Him Mark Lai: Reclaiming Chinese American History

JUDY YUNG AND HIM MARK LAI

In this interview with colleague Judy Yung, Him Mark Lai discusses at length the driving forces behind his passion for researching Chinese American history—his working-class background, progressive politics, training as a mechanical engineer, bilingual skills, and strong ethnic identity. Internationally recognized as the foremost authority on Chinese American history, Lai describes in detail his development as a pragmatic historian while researching and writing about such new topics as Angel Island poems, Pearl River Delta, Chinese American newspapers, regional groups, and Left movements.

THIS WAS AN IMPORTANT AND RELATIVELY EASY oral history interview for me to do because I have known and worked with Him Mark Lai for over a quarter of a century. Indeed, he was the one who inspired me to research my ethnic roots through oral history, beginning with our first book project about the Chinese immigrant experience at Angel Island.[1] He later encouraged me to pursue graduate studies and make Chinese American women's

JUDY YUNG is Professor of American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she teaches courses in Asian American Studies and Oral History. She is the co-author with Him Mark Lai and Genny Lim of *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980), and the author of *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (1986), *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1995), and *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1999).

1. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* (San Francisco: HOC DOI Project, Chinese Culture Foundation, 1980; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).

The Public Historian, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 50–69 (Winter 2003). ISSN: 0272-3433
© 2003 by the Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved.
Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

At the Chinese Historical Society of America's 35th Anniversary Luncheon Celebration in 1998, Him Mark Lai (center) received the Lifetime Achievement Award. Standing next to him is his wife Laura. (Photo courtesy of Him Mark Lai)

history my dissertation topic. He has in many ways been a pioneer and model public historian for those of us interested in reclaiming Chinese American history.

Him Mark Lai is a second-generation Chinese American, born on November 1, 1925 in San Francisco, California. His parents were immigrants from China who worked in a garment factory in Chinatown while raising five children. From an early age, Him Mark learned to love reading storybooks in Chinese as well as in English. He excelled in both Chinese and public schools, going on to earn his B.A. in mechanical engineering from University of California, Berkeley, in 1947, and then to work at Bechtel for over thirty years before he retired in 1984. However, his real love was not engineering but history, which he pursued with a passion throughout his life.

Him Mark Lai is internationally recognized as the foremost authority on Chinese American history, having written eight books and over one hundred articles in English and Chinese on topics ranging from Chinese district associations and Chinese newspapers to the Chinese Left movement and Chinese language schools in the United States. He is a walking encyclopedia and a public historian who strongly believes in sharing and spreading his knowledge and understanding of Chinese American history far and wide. I have never known Him Mark to refuse any researcher needing help, and he always knows where to look for the answer to any minute reference question asked of him. He has also lectured widely at universities and conferences locally, nationally, and in China and other parts of the world. Much of this accumulated knowledge has come from years of arduous study and painstaking research through libraries and archives, oral history interviews, travels to Chinese communities throughout the United States, and many trips to China, particularly the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, home of the majority of Chinese immigrants prior to the 1970s. He recently donated his entire collection of information files—two hundred boxes of articles and news clippings—to the Ethnic Studies Library at UC Berkeley.

Him Mark Lai's meticulousness and thoroughness as a historian is evidenced in the material he emailed me after we had set a date for this interview—a chronology of his life and his autobiography in sixty-eight pages, complete with footnotes and a list of his publications. The following interview was conducted in two three-hour sessions in the living room of Him Mark's home in the Telegraph Hill district of San Francisco. Like the rest of his house, the room was filled with books, file cabinets, computer equipment, and piles of magazines and newspapers. I had prepared a list of questions based on his autobiography, bibliography, and what I personally knew about him. I wanted to know more about the influential forces in his life, how and why he pursued Chinese American history with such passion, and what he saw as his major contributions to public history. Although it did not take much prodding on my part for him to tell his own story, it was difficult to get him to go into detail about specific research projects because I was already so familiar with them. I subsequently followed up with a third

The Lai family, 1946. Him Mark Lai is in back row, center. (Photo courtesy of Him Mark Lai)

interview in which he good-naturedly elaborated on various projects and his development as a historian.

In his own modest and methodical way, Him Mark seemed to enjoy reminiscing about the past and took great pride in his working-class background, progressive politics, Chinese language skills, and pragmatic approach to history. He has apparently always had an inquisitive mind and liked to figure out how different pieces of information fit together to form a larger picture that explains why things work the way they do. Without planning it, his Chinese knowledge and training in engineering would prove useful in his work as a historian, although he repeatedly said that he got into history because he was an opportunist: "I never ask to do anything, but I know how to seize the opportunity when I see it." I have selected and rearranged parts of the interview, deleted false starts and redundancies, and added footnotes for clarification and a smoother read, but the words, ideas, and style of speaking remain unchanged.

