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# A A Rice Sacks Secrets: Once Hidden from Ourselves and Others

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**AA RICE SACKS SECRETS  
ONCE HIDDEN FROM THEMSELVES AND OTHERS**

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**The Use of Cloth Rice Sacks as my Canvas**

As a contemporary installation artist for over thirty years I have been using cloth rice sacks as symbols in my narrative work about family, community and culture. A near tragedy that occurred in April of 1940 – my father’s non-fatal shooting – unconsciously seeded the creation of my seminal rice sack piece in 1978. Prior to my first use of rice sacks I saw an installation at a gallery by one of my art instructors who is of Filipino descent. He used rice sacks to narrate a story of his migrant youth in California’s farm fields. Initially, I didn’t understand what he was doing. My eyes opened after hearing him speak. Inspired, I then understood how I might be able to use rice sacks in my art. In 1986, I began an in-depth use of rice sacks to visually depict stories of family, community, and culture.

**Rice Sack Installations**

For this presentation I will speak about four installations - *Baby Jack Rice Story* (1993 – 1996), *made in usa: Angel Island Shhh* (1998 – 2000), *Kindred Spirit* (2001 – 2003), *My Sister: Li Hong* (2008). Each of these art pieces has an aspect of secrets, which affected the lives of my husband’s family, my family, and our Chinese American immigrant community in the United States.

**Secrets**

Before I show my images I want to share with you definitions of secrets from The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. (Updated in 2009, Published by [Houghton Mifflin Company](http://www.houghtonmifflin.com)) Here are some definitions - kept hidden from knowledge or view; concealed, not expressed; inward: their secret thoughts, known or shared only by the initiated: secret rites, containing information, the unauthorized disclosure of which poses a grave threat to national security, something kept hidden from others or known only to oneself or to a few.

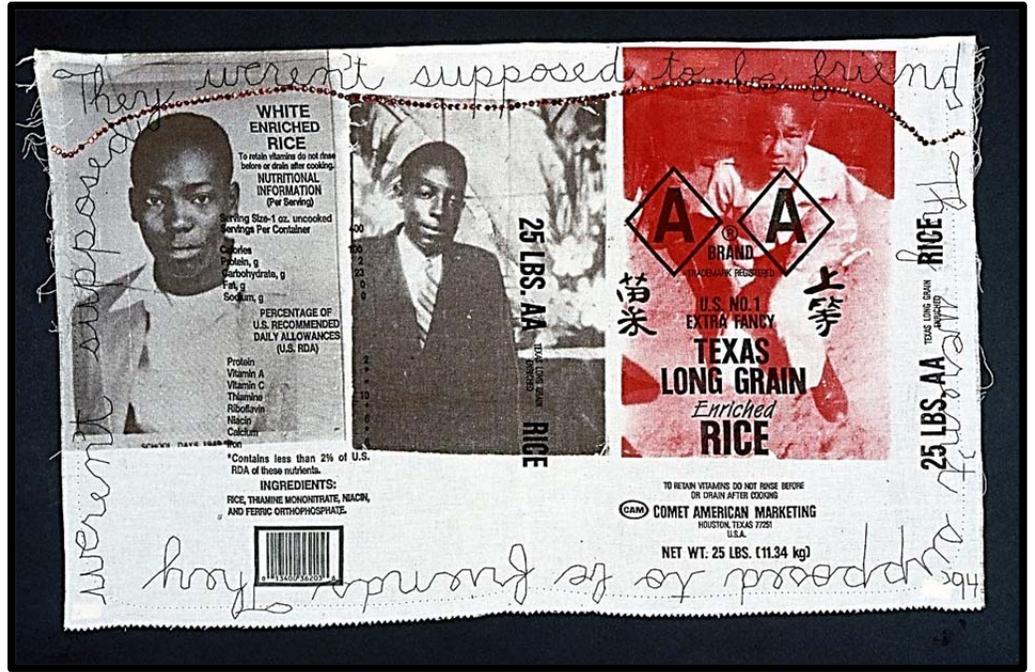
**The Four Installations**

1. *Baby Jack Rice Story* (1993 – 1996) (Figs. 1 and 2)

The *Baby Jack Rice Story* is a tribute to my husband, Edward K. Wong, who was born and raised in Augusta, Georgia during segregation. I honor his childhood memories in this piece by acknowledging his bonding to his best friends, the African American brothers, Cush and Boykin Cade. As a backdrop to Ed’s story I include my mother-in-law’s immigration narrative. In China she had given birth to a deceased older son. When she came to the U. S. in 1930 she used the identification papers of her older son to bring her brother, Robert, to this country as her legal son. She thus became a secret “paper mother.” It was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law that forbade the entry of Chinese laborers, their wives, and families to this country, which made my mother-in-law’s (and other Chinese immigrants to this country from 1910 to 1940) subterfuge necessary.

Ed’s childhood was one of an intense connection to the African American Cade brothers in Augusta, Georgia during segregation, which enforced the separation of the races through the Jim Crow laws.

