

Ruthanne Lum McCunn. *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. (San Francisco: Design Enterprises of San Francisco, 1981) 308 pp., \$10.95, \$5.95 paper.

“There is no history, only fictions of varying degree of plausibility.” Although historians may disagree with Voltaire’s provocative statement, Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s choice of this phrase as an opening for her biographical novel, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, is probably in keeping with the general agreement that any fiction which claims literary merits must contain some truth. McCunn, an Amerasian born in San Francisco’s Chinatown, grew up in Hong Kong. At the age of sixteen, she returned to San Francisco to attend college and subsequently worked as a librarian, teacher, and bilingual/bicultural specialist. She is the author of *An Illustrated History of the Chinese in America*.

*Thousand Pieces of Gold* tells the story of an extraordinary Chinese woman’s life-adventure. Lalu (1853-1933) was the eldest child—by chance a girl—of poor Chinese peasants who lived in a small village plagued by natural disasters and human evils. Circumstances forced Lalu to become a competent farm-laborer at thirteen, working beside her father in the open field instead of tending household duties with her mother at home (The latter being the traditional role assigned to Chinese women of the time.) Lalu grew to be a strong-willed, strong-bodied individual, a youngster who loved to till the land, who loved to be close to the soil. Abducted at nineteen Lalu was shipped off to America, where she was sold to a Chinese saloon keeper in Idaho. It was there, in a small mining town in Idaho, that Lalu was transformed into Polly, a Polly who eventually gained both her personal and economic independence. McCunn devotes approximately two-fifths of her book to Lalu and the remaining three-fifths to Polly.

On the whole, the novel is well constructed and well narrated. McCunn’s painstaking research has paid off, in that the reader is placed comfortably into many realistic, frequently moving, scenes about Lalu-Polly and the people surrounding her. And McCunn’s genuine interest in and evident enthusiasm for the life of her heroine is well conveyed and probably will be well received by her readers. She has brought Lalu-Polly back to life and by so doing has achieved what is perhaps the single most challenging task biographers set for themselves: that of placing their chosen characters simultaneously in the realms of both fiction and history.

Considering the Chinese immigrants of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the present century, one sees that Lalu-Polly is indeed one of a kind, for although her anguish and struggle might have been shared by many a contemporary Chinese immigrant to the American continent, her successes are

spectacularly unusual. In many ways, Lalu-Polly resembles more the “typical” pioneer-woman in early American history than the early “typical” Chinese immigrant to the New World. Fortunately for the reader, McCunn in her *Thousand Pieces of Gold* focuses most clearly upon the life of the courageous and resourceful heroine, whereas the other characters, including Charlie Bemies whom Lalu-Polly married in 1894, are portrayed largely in order to bring out the many facets of the heroine’s very active eighty years.

*Thousand Pieces of Gold* should prove to be an invaluable addition to the library of anyone interested in Chinese-American studies or Asian-American literature. Different from the so-called “exclusion-law novels” produced about 1905-1910, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* presents no exaggerated, gruesome scenes of injustices suffered by the Chinese immigrants at the hand of the “white devils” during the early phases of their immigration; nevertheless, the silent sobs of the Chinese immigrant can be poignantly discerned through the tears, and smiles, of Lalu-Polly.

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Carmelo Mesa-Lago. *The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981). 234 pp., \$17.50, \$9.95 paper.

It’s not unusual for partisans of opposing viewpoints about Cuba to spark each other to flaming argument, while those who prefer less heat and more light can easily find adventure enough just in following the course of the Western Hemisphere’s most important social experiment since the Mexican Revolution. Shouldn’t a book about twenty years of post-revolutionary Cuba be exciting, especially when it comes to us from Carmelo Mesa-Lago, Cuban native, an early supporter of the revolution and also an early emigre to the United States, and now, as Professor of Economics at the University of Pittsburgh, one of only a handful of distinguished students of Cuba in this country? His book is a product of a good deal of effort over a long period of time. It is detailed, precise, balanced, and informative. It is easily understood, so that non-experts can profit from reading it even though its wealth of hard-to-get data makes it an indispensable