* * *

Yung: Tell us something about your family background and upbringing.

Lai: My parents were immigrants from China. My father came over here in 1910 and his ship I think was the *Siberia*. It was the first shipload of

people that were detained on Angel Island.[2] He worked at various jobs, including the garment industry. During World War I, he went to Sebastopol to harvest apple crops. After he saved enough money, he went back to China to get married. I think there was a fifteen-year difference in age. He came back in 1923, probably because of the new immigration law that was about to be passed.[3] At first they lived in Oakland for a year or so. They opened a small business, lost his pants. [*chuckles*] He never engaged in any more business after that. He moved to San Francisco and then worked for George Brothers [a Chinese-owned garment shop]. And then of course, my mother worked in the garment shop too. The two of them were garment workers for the rest of their lives. So my upbringing is working-class family and very much Chinese in that I knew how to speak Chinese before I spoke English. I am the oldest of five children—three boys and two girls. I was born November 1, 1925.

Yung: Tell us about your education.

Lai: When I started school at Commodore Stockton in 1932, I didn't know a word of English. That's why I almost flunked first grade. It was so bad that when the teacher announced that there was a holiday, Washington's Birthday, I remember I went to school. [*laughs*] But I guess that makes a person try harder because I managed to conquer it by the third grade. By the fourth grade, I think I was about at the top of the class. So by the time I finished [elementary] school, I was a pretty good student. From there, I went to Francisco Junior High School, which was a little more than half Chinese, and the rest were Italians. In general, the races got along pretty well except they were pretty segregated. The Italians went with the Italians; the Chinese went with the Chinese. Because I was one of the top students, it got thrust on me to be class president. I never wanted to do anything like that, you know. But the guy with the least resistance usually gets it. I didn't know how to handle the situation—these occasions when the principal awards these trophies for citizenship and as president you have to go up there and accept the trophy. I used to hate public speaking. I still do. In the third or fourth grade we got our first library cards and I really read all the books. There was a limit of four books each time that you borrowed, and every two or three days I would borrow books on a wide range of subjects—fairy tales, American Indians, dinosaurs, Chinese history, biographies, the

2. Angel Island in San Francisco Bay was the point of entry for the majority of Chinese immigrants who came to the United States between 1910 and 1940. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, they were detained at Angel Island for anywhere from a few weeks to two years, and subjected to detailed interrogations about their identities and right to enter the United States.

3. The Immigration Act of 1924, aimed at curbing immigration from eastern, southern, and central Europe, also barred any "alien ineligible to citizenship," namely Asian immigrants and even Asian spouses of U.S. citizens.

American West, all in English—That's why my eyes got so bad. I accumulated a lot of book knowledge in the arts, sciences, and humanities, which I would find useful later in doing Chinese American history.

Yung: How about your reading knowledge in Chinese?

Lai: Actually, I started Chinese school the year before American school at Nam Kue,[4] where the emphasis was on classical Chinese and Confucian teachings. And we had a grand-uncle, who was a cousin of my grand-aunt's, who lived next door to us. He used to buy me Chinese storybooks and novels when I was about eight or nine years old. That's why I also did fairly well in Chinese school.

Yung: What was your ethnic identity growing up as a teenager?

Lai: Definitely Chinese because teachers in school kept reminding you you're Chinese. The American schools kept saying that you're an American citizen and you're supposed to vote. Your father and mother should be voting and all that. That really got me mad because my father was an alien and he couldn't become a citizen. "How could they be so ignorant as to say that we should be citizens and vote? Don't they know about the Chinese Exclusion laws?[5] I learned about those laws in Chinese school. They talked about the Opium War, the unequal treaties, and I think discrimination in the U.S. This was during the Sino-Japanese War period when Chinese patriotism was high. So Chinese school was influential as far as my ethnic identity went. I don't think I had a Chinese American identity at that point. That only developed in the 1950s, because under McCarthyism, you didn't want to identify as Chinese. All the activities then were Chinese American.

Yung: From Francisco Junior High you went to . . . ?

Lai: To Galileo High School. There were even less Chinese, about a third Chinese. I majored in mathematics because it was easy. I also took world history, which was not required. I did pretty well in history. In my senior year, I got first place in a citywide history competition. One of the contestants fainted. [*laughs*] It was only a twenty-five dollar bond. Then the school made a big thing about it because Galileo was not known for anything like that at all. [*laughs*]

Yung: Why didn't you pursue history?

4. The Nam Kue Chinese language school, established in 1925 for children from the Nanhai District of Guangdong Province, still exists today in San Francisco's Chinatown.

5. The Chinese were barred from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens until the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943.

Lai: First thing, we're poor. That creates a lot of insecurity about jobs. And then, I'm not exactly an outgoing person, so that made it doubly difficult. Even during my senior year, I was unsure. By the time I graduated from high school in the summer, because of the war I decided to go into engineering. It was something you could make a living with. At that point, I could not see any future in history. There was a lot of prejudice against Chinese.

