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PostMagazine

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Wild West

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Broken bloodlines

A South Korean adoptee tells the mothers' tales

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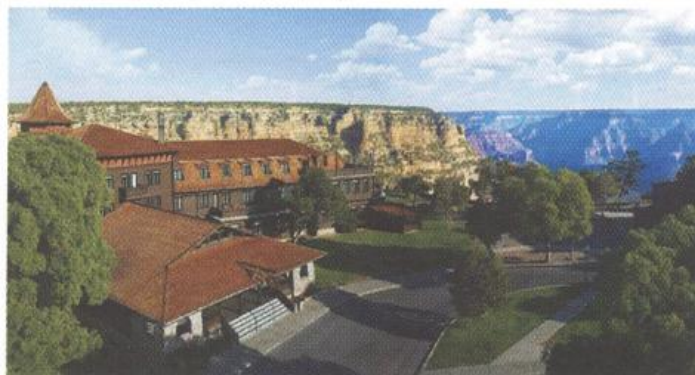
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Michael Chow

The restaurateur who made Chinese food fashionable in 1960s London tells **Fionnuala McHugh** about rediscovering his artistic side – and Zhou Yinghua.

MY LIFE

DRAMATIC START I was born in Shanghai into a family of theatre. I was Zhou Yinghua. My father was Zhou Xinfang, the grandmaster of Beijing opera. He is considered a national treasure of China. He became famous when he was seven, and he played more than 800 characters and wrote more than 300 plays. People would point me out as his son and I wanted to be great like him – China is going to celebrate his 120th birthday on January 14, 2015. I didn't know him that well because he was so obsessed with theatre. I only spent two weeks of quality time with him, but it was precious to me.

TO FOGGY LONDON I was very close to my mother. I had asthma and was spoiled and pampered. But when I was 13, I went by myself to England. It was just after the war; foggy London, sweets still rationed, school ... that was culture shock. I got into art. I went to Saint Martin's, then studied architecture, and painted for 10 years. In those days, you had to put a shilling in the gas meter. I was so poor, I'd split it with the neighbours and we'd share the heat. I did short-term jobs. Once, I was doing a self-portrait, but I had no mirror. I was working as a caretaker in a building where the elevator had a huge mirror and, when I pressed the button, the doors opened and I could see myself. I fantasised about tips, but those rich people never tipped. Now, I try to tip everybody.

PUBLIC SPECTACLES Nobody in England knew who my father was. That was shocking to me. And also, the way they looked at the Chinese ... But in England, three things let you off the hook. One, if you're a prince. Two, if you're eccentric. Three, if you're artistic. If you have two of these three qualities society will accept you. It took me a long time to realise this; I'm bright, but in some ways I was naive. England has a very strong class system and racism was part of the culture, but it was sophisticated. I began to wear these glasses because people see them,



not you. Andy [Warhol] wore a wig and that was part of his trademark dressing. I wear my glasses. But I don't want to be invisible. I'm a performer.

CHINESE WITHOUT CHOPSTICKS

I opened the first Mr Chow restaurant in London [in 1968] because I wanted people to love China. I wanted everyone to respect the Chinese and the bottom line is: Chinese cuisine is incredible. Yes, I did have Italian waiters, but did you ever see the movie *Contact*, with Jodie Foster? She's in a beautiful landscape and an alien comes to her in the form of her father because she can accept him, he's familiar to her. So the restaurant was very user-friendly to Western people. There were

no chopsticks because Westerners are not familiar with them and it's ridiculous to play with chopsticks while great, great food is getting cold. By the way, the whole world has followed me. In those days, having Italian waiters in a Chinese restaurant was like going to the moon, but now Nobu has Western waiters. There are six Mr Chows and we're opening in Las Vegas this year. Thank God I can multitask.

ROLE PLAY I'm the most patriotic Chinese man alive. I fight for China every day. That's my thing. How do you think that Mr Chow, a Chinese restaurant, the lowest on the food chain, could become one of the greatest names? You do it with passion. Yes, I did have a part in [1966

film] *The Brides of Fu Manchu* [as well as several other stereotypical roles, including a minor Bond villain]. If I were a serious, professional actor I probably wouldn't have done it. I've done 16 movies, all of them are like that: unrealistic. That anti-Chinese chinoiserie concept was born in Hollywood, it still goes on. Racism is part of my trade. I'm always this Chinese restaurateur thing. The first thing I do when I read an article about me, I see how many times they say I'm Chinese. Not here [in Hong Kong], of course.

FATHER'S LAND Terrible things happened in China and to my father. There was terrible suffering. I don't want to get into that. There's been no closure, the mourning is ongoing. But I still love China. My father, for me, is China. I'm frozen in time and it's related to my parents. The more personal it is, the more universal it is.

SELF-PORTRAIT It's not appropriate to talk about the other marriages. [Chow was married to *Vogue's* Grace Coddington and the late model Tina Chow.] My wife, Eva, and I are coming up to our silver anniversary.

I've been painting like a madman at home in LA for the last 19 months. I didn't plan this 50-year sabbatical, but it's been a blessing in disguise because I've become more objective. I did not weaken through time. It's about trying to reach a climax of perfection. It's the closest thing to God. There's a level of equalisation in my collages – treating silver in the same way as trash, another anti-racism concept. Yes, anger is part of the recipe, but it's like bitter melon with beef. Or sweet and sour (that's a wonderful dish, by the way). I believe the energy of an artist is limited to six years of good work, so I've got four and a half years left. After that, I'll just be copying myself.

I'm happy finding Yinghua, but I'm more happy about becoming Zhou again. Zhou was my father's name. I lost it and I found it. That makes me very happy.

"Recipe for a Painter", Michael Chow's first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, opens at Pearl Lam Galleries, 6/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, on Tuesday and continues until March 8.