鼓勵及教訓，給我很大的信心勇氣。從此我堅強的去忍受一切艱辛來爭取上進，故有今日的收穫。我此生難忘誼母的恩典。她的一言一行到現在還歷歷如在目前。

回憶十六年前，誼母臨終之日，我坐在她床邊，我並未感到驚恐。直到她安靜沉默的離開這世界時，我沒有哭泣，而起立去吻她的額。細聲向她耳邊說：「媽！親愛的媽，你現在是自由了，今後你可以跟隨我四處去，請你勿離開我！我靜悄悄的返回坐位，執筆草紙以下幾行：「媽！我永遠不忘你對我的偉大母愛，你會永在我心中。記得你常對我說：『要愛人如己寧人員負我，我不負人。』媽，我一定照你的教訓而行，希望有一天我們會重聚。求你在 天主之前，為我們祈禱。」

到誼母出殯之日，我亦流不出淚，然而每次當我回憶媽的時候，我哭泣的不是眼淚，而是心內的血淚！

一九九三年，六月，十日。

黃素蘭於美國加省。

First, I would like to give special thanks to my five children and to their spouses, for their wonderful efforts in encouraging me, to make this Oral History of my life experiences come true. Likewise, I would like to express my gratitude to the Committee of the Bancroft Library, for providing a permanent place for this document on its shelves.

My son-in-law Paul Hertelendy, through Mrs. Harriet Nathan, first suggested that I write something in the Chinese language to be included in this Oral History. I chose the subject of my noble and kind godmother, as a testimony of my eternal respect and gratitude.

The past sixty-plus years of my life have created many worthy memories; however, my godmother's love has left such an indelible mark on me, that I would like to give it its deserved acknowledgement.

My godmother was named Wong, Sam Shao Wing and she passed away on July 30, 1977, in Sacramento, California. She was born in China, had achieved advanced degrees, and had been an obstetrician in Canton. She was a most extraordinary human being, kind, responsible, honest, intelligent and sincere, and loved people in general. I met her in Canton during the war with Japan in World War II, during the most difficult part of my life. At that time, she worked with friends in a real estate company, engaged in the purchase and sale of real property.

I remember that the first time I had to ask for a loan, I went to her; she was the first person who offered to help me, and would not charge interest. I recall that she advised me to be punctual in the repayment. The day for repayment it rained heavily all day; I nonetheless ventured out to fulfill my debt armed with only an umbrella. From that day, she gave me her love and always cared for my well being. Additionally, she introduced me to her real estate business associates and taught me the trade. She always encouraged me to keep learning and to continue forward.

One day, she said to me:

So Lan, you are young but very dedicated to your work, you love your children very much, you are a good wife and a very loved mother; you touch me deeply! I too worry a great deal about my children who are all far away in Shanghai. Although you are not my daughter, you are so much like me. Your children are very young and you have a bad situation; I will take care of you, protect you and help you; do not worry. Keep taking care of your children until they become professionals; then, you will be fulfilled and without worry.

She always said:

When a person drinks the water, he must remember the source of its origin. One must be honest and responsible at work, and respect and love others. It is better that others be ungrateful to us, than for us to be ungrateful to them.

Her kind deeds and her encouraging words have influenced my mind and my soul; they are the source for the faith, strength and unrelenting efforts that I have had to maintain, for me to move ahead and to be a successful individual today. I shall never forget her pure and unqualified love, her integrity or her teachings. She is kept alive in my memories and I can even feel her movements, as if she were still physically here.

Almost sixteen years ago, I sat at her bedside without fear, while she was in a state of coma, until she peacefully passed away. At that moment I did not cry, but approached her and kissed her forehead. In a whisper, close to her ear, I said to her:

Ma! My dearest Ma, now you are free; from now on, you can be with me always, everywhere; please, don't leave me!

Then, I returned to my seat calmly. I took a pen and wrote the following words:

Ma! I will never forget your great love like a mother's, you will always be in my heart. I remember that you always told me that: 'we must love our neighbor' and that 'it's better that others be ungrateful to us than us to them'. Ma, I will follow your wise advice. I hope that some day, we will see each other again. Before God, please pray for all of us.

At my godmother's funeral, I did not cry either. However, when I remember her, the tears that flow are not from my eyes, but from my heart.

Isabel Wong-Vargas

June 10, 1993  
Berkeley, California



## INDEX--Isabel Wong-Vargas

## Note to Index:

This follows the listing of Chinese names as formulated for the Regional Oral History Office by Ruth Teiser. Some Chinese names are alphabetized by what American usage calls last names, others, following Chinese usage, by first or family names, according to the individual's known custom: i.e., Sun-Yat Sen but Wong, Henry Kwok.