Yung: Did your family encourage you to go to college?

Lai: My mother did but my father didn't. He said a lot of shipyard workers were making pretty good money.[6] At that time, my boss at the sewing factory was a mining engineering graduate from UC. He wasn't doing so well. [*laughs*] But my mother supported me. She herself was not that well educated, but she probably thought education was good. In the fall of 1943, I enrolled at [San Francisco] City College with a major in engineering. I found college more demanding and it took me a while to adjust, but when I graduated in 1945, I was selected as the valedictorian. I continued on at UC Berkeley.

Yung: Why did you choose UC Berkeley?

Lai: Because it was the nearest and I couldn't afford Stanford. It was only fifty dollars [for incidental fees per semester], not out of reach. I was living at home. I had to commute, and that was tough, too, because it took two hours. The competition was rougher. I managed to get through with a C+ average. I blamed it on working. I started working about twenty hours a week in a sewing factory in 1941, just before Pearl Harbor. It prevented me from getting too much into social events in college, but you can't live it over again. I got my B.A. in mechanical engineering in '47. I think there were only two Chinese who graduated in mechanical engineering.

Yung: So you got your degree, then what?

Lai: Then I found out there was an engineering shortage. But that didn't mean you automatically got a job. I graduated in the summer and couldn't find anything for a couple of months. I went to the placement office, but it wasn't that simple. The excuse was always, have you got experience? I finally decided on civil service. So I took the civil service examination for federal and for the city. In the meantime, I went to work for T. Kong Lee [an import-export business on Sacramento Street] as a stock boy. I didn't want to be

6. During World War II the San Francisco Bay Area developed into the largest shipbuilding center in the world, providing good-paying jobs to many Chinese American workers who had been previously discriminated against in the larger labor market.

doing nothing at home and then my father would get after me again. I was there a couple of months. Then the Bureau of Reclamation gave me a job as a civil engineer at Antioch. But they had just moved and were not organized yet, so I just sat in the office with nothing to do for a couple of months. At the end of the year, the city called and offered me a job at the Utilities Engineering Bureau. I worked for the city for a couple of years, from 1948 to 1951. Started as junior engineer and worked myself up to assistant, designing the overhead systems for the trolley coach lines. There, I was exposed to the ugly side of discrimination and office politics when I saw two colleagues, one Indian and the other Jewish, prevented from promotions because they were not part of the inner circle, while an Irish worker was successful despite doing poorly in the promotion examinations. At the end of '51, I decided to go back to UC for graduate school in electrical engineering. The Cold War was on and I didn't like the way it was going. I feared that America was going toward fascism. I thought maybe I would go to China.[7] But I never got the degree because I got married in 1953.

Yung: How did you meet your wife, Laura?

Lai: By that time I was involved in the Chinese American Youth Club Mun Ching, a progressive organization that supported the new China. I was one of the few American-born Chinese members and served as president from 1951 to 1959—except for the first year I was in graduate school. During the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, the club decided to move away from progressive politics to cultural activities. It introduced the Chinese community to music and songs, folk dances, and vernacular dramas connected to the new China. We also encouraged members to learn technical skills and the sciences and organized a tutorial program for immigrant high school students. And Laura, my future wife, had just come as an immigrant and was having a hard time with U.S. history. So I started helping her, got to know each other, then got married after she graduated from high school. We went on a honeymoon bus trip covering Portland, Boise, Salt Lake City, Denver, the Grand Canyon, Phoenix, and Los Angeles.

Yung: Getting back to your work history . . .

Lai: Then I got a job at Bechtel Corporation in the power division. They came to UC to recruit. I became a junior mechanical engineer earning $350 a month, which wasn't very much. I started in 1953 and worked until 1984. I was promoted to supervisor in '62.

7. To escape racial discrimination in America and out of a strong sense of Chinese nationalism, second-generation Chinese Americans like Him Mark Lai seriously considered going to China to advance their careers and to help build a modern nation-state.

Here I was the only Chinese in that division and I was kind of dubious about whether I could manage these guys. But I found out that when you have power, people will respect you if you use it judiciously. I wanted a good raise and all that, but I really didn't want that kind of responsibility. Then I found myself in the situation. "Am I speaking for management or for the workers?" I didn't like to be put in that kind of position, but once I had the responsibility, I had to discharge it, that's all.

Yung: How did you become interested in Chinese American history at this point?

Lai: I think it was evolution rather than sudden. I was always interested in history, but first it was classical Chinese history. Then by the time I became active in Mun Ching, it became modern Chinese history, since the Opium War and all that. Then in 1959 or '60, I took a course at UC Extension from Stanford Lyman[8] in Asian American history. For the first time I really learned something about Chinese Americans. It lit a spark in me. That gave me an introduction, but I didn't do anything with it. By then, the Left was in disarray and Mun Ching wasn't doing much.

