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“White men refused to work up to their knees in the water, slime, and filth of the sloughs.”

Recently I went hiking in the Santa Lucia Range above Spreckels in the Salinas Valley. There, wheat was once dominant, followed by hops and tobacco, and finally supplanted by sugar beets as the emperor of crops. Looking down, I saw Salinas Valley as it is today, with its viridian and chartreuse patchworks of lettuce, and I could picture what the Chinese saw when they unkinked their aching backs and scanned the land.

The Chinese knew that where willows grew, there would be fresh water, not *salinas*, which in Spanish means “salt water.” I could smell their desire for land and all the rights that landownership meant. They had known about the poverty of terrain from the populous provinces of Guangdong whence they came. This land—so much land!—could feed many mouths. Most of the arable land was in the hands of a few rancheros, who used it for grazing cattle. In the eyes of the Chinese, those acres were not used at all.

Every time I drive to the valley, crossing the highway bridge over the shallow Salinas River, the sky yawning above me, I recall the topography that John Steinbeck described in *East of Eden*. It was rich land for which men hungered and fought pitched battles to take or retain. It was the same kind of land that the communists in my great-grandfather’s Manchuria wrested away from the haves to be redistributed—not necessarily fairly. From the stories passed down to me by my father about the House of Yang, eight generations in the telling, I inhale the love of land.

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act suspended immigration of Chinese to the United States on the grounds

that their admission would disrupt the social order. The law barred large numbers of Chinese women from entering the country, which meant Chinese men were unable to marry. I can imagine the strain, their lives suspended between their desire to return to China—but then they would need to obtain certificates of reentry if they wished to come back to America—and their aspiration to stay, living lives of normalcy, jiggling children and grandchildren on their laps. But they would always remain outsiders, looking in hungrily and then dying alone and forgotten in county hospitals.

A generation later, in 1913, the California Alien Land Law targeted the Japanese but in the process snared all Asian immigrants, barring them from becoming naturalized citizens who could own land and property. The Chinese never gained control of the land in the Salinas Valley, but they always had a keen sense of what was valuable where other ethnic communities saw trash or weeds. According to legend, the Franciscan friars had scattered mustard seeds to create a trail of gold hitching one mission to another. The Chinese saw the value of the oil and cut the weeds for landowners in exchange for the seeds. When the mustard crop in Europe was wiped out one year, buyers came to the Chinese and paid well for their stash.

In my adult years, I have read *Cannery Row*, which I was given at age eleven, multiple times. Steinbeck’s understanding of the outsider knocks me off balance each time I meet him in those pages: the old Chinaman with one flapping shoe, who walks down to the water at dusk and fishes in the night. A boy from Salinas saw the Chinaman and itched to be contrary. He cried out, “Ching-Chong-Chinaman sitting on a rail—’long came a white man an’ chopped off his tail.” When the old man turned, the boy saw in his brown eyes a landscape of utter desolation. The landscape of China, from which the Chinese fled in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was indeed one of spiritual waste. In those brown pools the boy encountered the despair of the excluded.

I am currently at work on *Umbilical Cords*, a graphic memoir about my Hakka mother, who lived under the Japanese colonial system from 1895 to 1945. What does this story have to do with the Monterey Bay region? As it turns out, from *Chinese Gold*, I read that Tanka Chi-

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Hunan Farmers, 2003
Gouache, 16 x 22 in



courtesy: the artist