- Amador, Ezequiel, 308-309  
 Angel Island, 139  
 Arce, Augustin, 240, 245, 248  
 Asilo de los Ancianos de Desamparados, 251-254, 306  
 Au Robert, 39, 41, 46
- banderos, 178-179  
 Belaunde Terry, Fernando, 249, 258, 282  
 Brown, Thomas, 127
- Carcelin, Oscar, 306  
 Castagnola, Manuel, 208-210  
 Cavero (ambassador) 281-282  
 Chang family, 60, 63-64, 69-73, 78, 84-86, 108-109, 261-262;  
 brother-in-law, Chang Nim Yan, 97-99, 312; daughter, Martha;  
 father-in-law, Chang Seen Pac, 60-73, 76, 77, 84, 312;  
 husband, Chang Nim Yee, 57, 60-91, 97-101, 103, 107-111, 260-261, 313; mother-in-law, 90, 184; sister-in-law, Quok, Joan, 180; sons, Chan Fung and Michael. See Wong family, children for Chan Fung, Martha, and Michael.
- Chao, Manuel, 144-145  
 Chau, Peter, 110, 121  
 Chen, Stephen, 170-171, 177-178  
 Cheung family, 105-106  
 Chew Sin San, 60, 86
- Chiang Kai-shek, 39, 50, 118, 128, 270  
 Chifa Na-Mey (Chinese restaurant), 155-174, 200, 207, 215, 226-231, 239  
 theft from, 195-199  
 Children's Hospital, Oakland, 310  
 China, customs related to, buying people, 9, 43-44; child naming, 88; death, 8, 70-71, 79; education, 16-17, 20, 304-305; family responsibility, 296-298; food, 70; foot-binding, 2; godmother, and relationships of choice, 97; hospitality, 87; marriage, 28-29, 58, 66-67; medicine, 18-19; religion, 79-80; status of women, 270, 304-305
- Chow, Louis, 156-157  
 cinema, purchase of, 154, 208  
 clothes business, second-hand, 87-88  
 Communist regimes, 20, 38, 50, 117-118, 170, 185-191, 261, 312-317
- discrimination, racial,  
 in China, 16, 289  
 in Peru, 289-299
- family relationships  
 in China, 296-298  
 in Peru, 296-299  
 in the U.S.A., 300-302

- Ferry Plaza Restaurant, 268-269, 275-276
- Garcia, Alan, 307
- Garrett, Burke, 222-223
- grocery store (called South American in San Isidro) 140-154, 164, 171-173, 185-186, 200, 225
- Guillermo, 141-146
- Hacienda Lurifico, 3-4
- Hacienda Talla, 135-139, 150-151, 168
- Hoy Chui Bridge, 58-59, 81-82
- Hoy Ko, 53, 56-58, 66
- Ica Cultural Center, 308-309
- International Institute of the East Bay, 310, 318
- Japanese people, 24-28, 35-47, 51-53, 82, 89, 94, 98
- Keom, Carlos and Cecilia, 225-231
- Kong Chi Fun (Fun Che), 38-39, 41, 44-45, 49
- Kwan (Sae Koo), 112
- La Barca (restaurant), 244-248
- La Caleta (restaurant), 206-221, 238-251, 257-258, 273-276, 283-285
- Lai family, 54-66
- Lau Yin Ha, 31, 34-35, 88, 188
- laundry business, 156, 161-162, 166-169, 217
- Lee (cook), 155-157
- Lee Sai Wah, 115-119
- Leon, Miss, 111
- Leong, Miss, 112-113, 119-122, 132-133
- Lin, Miss, 73-75, 81-82, 89
- Llosa, Eduardo, 282, 287
- Llosa, Mario Vargas, 315-316
- Lopez, Mr., 157-159, 239-249
- Lotus Park-In, 212-215
- Lung Fung (restaurant), 207-208, 216
- Mao Tse-tung, 269-270, 312
- María, 113, 166, 185-186, 193-196, 236, 261, 272, 277
- Ng, Gonzalo, family, 101-105, 126
- Peru, business customs in, 159-160; divorce law in, 200; honorary consul for, 280-284; politics and economics in, 118, 257-258, 284-285; problems of, and hopes for, 313-316
- real estate, 86, 91-94, 113-118, 201, 257-258, 276-277, 302-304
- Red Cross, 310
- Remedios family, 105
- rice fields, work in, 18
- Romero, Oscar, 240, 245-248
- Sam family; daughters Ines, Lita, Susy. See Wong family, children; father-in-law, Sam Pac Teng, 39, 184, 189; husband, Sam Po Wuan (Pablo Sam) 39, 50, 52, 56, 123-132, 138-149, 157, 162-165, 168-172, 180-181, 184-186, 191-200, 261; stepdaughter, Ana Maria, 125, 132, 180-181, 187-197, 200
- Sam Yee Sham, Mrs., 196-197
- Si Fung, 12, 27
- Sito Pong, 213, 215
- South American Import-Export Trading Company, 104-107, 109
- Spidell, Dr. and Mrs., 234, 236
- Tay, Mr. 168-169
- Urtiaga, Humberto, 282
- Wong, Cecilia, 186, 215
- Wong Chau Yue, 185