Then in 1965, when the Chinese Historical Society had this exhibition at the YMCA asking people to identify photographs, it was at that point that I joined. I knew that those guys didn't know Chinese, and I did. That was where I could help, do some translations. One of the first things I translated was a genealogy of the Look family in Mendocino [California]. I don't think the historical society ever did anything with it, but I found that my knowledge of Chinese and U.S. history could be used to great advantage in Chinese American research.

Then at the end of 1967, Maurice Chuck became the editor of *East West*,[9] and he asked me to write a series of articles on Chinese American history. That's what started my career in research and writing. I went to the public, university, and historical society libraries on weekends to look at books, and if they had any information on Chinese Americans, I would xerox it. All kinds of travel books, books on economics, a wide range of material that was really scattered. This was the beginning of my information files. Later I went to Bancroft Library on Saturdays to read the *Chung Sai Yat Po*[10] from 1900 to 1906, but it took me a long time. Another time I followed the *Chung Sai Yat Po* in the 1920s. Then I got into the Hoover [Institution] library at Stanford. I was writing as fast as I could in *East West* because I was working at Bechtel at the same time.

8. Stanford Lyman, Professor of Sociology at the New School for Social Research, taught the first course on Asian American history at UC Extension in 1967. He is the author of *Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 1974).

9. *East West* was a bilingual weekly newspaper in San Francisco that covered Chinese American news from 1967 until its demise in 1989.

10. *Chung Sai Yat Po* (literally China-West Daily News) was founded by Rev. Ng Poon Chew in 1900 and folded in 1951.

I had never thought about myself as a writer, but as I was writing, people seemed to be receptive to it. Then that, of course, encouraged me to go further. I don't think that when I started I thought I would be doing what I am doing now, although I've always been curious as far as pure research is concerned. You give me a good research project and I will do it, just to satisfy myself. I used to list all the Indian tribes and make maps showing where they were located. I would also make maps of all the rivers and mountain ranges when I studied Chinese geography. I was just regurgitating a lot of information already done by other people, but I learned a lot that way. I guess that's just the way I'm made up. [*chuckles*]

Anyway, one thing led to another, and by 1969 there was this seminar on Chinese American history for educators and Thomas Chinn[11] called me and Phil Choy[12] together to write some handouts. I already had these articles in *East West*, so I just refined them and added footnotes. In those days I was young and vigorous, and I could do a lot of things fast. So in three months we finished *Syllabus*, which became the basic reference work on the Chinese in California.[13] It ended in the nineteenth century because that was all I had written for *East West*. I contributed the parts on Chinese labor and the Pearl River Delta. The anti-Chinese laws were written by Chuck Chan. Phil Choy did the anti-Chinese movement. All the stuff about Chinese organizations, the opera, and temples was by Thomas Chinn.

After the *Syllabus* project and the seminar ended, San Francisco State College had just settled the [Third World students'] strike, and the History Department decided to offer some courses, apparently trying to preempt ethnic studies. Chester Cheng [a professor in the History Department] contacted me to do a pilot course on Chinese American history, and I contacted Phil [Choy]. It was a night course, but since I worked, I didn't want sole responsibility, so we team-taught the course in the history department. We prepared the course outline based on *Syllabus* and printed selections from different books and papers. We covered labor and everything up to the present. Since I had Chinese references on the geography and people of Guangdong Province, I covered that. I wanted to also compare the situation on the mainland U.S. with Canada and Hawai'i. Phil and I took turns lecturing. That was in fall of 1969. After that, they gave an okay to the course and it got shifted over to Asian American studies. Phil and I team-taught it for another seven semesters. I never did regard teaching as a career objective and taught only when responding to a request to fill a need. But the challenge of teaching was of great help to me in that

11. Thomas Chinn was the founder of the *Chinese Digest*, a weekly newspaper for American-born Chinese (1936–1940), and one of the founders of the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1963.

12. Philip Choy is an architect, historian, teacher, and past president of the Chinese Historical Society of America.

13. Thomas Chinn, H. Mark Lai, and Philip P. Choy, *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969).

I had to think through many historical issues before presenting them to the class.

Yung: When did you start doing oral history?

