

# Restaurant, Public Office, Even Bruce Lee

*Ruby Chow*

*Ruby Chow was born in Seattle in 1920 and became the first Asian American elected to King County Council.*

My family has always been in the restaurant business. I'm not ashamed to say it—I've always had to wait on tables for a living. My father came to this country to help build the railroads. He came when he was very young. In those days they match married. He already had a wife in China. But wives couldn't be brought over, so he married my mother. She was from Victoria, Canada. My father was quite a bit older than my mother. They had ten children together.

I was twelve years old when my father went back to China to see his first wife. He passed away in China and left my mother with ten children to take care of. I was child number four. In those days there weren't many jobs available to the Chinese—restaurants and menial work, mostly. After they finished the railroad there was no work for them.

My mom spoke both English and Chinese. But she couldn't read and write very well. She couldn't go out and work, so she ran a laundry and had this little lottery place where white people would go up and buy their tickets. She made a living that way—that's how she raised us, with a little help from welfare.

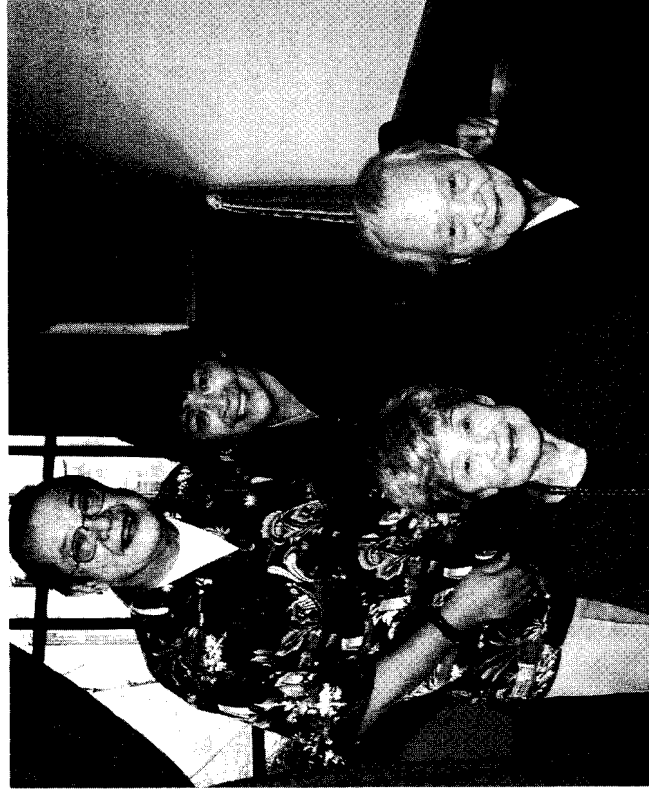
After school and on weekends I would get a job waiting on ta-

bles to help my mom. I dropped out of school when I was a sophomore or junior in high school.

I eventually got married; but my first husband . . . in those days there was no such thing as domestic violence. It wasn't easy being in New York with two small sons and having a husband desert you and dealing with domestic violence. And in New York you could not get a divorce unless you could prove adultery. I met my current husband, Ping, a Chinese opera singer, in New York. After he got out of the army, we both came back to Seattle. It was very difficult. We got back here in 1942 after he got out of the army. When we came back it was already bad enough that they looked down on our family because we were so poor—and then for me to come back a divorced woman and with an actor? Being a Chinese opera person is the lowest wrung in the ladder. They have no respect for that. But what are you going to do about it? Cry about it? No—just have to say, To hell with them. In those days, Chinese women didn't get divorced. But on top of that, to marry a person in Chinese opera—that's a no-no. It was okay if men went out and courted the actresses, but not for the actors to court us. But it's changed since then.

**Ruby Chow's:** I was in the restaurant business for thirty-one years. We owned our own place, Ruby Chow's—built up a clientele. Being in the restaurant business is not easy. It's very difficult, very hard to raise children. You make the money at nighttime and on weekends. You want to spend time with your children, but you can't because of the restaurant. And so I thought that I would like to make a change in my career. I didn't want my husband to be working so hard, because it's a twenty-four-hour job.

