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HONOLULU STAR-BULLETIN

MAY 17 1971

Togetherness ... After 49 Years

By Lyle Nelson
Star-Bulletin Writer

Mrs. Tim Dai Lee walked toward her husband, Wah Chong Lee, without the slightest sign of emotion.

They had not seen one another in 49 years.

Lee, 73, was excited, his eyes red and wide, tears streaming down.

His wife, 68, accepted the red carnation lei he put over her head.

He touched her on the elbow.

She stood immobile, impassive.

Neither said a word.

THAT WAS it, a first meeting in 49 years of a woman from Hong Kong and a Kalihi man who now met like strangers in Paradise.

There was no kiss, no hug, and for Mrs. Lee not even a tear.

She appeared in shock.

The busy U.S. Customs area at Honolulu Airport is not conducive to emotional scenes.

Earlier, when she had been cleared through most of the customs routine, she sat in a chair about 25 yards from where Lee stood.

Some of her papers needed stamping and she had to wait a minute.

She peered across the big room, across the busy comings and goings of travelers clearing customs, across 49 years.

And then she slowly walked toward him, dressed in the dark blue clothing often worn by elderly Chinese ladies.

Waiting at the reunion scene were officials, his friends, reporters, cameramen, TV lights. Too much.

Maybe she was just tired and overcome, or embarrassed by the many spectators.

LEE IS Hawaii-born, but moved to the Chinese village of Hung Mee in Kwangtung province, southwest of Hong Kong, in 1900.

They married in 1918, when he was 24 and she was 19,

and had two sons when he decided in 1922 to return to Hawaii and later send for her.

Mrs. Lee raised the family, then slipped out of China in 1956 by boat and reached Hong Kong.

Their two sons are still in Hung Mee.

She was accompanied to Honolulu yesterday by her granddaughter Lai Hin, 21, and grandson Yuk See, 18.

Another granddaughter, Lai Sun, will come later with her architect husband, Herbert Yueng.

WHEN THE three first cleared customs yesterday, Lai Hin hurried to the grandfather she had never seen.

She gave him an embrace and whispered one word in Chinese, "Grandfather."

The family reunion was delayed for a number of reasons.

Lee tried to bring his wife here in 1956 but got snarled in red tape.

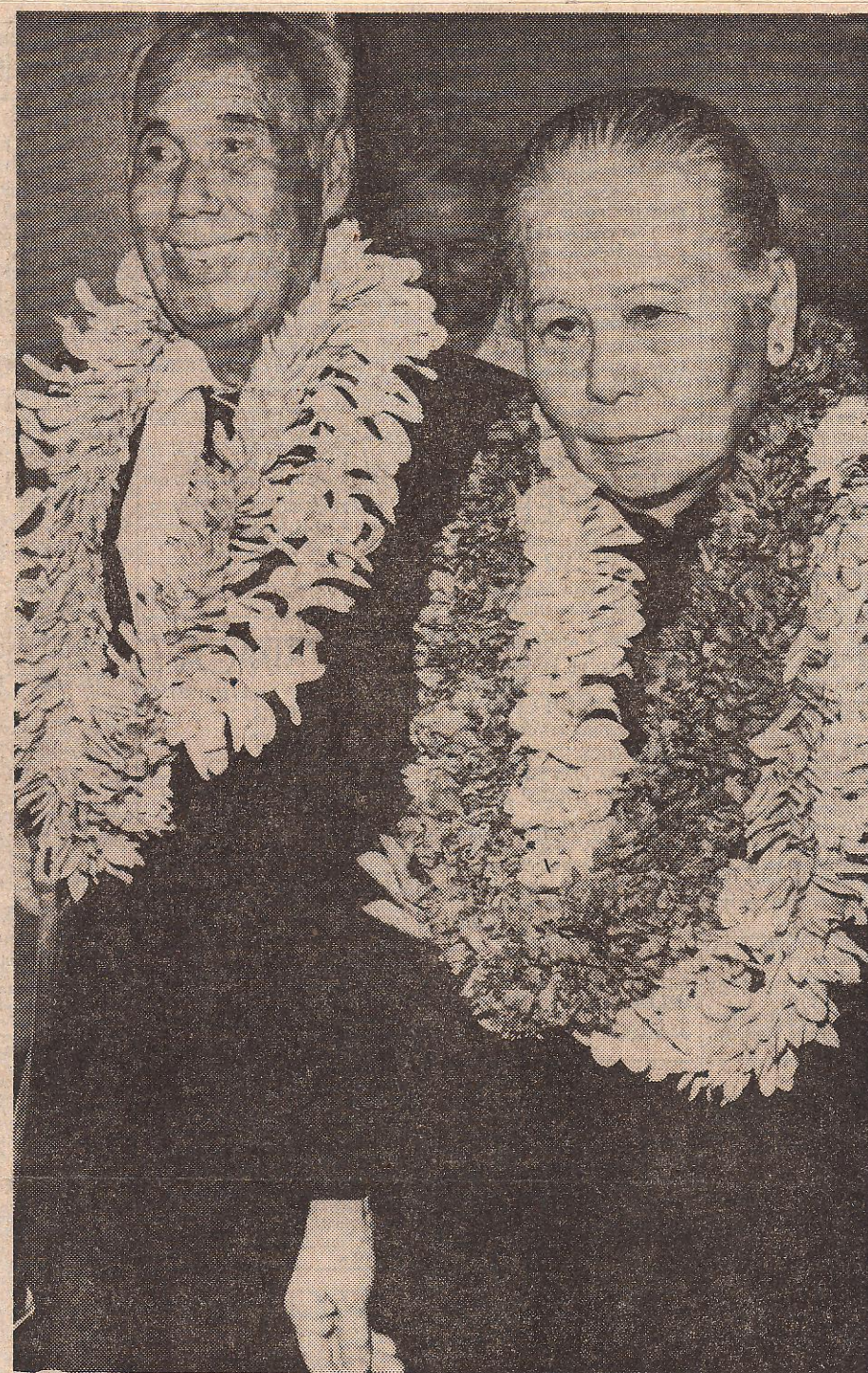
Finally a friend, Richard Chung, who worked with him at Barbers Point, sought aid from Rep. Spark Matsunaga and Sen. Hiram L. Fong. The senator unravelled the red tape.

Part of the problem was that U.S. immigration laws are sticky when it comes to a grandparent sponsoring a grandchild. Lee might have brought his wife here sooner, but she wouldn't leave Hong Kong without the grandchildren, who now have been separated from their parents for 15 years.

Lee, who live at 518-I N. School St., has worked as a chef at military officers clubs at Schofield Barracks, Pearl Harbor, Barbers Point and also the Elks and Outrigger Canoe clubs.

When he left China in 1922, Lenin was alive; Mussolini had just taken over in Italy; Prince Jonah Kuhio died that year; crystal-set radios were still rare; the League of Nations was debating troubles in the Balkans; Sacco and Vanzetti were in jail; the Princess Theater opened downtown and the Seaside Inn sat where the Royal Hawaiian is today.

... It was a long time ago.



49 YEARS APART—Mr. and Mrs. Wah Chong Lee.—Photo by Dick Schmidt.