Lai: I started oral history in the late sixties because H. K. Wong[14] appointed me the head of the oral history committee. That's typical of the Chinese Historical Society. No planning, and what am I supposed to do? But anyway, I went with him on some of the interviews, like with this guy in Mendocino, George Hee at the temple. But I never did too much of it until after Victor Nee's book [*Longtime Californ'*].[15] Even then, I wasn't doing it regularly. I just did it when I had the chance, like when I worked on the Sam Yup Association project with Yuk Ow and the Angel Island project with you and Genny [Lim].[16] I haven't consistently gone out to interview people, because it's not easy to find all these guys. I wish sometimes that I had done better, because I usually went into the interviews cold. Some of the memorable interviews were of the older Chinese Americans, like Hugh Leong on the Chung Wah Four Quartet and Cathay Band. He talked about the 1906 earthquake, his being Chinese American, and how he taught the Chung Wah students to march in the parades. Another one was with former Secretary of State March Fong Eu's father-in-law, M. Q. Fong. He owned the Republic Drugstore, below Kan's Restaurant in San Francisco. He was an interpreter for the Chinese consulate, a member of the board of directors for the China Mail Steamship line, and one of the first in pharmaceutical work. That was a good interview in that he was all prepared and just recited it out, although I wish I had questioned him more. He had quite an interesting life. Another one was Dr. James Hall, who started the Chinese Hospital, and Walter James, another loquacious person who talked about the oyster beds in Olympia, Washington, and the Chinese American civic council, which he started in the Midwest. His interview was published in *History and Perspectives*.[17] A lot of the interviews were conducted in Chinese. Only a few were in English, like the one with Rosie Ow that I gave you.[18] The fact that I was not doing it with any objective in mind, sometimes

14. One of the founders of the Chinese Historical Society of America, H. K. Wong was also the author of *Gum Sahn Yun: Gold Mountain Men* (San Francisco: H. K. Wong, 1987).

15. Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee's *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) is based on oral histories with a cross-section of Chinese Americans in San Francisco.

16. The two books involving oral history that Him Mark Lai co-authored are *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Sam Yup Association of San Francisco, 1975, 2000) and *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*.

17. Him Mark Lai, Laura Lai, Philip Choy, and Marlon Hom, "Walter James: Reminiscences of My Younger Days," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1995): 75–86.

18. "Rose Yuen Ow, Cabaret Dancer: 'I've Lived a Full Life.'" In Judy Yung, *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 273–80.

that was a disadvantage because I didn't know what I was looking for. I just asked questions on the spur of the moment. Unfortunately, I don't have any signed release forms. But things evolved. I learned as I went along.

Yung: Did you have a focus for all the research you were doing?

Lai: The first thing I was interested in was the Chinese regional groups in the U.S., like the Fa Yuen group and the Dow Moon group.[19] It was probably the history book on the Sam Yup district association that I compiled with Yuk Ow and Phil Choy that got me started. We used the association's existing records, which go back to 1881, oral interviews, and other research materials like annals, gazetteers, and biographies. I translated the history and wrote about the changes in occupations and populations. There's a lot of ego involved. Everyone wants their biographies in there, so you have to be careful they're not puffing it up. Up to now, it is the only detailed history of any of the Chinese district associations in San Francisco, and it's a useful reference book to start with in doing research. I still want to do more regional histories, but it involves a lot of research.

Since I had to get much of my information from the newspapers, I next got interested in collecting and indexing Chinese newspapers, and there have been a lot of them.[20] Now you have those that are for Taiwan independence, those that are Vietnamese Chinese, those that are plain commercial. Then you have Christian and Buddhist ones and of course those representing political parties. So that makes it difficult for me to do a national bibliography, because I can't be every place all the time. I try to keep up with the trends by picking up Chinese newspapers wherever I go in my travels. For instance, I found there was one in Salt Lake City, in Denver and Phoenix, and in Detroit and Cleveland, even in places like St. Louis and Miami. I went to Atlanta and I found four or five weekly papers. They really mushroomed in the 1970s because of the increased immigration and advanced printing technology. Now they even have Chinese newspapers on the Web. How do you classify these and how do you keep up with them? I keep on telling both the [Chinese] Historical Society and the libraries that this is important stuff that should be collected, but nobody is willing to do it. So okay, if they won't do it, I'll do it. I began to read the Chinese newspapers regularly and to add Chinese clippings to my information files. Soon they exceeded English-language items for certain categories. The obvious truth

19. Fa Yuen (Hua Xian) and Dow Moon (Doumen) Districts are both located in Guangdong Province. See Him Mark Lai, "Potato King and Film Producer, Flower Growers, Professionals and Activists: The Huangliang Du Community in Northern California," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1999): 1–24; and "Chinese Regional Solidarity: Case Study of the Hua Xian (Fa Yuen) Community in California," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1994), 19–60.

20. Him Mark Lai and Karl Lo, *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854–1975* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1977).

began to sink in that since foreign-born Chinese outnumbered American-born for most of Chinese American history, it was natural that most of the documentation would be in Chinese. I also found that newspapers helped me to understand what is going on locally in the communities and from there I can get a more complex picture of Chinese America.