Things seemed to happen. I remember going to Chong Wa (the Chinese Benevolent Association in Seattle) and saying we needed to have better public relations. My sister was pushed out of her seat on a bus—a white male ordered her out so he could sit, thinking she was Japanese. Those incidents happened and some of the Chinese were worried, so they would say, But I'm Chinese. I



The Chows (front row: Ruby Chow with her husband Ping Chow; back row: Roy S. Mar, Ruby's younger brother, and Cheryl Chow)

thought at that time, That's why we need public relations. I never said anything about the Japanese or internment; I just brought it to the newspapers' attention about the Chinese people—how they eat, and how they would participate in the Sea Fair Parade, which is going on fifty-five years now. I started the girl's drill team in Chinatown in 1952.

**Fortune Cookies and Politics:** In the sixties a man called Wing Luke came and asked for my help. He wanted to run for city council. I thought of the idea of putting Wing Luke's name in fortune cookies. We had to call all the restaurants to get their permission, then find out which cookie factory they patronized. Instead of "Confucius says," we would write, "Wing Luke says this, says that. . . ." The cookies went all over the whole city—over two hundred restaurants—and in all the Chinese restaurants at the same

time. I don't say that's the only thing that got him elected, but I think it helped him. He was a city councilman for less than a term. He died in a plane crash. But we remember him as the first Chinese to run and win office in Seattle.

In 1972 I was appointed to the county's Equalization Board. When I looked around to see what they were doing there, people encouraged me to run for office. King County, the largest county in the state of Washington, had an open seat in the county council. The then-governor, Dan Evans, called me and told me to please run, and as a Republican. He said, "I will get you support and financing." That's two things you need to have, support and financing. And so I decided to run—but as a Democrat, as the district was Democratic. There was no other Chinese, or Chinese woman, who had done this in Seattle.

**King County Councilwoman:** I was a councilwoman for twelve years—three terms. I considered myself more as an Independent in some ways. This was from 1973–1985. I learned how to campaign, how to raise money. I had joined Chong Wa, and the association always needed money for the Chinese school, so I just got the knack of asking people for money. I don't think being a Chinese woman hurt me.

Three Democrats—men—ran against me, or I ran against them. And I wasn't a Democrat who went to the meetings and all that. They have meetings and you have to pay your dues to become a Democrat. But I still got elected. The man that vacated the seat was Johnny O'Brian. I went to ask him, "Hey, how do you get elected? I would like to run for the open seat."

At that time anyone could run for an open seat. He said, "Ruby, there are only four things you need to have. You need someone to endorse you, you need to have endorsements, you have to have places to put your signs up, and you have to raise some money—things like that." So I thought to myself, I've connected with a lot of people in running my restaurant, so I can do this. Seattle only had like seven thousand Chinese in the city. I wasn't even confident I

would win or not. I was just doing it because I thought I'd better change my career, because it's hard working in a restaurant and I didn't want my husband to be working so hard. Most of those who voted for me were non-Chinese. I don't know how I got their vote. It's just that I was in the restaurant business and people knew me. Just like when I started Ruby Chow's. I placed a \$20 ad in the beginning, and the place was filled. People were coming and I was getting a lot of press. People in the area knew me, I guess.

**Bruce Lee Called Me Auntie Ruby:** Bruce Lee wasn't easy to handle; he lived with us for four years. He was a houseguest. His father knew my husband; they were Chinese opera people. The story got out that Bruce Lee worked for us, but he never worked a day in his life for us. How could I put him on the floor with his acne, with all that stuff running down his face—he wouldn't work for a living, anyway. He was there with my children. The restaurant was on the first floor, we lived on the second floor, and we had many rooms on the third floor. He came up here from San Francisco to study. His father said to him, You can never make it without me. So Bruce came and asked if he could stay with us to attend university. His mother wrote to me and asked us to please take care of him. She thanked us, saying if I needed anything, let her know. He created an image worldwide; people would call from England and ask if they could just come and look at the room that he slept in.

I have had lots of interviews. The last young lady that wrote about me gave the impression that I set my hat to do this and that. I thanked her, but that wasn't what happened to me. Circumstances happened and I had to deal with the situation as it was.

If you did a story on me, I'd say, I'm a high school dropout, mother of five, owned a restaurant. There was a big article about me on the front page of a weekly. In big letters, it read: High School Dropout Retiring, but Not From Controversy.