Wong-Vargas, Isabel, family: aunt, Aurora, 1, 3-4, 135; aunt, Sai Pac, 13, 21, 28; aunties, 2, 13, 15, 21-22, 24, 40, 79; children: daughter, Ines, 148-149, 153, 166, 196, 234-238, 260, 264, 271, 278, 300-302; daughter, Lita, 166, 185, 196, 236-238, 260, 263-265, 271, 273, 279, 301-302; daughter, Martha (Chan Ming), 68, 70-71, 75, 77-79, 81, 84, 88-90, 94-95, 100, 104, 106, 109, 112-113, 131-134, 137, 141, 149-153, 163, 166, 169, 175-180, 196, 220-224, 233-238, 262-264, 267-268, 271-272, 310; daughter, Susy, 166, 173, 185-186, 196, 236, 238, 260, 263-271, 278-279, 301-302; son, Chan Fung, 88-89, 100, 109; son, Michael (Chan Hun) 101, 103, 112, 123, 131-134, 137, 141, 149-150, 153, 163, 166, 169, 196-197, 224, 235-238, 263-264, 279, 301-303, 306-308; cousins: Alberto, 5, 15; Carlos, 135-136, 149-150; David, 13-14, 23, 25-26, 102; father's goddaughter, Ines, 4-7; Juan, 15, 108, 113, 115, 119, 121-122; Rafael, 23, 200; Sei Cache (Chen Go), 15-17, 20, 184; father, Jorge Wong Shung, 1-15, 37, 101-103, 108, 114, 130, 135-144, 149-151, 174, 180-182, 200, 211, 294; godmother, Sam Shao Wing, also Mrs. Wong, Amah, 76-77, 84-94, 97-99, 111-117, 120, 124-125, 131, 133, 138-140, 170, 292, 312; grandfather (paternal), 3; grandmother (maternal), 3-7, 61, 135, 292, 305; mother, Jesus Vargas-Burgos de Wong, 1, 3, 292; niece, Rosalia, 26-28, 37-46, 106-107; niece, Yuc Jou,

15-16; son-in-law, Paul Hertelendy, 224, 233-236, 242, 260-264, 267-268, 271-272, 301-302; stepbrother, Jorge, 135-136, 140, 150, 182; stepbrother, Sergio, 183, 189; stepbrother, Sixto, 135-136, 150, 174, 182, 189; stepmother, Ah Sham, 8-13, 19, 24-27, 50, 66-69, 78-79, 106-107, 265-266; stepmother, Augusta, 10-13, 182-183; stepsister, Susana, 10-11, 23-28, 32-47, 106-107, 110, 133-135, 148-153, 170-171, 175-178, 181, 305; stepsisters including Sofia, So Man, 181; Soraida, 102-103; uncles, 2, 12-15, 21-28, 31-34, 37-43, 49, 54, 56, 62-67

Wong-Vargas, Isabel, personal concerns and interests: divorce, 103-104, 108-111, 186, 199-201; education: Anthony School-real estate, 277; Chinese village school, 16-17, 20-21; Chi Yung Middle School, 30-34; Merritt College, 318; Miraflores College of Interior Design, 23, 201-206, 285-286; St. Mary's High School, 34-35, 126; employment, secretarial, 241-242; illnesses, 18-19, 64-68; languages, 31-33, 265; medical studies, 20, 37-38; painting, 23; religious experience, 70-71; 79-80, 96, 109-110, 128, 306; sewing, 21-22, 34, 292; singing, 254-255, 286-288; social work, 318-319

Woo Man Hin, 28-29

wood for cooking, sale of, 83-84

World War II, 24-28, 35-51, 94-96

Yi Po, 77-80, 89, 94-95, 106, 119-122

Yut, Gwei Che, 52-53



Harriet Siegel Nathan

University of California at Berkeley alumna with two Journalism degrees: A.B. in 1941 and M. J. in 1965. Wrote for the on-campus paper, The Daily Californian ("Monarch of the College Dailies") as reporter, columnist, assistant women's editor, and managing editor. Prepared President Sproul's biennial report to the Legislature, 1942-44; wrote advertising copy; edited house journals; served on local and state boards of the League of Women Voters primarily in local and regional government and publications. As a graduate student, wrote for the University's Centennial Record. Worked as an interviewer/editor at the Regional Oral History Office part-time from the mid-sixties; concurrently served the Institute of Governmental Studies as Principal Editor doing editing, writing, research, production, and promotion of Institute publications. Wrote journal articles; and a book, Critical Choices in Interviews: Conduct, Use, and Research Role (1986) that included oral history interviews in the analysis. Also with Nancy Kreinberg co-authored the book, Teachers' Voices, Teachers' Wisdom: Seven Adventurous Teachers Think Aloud (1991), based on extended interviews with the teachers.











BANC/MSS

95/55

e