Regional groups and newspapers were the main research topics, and then the Chinese American Left because I was involved with them. I felt I knew more about it than other people. My first essay in a scholarly journal was a historical survey of Left organizations.[21] The subject aroused interest among Asian American activists, and a revised version was included in *Counterpoint*[22] and later further expanded and published in *History and Perspectives*.[23]

Yung: What did you go on to do next?

Lai: The next major project was on Angel Island. As usual, I wasn't the one who suggested it. I think it was Genny Lim who approached me to translate the poems left by Chinese immigrants on the barracks walls of the immigration station. I knew some of them were just imitations because I recognized them from Chinese poetry I knew. There were a lot of literary references and only someone with background in Chinese history could translate them. Fortunately, I had that kind of background. Sometimes I would mull over a Cantonese term for weeks as to its meaning. That's why we ended up with so many footnotes in the book. Then, as the poet, Genny would polish up my translation. Your job was to do the oral histories. I wrote the historical introduction.

Yung: Did you get excited about any of the poems?

Lai: I considered them part of Chinese American history, but I wasn't particularly excited. I don't get excited easily, but my favorite poem was the one I selected for *California History*.[24]

21. Him Mark Lai, "A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left Among the Chinese in America," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (Fall, 1972): 10–21.

22. Him Mark Lai, "Historical Survey of the Chinese Left in America." In Emma Gee (Ed.), *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1972), 63–80.

23. Him Mark Lai, "To Bring Forth a New China, to Build a Better America: The Chinese Marxist Left in America to the 1960s," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1992): 3–82.

24. Him Mark Lai, "Island of Immortals: Chinese Immigrants and the Angel Island Immigration Station," *California History* (Spring 1978): 88–103. His favorite poem appears on page 99:

This place is called an island of immortals
But as a matter of fact the mountain wilderness is a prison.
The bird plunges in even though it sees the open net.
Because of poverty, one can do naught else.

At the same time, Russell Leong asked me to compile an annotated bibliography on Chinese language materials.[25] That took several years. Most of the entries were in the local libraries around here because they didn't give me any travel funds. I'm sure there's a lot more in the Yencheng Library at Harvard and in Hawai'i. It mainly included collections at Berkeley, Stanford, and the Chinese Historical Society. Of particular importance is what the [Chinese] Historical Society found at the offices of the *Chinese World*.[26] It is the richest find so far. Someone from the Chun family called me about it and I called Phil Choy. There was a lot of stuff up there, all these old newspapers, books they had published on Tsai Ting-kai's trip to the U.S. in the 1930s.[27] Then there were a lot of magazines that were anti-KMT[28] in the 1920s and early 1930s, a lot of correspondence, the archives of the Constitutionalist Party,[29] and the correspondence of Li Tsung-jen, the former vice president of China. They decided to give the newspapers to the San Francisco Main Library. But they had no Chinese expertise and the newspapers got put in the Boiler Room until Wei Chi Poon [UC Berkeley librarian] picked them up. UC Berkeley is the right place for it. People have this thing about bureaucracy, and they want to give it to the so-called community. But I have seen things kept in the community, and without funds and professional help, they eventually just get destroyed. That is not good.

From 1972 to '84, I was also coordinating a weekly radio program, *Hon Sing*, and that really tied me up. It was basically news commentary, announcements, and modern Chinese music. I remember the first thing I put on was the "Yellow River Cantata."[30]

Then in 1979, diplomatic relations were resumed between China and the U.S. That year, the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA started a research project to study emigrant families in two villages in Taishan County [Guangdong Province], and I was invited to join the research team. I spent

25. Him Mark Lai, *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1986).

26. A daily newspaper founded in 1891, *Chinese World* was the official news organ of the Chinese Empire Reform Association (renamed Constitutionalist Party in 1906). After civil war broke out in China between Nationalist and Communist forces, *Chinese World* became critical of both governments and advocated the organization of a third political force. The paper folded in 1969.

27. General Tsai Ting-kai became an instant hero to Chinese Americans when he went against Chiang Kai-shek's orders and valiantly fought against the Japanese army in Shanghai in 1932. In 1934 he came to the United States to rally support for China and was given a hero's welcome by the Chinese American community.

28. The Kuomintang (Guomindang) became a national political party of the Republic of China after the 1911 Revolution and overthrow of the Qing dynasty. The party became anti-Communist under the control of Chiang Kai-shek in the 1920s, and continued to dominate Taiwan and the Chinese American community until recent times.

29. Previously known as the Baohuanghui, the Constitutionalist Party advocated for a constitutional monarchy in China.

30. Composed by Xian Xinghai in 1939, "Yellow River Cantata" was a popular patriotic song during the Sino-Japanese War.

a week in Zhongshan University's library and another week in Taishan looking at their archives to suggest things to microfilm. I was also involved in some of the oral histories. My part was really not that big, but it helped me establish contact with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, both at the local and provincial levels. This network proved to be quite useful in the next two decades, facilitating my visits to emigrant areas in China. The project also led to two conferences in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, where I began to make numerous contacts with scholars from China and other countries researching Chinese overseas. These contacts enabled me to keep abreast of developments in the field and broadened my perspective on Chinese American history.