Under segregation there were known classifications for whites and known and highly biased classifications for African Americans. What is little-known in American history is the existence of pockets of Chinese Americans who also resided in the South. Because the Chinese were neither black nor white they were invisible in their communities. In Augusta, Chinese lived and worked in the black neighborhoods. Their children attended white schools. This happened to Ed's family.



*Figure 1, left. Installation image of Baby Jack Rice Story, 1993 – 1996 from the Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, 2001 – 2002, mixed media - rice sack, silkscreened photos, thread text.*

*Figure 2, right, detail, They weren't supposed to be friends, 19" x 31". Photo by Bob Hsiang.*

To tell Ed's story, I silk-screened images from his family's photo album and images from the Cade family album on the rice sacks. To further embellish the rice sacks I co-opted the commercial branding "AA" on the sacks to refer to both Asian American and African American communities in the Deep South. Chinese had grown rice in California and African Americans had grown rice in southern states. Referencing Faith Ringgold and her story quilts I hand-stitched Ed's story in a non-linear narrative around the edges of the rice sacks pieces, a contemporary reference on my part as a Chinese American artist influenced by a renown African American artist.

2. *made in usa: Angel Island Shhh* (1998 – 2000) (Figs. 3 and 4)

*made in usa: Angel Island Shhh*, a specific tribute to both my mother-in-law and my mother, is an exploration of identity secrets of Chinese immigrants detained and interrogated in the United States from 1910 to 1951. I wanted to tell Chinese immigration stories from a woman's point-of-view. My mother, Gee Suey Ting, had entered this country legally in 1933 as my father's sibling making her a "paper

sister.” My mother-in-law was a “paper mother”<sup>1</sup> to her brother. Both my mother and mother-in-law had altered identities for their entire lives because of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law. I started *made in usa*<sup>2</sup> in 1998. When I began a U. S. flag as a textile frame flashed in my mind. The flag became a visual reality in this series. Along the edges of the each rice sack I hand painted the definition of the word “interrogate” to symbolize the interrogation process all immigrants from China went through at either the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay or at Ellis Island. I hand painted each immigration secret in red, white, and blue, to refer to the colors of the U. S. flag. I painted the actual secrets in white because I wanted to make it difficult for viewers to read the concealed stories. I co-opted the commercial branding “A A” to read as Angel Island, the site where over 175,000 immigrants were questioned before they could step on soil of this country.

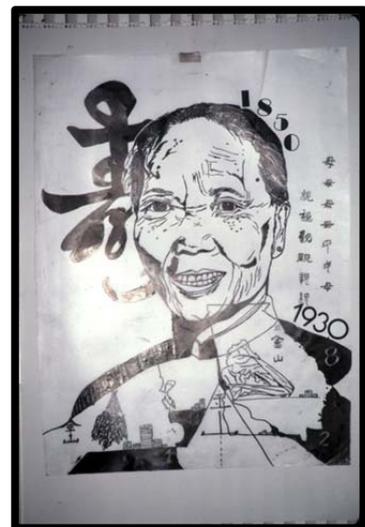
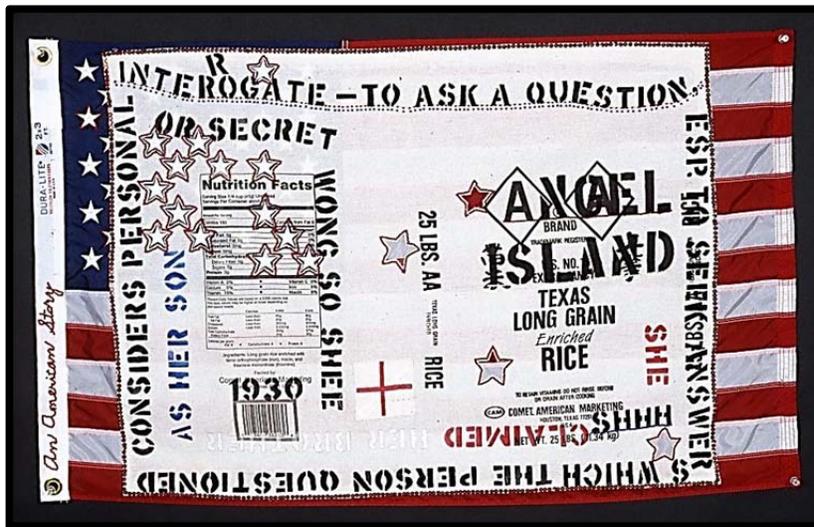


Figure 3, left. *made in usa*: Wong So Shee, 1998, mixed media, 2' x 3'. Photo by Bob Hsiang

Figure 4, right. Sue Shee Wong, ink drawing. Photograph by Ed Wong.

