



Arts and Culture

# What's Your Story: Asian immigrant women on life in America

By CROSSCURRENTS PRO... on October 14, 2010 - 2:05pm



Photo courtesy of AIWA. <http://www.aiwa.org/index.php>

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Imagine for a moment that you go into the grocery store, only to find that the language on all of the boxes, cans and packages has changed. And it's a language you don't get. You can't tell what's being sold, let alone make out what the signs hanging over the aisles say. It might be enough to make you give up, hungry and disappointed.

That's the experience that many new immigrants have when they move here. Jobs, housing, transportation – it's all a lot harder when language is a barrier. But for the community of immigrant women in Oakland's Chinatown, help is just around the corner. The [Asian Immigrant Women Advocates](#), or AIWA, provides language and leadership classes to new immigrants so they can fight for just working and living conditions. KALW's Erica Mu and Brenda Payton headed to Oakland's Chinatown to capture the stories of some of these women for this edition of "What's Your Story."

\* \* \*

BING LIU: My name is Bing Liu, I work in the cosmetics field.

CHI MEI YEUNG: My name is Chi Mei Yeung. I've been a seamstress for 30 or 40 years. I work 8 hours a day. I work 5 to 6 days a week.

YU PING LI: My name is Yu Ping Li. I've worked in electronics for almost 20 years. In China, I was a mid-level accountant. My husband was in home remodeling services. We emigrated because I wanted to have another child because of China's One Child Only policy. When we came here, it seemed like my luck changed. After a few years of hard work, I had a daughter.

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LIU: We came here because of our three children, to provide a better education. It's hard to get into the Hong Kong university system. The whole family was here and then I came – I was the last of my family to emigrate.

YEUNG: The reason we emigrated was because China took back Hong Kong in 1997. I had two children, and I wasn't sure what would happen to them. My husband's brothers had been petitioning us to come to the U.S. I didn't know what Hong Kong would be like after 1997, so that's why we immigrated here.

LI: When we got here, we didn't have mouths or legs. We didn't know English, and we didn't know how to drive.

LIU: We can't go far from the house because we can't read the signs. Also, you dare not go out at night because you don't know where you are.

YEUNG: I ask my relatives for help, but it's still hard. When I get home, I feel frustrated and I'm unhappy.

LIU: My boss sends me emails telling me what to do, but my English ability is not that good, so I don't understand it totally. It creates pressure, and then I have nightmares.

YEUNG: There are samples that I need to sew and the instructions are in English. But I can't read English, so I can't understand it.

LIU: We thought that America was a free country, and when we came here, we thought we'd have an opportunity to have money. When we came here, we realized it isn't exactly true. You labor, and you still don't get what you want.

LIU: When it's time for layoffs, the first batch to be laid off are the ones who don't know English. I was lucky someone introduced me to AIWA.

YEUNG: I learned that AIWA was a non-profit with activities workshops – all the workshops were free. I thought, "Oh, I should come and learn." I was introduced to the leadership training and I know a lot of my rights now.

LI: I learned self-defense. In the past I had to have someone accompany me, my husband. Now I drive by myself to AIWA, to work and to shop.

YEUNG: Through AIWA's intergenerational activities, I started to communicate better with my kids. I'm not as solemn or stern. We're open and the relationship is much better.

LIU: Through AIWA, we learned a lot of information about the community. The first workshop I attended was leadership training, then women's rights and job training.

YEUNG: I first came to the United States as a woman without knowing any of my rights in the community. Now after several years of training at AIWA, I know my rights. The best thing is that now I've become a trainer, too. So transforming from being so shy that I dared not speak in front of people, and now I'm training people and doing presentations at schools – I feel like my transformation is very great. The way we train one, and in turn they train others – in that way, we can train a lot of leaders and trainers to work in the community.

*"What's Your Story" is a feature produced in partnership with the San Francisco Chronicle. You can read more in the Insight section of this Sunday's Chronicle. And you can tell us your story by giving us a call at 415-264-7106.*

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