

Imitation of Life

by Marko Fong

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For fifteen years, Sam Share's black-and-white photo of Paperson's 1950 Fourth of July picnic hung in most Chinese-American households. The picture, which appeared on *Life* magazine's Miscellany page, should have merited a thousand words, at least according to that tradition of Chinese proverbs that only Americans seem to quote. Instead, it got a two-sentence caption.

"The town of Paperson, California celebrates the 4th of July by honoring both the American Revolution and the Chinese Revolution of 1911. This year's picnic in America's last-self-contained Chinatown raised over ten-thousand dollars for the cause of democracy in China."

What's in the picture: A statue of Dr. Sun Yat Sen holds the center. A Chinese boy in a baseball uniform and a girl twirling a baton sit on his lap and turn Dr. Sun from Chinese George Washington into Santa Claus. A group of Chinese men in sport shirts and women in Bermuda shorts and sundresses wave American and Nationalist flags. In one corner a woman hands out slices of watermelon next to a table filled with soda bottles and cups of tea. A man in an apron grills hamburgers and hot dogs. Those in line fill paper plates with chow mein, rice, and cole slaw. In another corner, men play baseball. If you look closely, a twenty-pound sack of rice serves as third base. There are almost as many women as men. Young families outnumber the handful of elderly men. It must be noon because there are no shadows.

What's not in the picture: Four-fifths of Paperson was male and over the age of fifty five. The gambling house, the heart of the town's economy, got airbrushed. Eleven of the women in the photo were prostitutes recruited to pose for five dollars each. Most of the children came from Sacramento or Stockton. Neither of my

grandparents posed; they were arguing about the money Yeh-Yeh wasted on the project.

The photographer chalked an "O" on the grass where each child stood to keep spacing right. The watermelon slices were painted wood, because they held their shape better in the heat. The photo was done night-for-day with bright spotlights to make for sharper outlines than natural light could provide. In actuality, it is all shadows.

How it was chosen for Miscellany: Henry Luce was angry at Madame Chiang. With the help of Time-Life, she had raised millions in the United States for Chinese relief and then almost none made it to China. It devastated Luce when the country of his birth as the son of American-Protestant missionaries had gone Communist.

My grandfather hired a publicist to encourage Chinese families to settle in Paperson. For three thousand dollars, the publicist hired Sam Share, the man who had photographed the cover photo of the Hindenburg. The publicist persuaded Life's editors that this photo could help Luce promote democracy in China without invoking Mr. or Mrs. Chiang Kai-Shek.

In a box: When I took it out, I showed it to my wife, "It's my grandfather's portrait."

"Which one is he?"

"He's not in the photo...It's more like his dream for the town."

Miscellany: None of the old men in the Miscellany photo ever returned to China. A few of the children grew up and visited after "ping pong diplomacy". Fifteen years after Paperson closed, one was astonished to find a faded copy in his Chinese cousin's photo album. He asked, "How could you have saved this from the Red Guard? Why didn't you throw it out? We'd never even met. You could have been killed just for having it!"

"When they forced us to move to the village for re-education, I told myself that I would survive and one day move to Paperson, my dream of America."