### 3. *Kindred Spirit* (2001 – 2003) (Figs. 5 and 6)

*Kindred Spirit* is a tribute to Wen Ho Lee, the nuclear scientist who was arrested in December of 1999 by the U. S. government for mishandling sensitive nuclear data. The U. S. government claimed that he provided nuclear secrets to the People’s Republic of China. When Lee was arrested the Chinese American community in the United States was outraged. A movement to prove his innocence began.

My husband and I attended a Northern California fundraiser in to show our support and I vowed to make an art piece about his case. I was incensed that Lee (who was denied due process) was incarcerated for 278 days because his F. B. I. handler had lied during court proceedings.

I told the story in the format of ancient Chinese scrolls. I dyed each rice sack in a food that represented Wen Ho Lee - soy sauce, tea bags, string beans, and chili. I beaded the narrative in English from right to left in the style of traditional Chinese calligraphy. The embellished rice sacks were then sewn onto silk

<sup>1</sup> ‘Paper people’ were Chinese immigrants who came to the U. S. from 1910 to 1940 using false identity papers. The practice actually continued beyond 1940.

<sup>2</sup> I received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to create *made in usa*.

with floral designs. The floral symbols represented his home garden that eventually died as he languished in jail.

When I show *Kindred Spirit* I usually place plates of chicken bones and string beans under each scroll to symbolize the first meal that Lee cooked for his family upon his release.



*Figure 5, left. Installation of Kindred Spirit, 2001 – 2003.*

*Figure 6, right. Detail of Kindred Spirit; mixed media - rice sack, silk brocade, beads, text, quilting.*

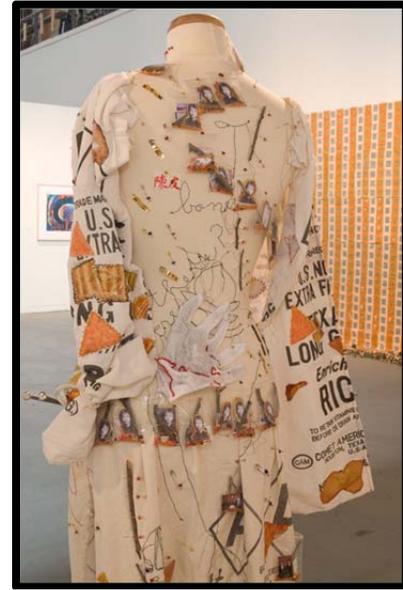
I learned to quilt for the first time in the making of the piece.

#### 4. *My Sister: Li Hong* (Figs. 6 and 7)

*My Sister: Li Hong*<sup>3</sup> is a tribute to my 88 year old developmentally disabled sister. When I turned 70 I wanted to tell Li Hong's story at my birthday exhibits. I had shared many challenging family stories in my art career but seldom did I tell her story of disability, which was considered shameful in the Chinese American community. Her disability was not necessarily known beyond our family in Oakland Chinatown when we were young. My vision to tell her story resulted in a stunning collaboration between her husband, her children, my older sisters, and me.

I used a mannequin as the main object of the installation. I made Li Hong a rice sack dress embellished with twigs, photos, and other found objects. The bodice is covered with sewn text and plastic sacks, which carry her immigration photograph. I used red, orange, and yellow beads to symbolize the colors of vegetables she liked to eat. The sleeves are covered with tortilla chips, taco chips, potato chips, snacks that Li Hong loved.

<sup>3</sup> I received my second National Endowment for the Arts grant to make *My Sister: Li Hong*.



*Figure 6, left. Installation of My Sister: Li Hong, 2008, mixed media.*

*Figure 7, right. Detail of My Sister: Li Hong, 2008, mixed media.*

*Photos by Bob Hsiang.*

The skirt is overlaid with twigs, Chinese opera masks, and sayings. There are knitting needles and a crochet hook, her warrior symbols. They are inspired by her younger daughter's memory of the pencil cases her mother knitted and crocheted for them. There are family photos in collage, which can be seen through the opening of the bottom of the skirt.

In the background hang seven rice sack panels with twigs at the bottom. When Li Hong was punished by a teacher in China for not knowing the answers to questions she was forced to hold twigs in her hands while standing on one foot. There is a sound component with recorded memories spoken by family members. The memories are backed by Chinese Cantonese opera music of the 1930s and 1940s. Li Hong was able to sing Chinese opera in her youth.

These above stories transformed into installations were once hidden from me and others.

In closing, I thank two San Francisco-based arts organizations, Kearny Street Workshop (KSW) and the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (APICC), for helping me secure funding for my work. In particular, I am grateful to Nancy Hom, former director of KSW, artist, curator, writer, poet, for generously assisting me with *made in usa: Angel Island Shhh* and *My Sister: Li Hong*. I also thank Pam Wu, former director for APICC, for her invaluable assistance with *My Sister: Li Hong* and the second of my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday solo shows. I am deeply appreciative to Ron Bowlin, formerly of University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and to Wendy Weiss, Professor, Textiles, Clothing and Design, at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Both have been and are major supporters of my work.