Yung: What was your most satisfying project?

Lai: I think the most satisfying was the publication of my Chinese book on overseas Chinese history.[31] That again, like most things in my life, came as an accident, and I seized the opportunity. I had written the article on Chinese American history for the *Harvard Encyclopedia*,[32] and Maurice Chuck wanted me to translate that for his newspaper, *San Francisco Journal*.[33] But after several weekly installments I decided there were too many vague generalities, lots of bones but no meat. So I decided that since I had all these lecture notes, why not put them in? Of course, that still wasn't adequate, so I had to do a lot of research on the side. Every week, I would write a thousand words and do research on the run. [*laughs*] It was supposed to be a short history, but it ended up going on for four years. I wasn't even finished with the series when Teo Ng at Eastwind Bookstore said, "Why don't you see if Joint Publishing Company in Hong Kong would be interested in publishing it?" I didn't really have any great hopes, but I said all right, I'd try. To my surprise, they accepted it. That's when I decided to take a leave of absence from Bechtel, and then later I just resigned. At fifty-nine, I was not a rich person, but I knew I wasn't going to starve. If I retired, I could do a lot more writing. I badly underestimated the time needed to revise and introduce additional material into the manuscript. The total effort took over ten years.

The main thread is the Americanization of the Chinese, how they became a part of America, particularly after World War II. Before then, they still thought of themselves as Chinese, and the Americans thought of them as Chinese too. Becoming a part of America is really about becoming ethnic

31. Him Mark Lai, *Cong Huaqiao dao Huaren: Ershi shji Meiguo Huaren shehui fazhan shi* (From Overseas Chinese to Chinese America: A History of the Development of Chinese American Society during the Twentieth Century) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1992).

32. H. M. Lai, "Chinese." In Stephan Thernstrom (Ed.), *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 217–34.

33. *San Francisco Journal*, a pro-People's Republic of China newspaper, published between 1972 and 1986.

American. That's why the title, *From Overseas Chinese to Chinese America.* The other thread is that relations to China cannot be neglected—political, economic, and cultural ties, all of them. Then too, I wrote about reverse flow—people who went to China to serve and find careers at the turn of the century, like the guy from Hawai'i [Holt Cheng] who started the first medical college in Canton in 1908. The title indicated the book covered the twentieth century, but actually the first chapter is on the nineteenth century. I've never been an advocate of stressing the nineteenth century. I think that the twentieth century is much more relevant for us. It's not a best-seller, but it's gone through a second printing. I've known people from China who have used the book, especially when they are doing research, like film producers. I think it's pretty accurate.

About three years after I retired, *History and Perspectives* came into being.[34] It is the only scholarly journal of Chinese American studies and free of the strictures of academia because we publish things that orthodox journals would never do, such as oral histories, translations, memoirs, and reprints. We have included in-depth articles on the Chinese language schools, the Chinese Left, and family histories. The journal will probably expand to Chinese in the Americas. We've already published articles on Mexico and Canada.

Yung: Do you want to say anything about the "In Search of Roots" Program?

Lai: The Roots Program started in 1989 when the Chinese Historical Society and Chinese Culture Center held a symposium on Chinese American family history and genealogy. It was pretty well attended and showed that people were interested. Two years later we started the program with a ten-thousand-dollar grant for youth work. We wanted to look at genealogy and how it related to the development of Chinese American society. Taking the young people to China to find their roots was always part of the plan, because that was the part that was subsidized by the Chinese government. In preparing the youths for the China trip, Al Cheng[35] would help them with their genealogy and I would concentrate on the history of Chinese Americans and the Pearl River Delta. I also gave them information from the gazetteers about the villages, population, industries, and things like that. Also the derivations of their surnames, and of course I helped plan the itinerary. We never knew that identity would be such a big issue with the young people. Even those who thought they had nothing to do with China would get very emotional when they visited their ancestral homes. I would say it's a good program that has brought good results.

34. *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* is the annual journal of the Chinese Historical Society of America that Him Mark Lai helped found in 1987.

35. An educator and genealogist, Albert Cheng is director of the California School Leadership Academy.

Yung: Why is it so important for you to pursue Chinese American history?

Lai: Because our history and heritage is a part of America, yet it is not something our educational system is interested in teaching. The general public needs to know about it and Chinese Americans themselves need to be aware of it. To me, it is important for us to know our history, where we are different and where we are the same, why are we here and how did we become who we are. The process through which the Chinese became a part of this country is just as legitimate and important as that of other ethnic groups in this country. And if we don't know that, then I think a person will be psychologically handicapped and will feel ashamed of certain things. The next generation should know about the struggles that the Chinese have gone through. In other words, you have to be actively engaged to protect our equality and rights. I think the next generation right now has it comparatively easy, but there's no guarantee.

Yung: What has influenced your pursuit of history?

Lai: Yuk Ow for one. He was from the same area of China as my father, so I had known him for a long time. He was a trained librarian and a lay historian who had been quietly doing in-depth Chinese American research for years. He was good with details and much more organized than me. You asked him something and he would come up with a list, so he was very good with historical information. When I became active in Chinese American history, I often consulted with him. He stressed to me the importance of bibliographic work and Chinese language materials. One important thing he told me was that history is research, organize, and the last thing, which I never considered, is interpreting.

Yung: How did engineering affect your work as a historian?

Lai: My engineering education taught me to be analytical, logical, and practical in solving problems. So that affects the way I approach history. There's the ideal, but you're not going to get the ideal. You have certain things that objectively exist and you have to live with that and, from that, get practical results. Engineering also taught me to look at various alternatives. That's why I have never gotten involved in advocacy work, even though I support it in a way. I cannot see myself giving a speech that is one-sided without giving the other side. Yet that would be fatal if you were an advocate. Some people may say that I don't have a historical theory and all that, but historical theory just builds on logic. In the beginning I was just narrating, but later I started being more interpretive. I never got away from narration because I think some historians go overboard. All they do is weave a lot of

stories out of a few facts. Trained as an engineer, I go from the facts to the conclusions. To me, that's what a historian does, not weave a lot of tales from nothing.

Yung: How do your Left views influence the way you do history?

Lai: Initially, because of the influence of Mun Ching, I tended to stress the common people or collective good rather than the individual heroes. But then as I went further, I realized society was much more complicated than that. So I began to collect biographies. Just writing about a faceless, nameless mass was not very satisfying. Then this question of class versus race kept coming up. For instance, you cannot have a Chinese perspective aside from your class standpoint too. I think when Asian American studies first started, you had a lot of people who were focused on race. Now they are slowly getting around to recognizing it's not just race. Race and social class are all factors. Actually, I've gone long enough in these things to know that just class is not enough either. For instance, if you look at the anti-Chinese movement, you have labor involved. How do you explain that? Certainly Marxism has a difficult time explaining that. At different times under different conditions, one might prevail over the other. It's not a simple thing.

Yung: What are some of the challenges you face in doing public history?

Lai: I think the real challenge is finding material. You can do broad-brush opinions any time, but to go into depth is not that easy. For example, you try to get into Chinese enterprises. Financial records are usually not that easily available. Or else you want to find out about the history of organizations. You don't really have that much primary material for the nineteenth century. Most of it is in later years, and those are not that reliable. Despite the lip service that people pay to the importance of knowing the history, there is really not that much effort going into saving it. People want to use it, but they don't want to do the research. I don't see the historical societies playing a major role in research. As a general rule, most of these people are supporters. They get to the narrative stage and that's all. Most of them have what Stanford Lyman calls defensive type ideological thinking; in other words, what are the Chinese American contributions? And a lot of the history is not very critical of the Chinese, sometimes, a lot of glory. But you do need a certain amount of that.

Yung: What are the advantages of being a public historian rather than an academic historian ?

Lai: For one thing, I'm free to undertake any research I want without worrying about funding, tenure, or promotion. I can do an index and feel just

as satisfied, whereas in academia that will not get you a promotion. The other thing is that I can put in whatever materials I think are useful to prove my thesis. Orthodox historians think that oral history is not as valid, but to me a historian has to make some judgment as to the layers of reliability. Then, I'm not bound by discipline. This is anthropological, that is sociological, that is historical. It's just whatever I want to put in to get a picture. Reality is not bound by disciplines either. I don't have to worry about getting published, because I'm not after academic status. The thing is, though, with academia, you do have research assistants. You can exploit all these graduate students. I can't do that. Then of course there is this certain snobbishness among academicians too. "A lay historian, what do you know? I know theory, you lay historians don't." In fact, I don't think theory is that great.

Yung: What do you feel are your major contributions to public history?

Lai: I think my major contribution is to give to the English-speaking Chinese who don't read Chinese a sense of the breadth and complexity of Chinese American history. For a small population, Chinese American history is very complex. In other words, it's not just the anti-Chinese movement or discrimination. There are many areas that have not been covered. For instance, the history of the Shanghainese and Fujianese groups, or Chinese from Burma, they are all distinct subgroups in this society. It's only because of the [campaign finance] scandal that people know about the Hsi Lai Temple.[36] Yet, it's existed there in Hacienda Heights for about a decade. How did they get so much money? Why do they have so many adherents? You have a lot of people that are connected with the elite in China who have come to the United States. How have they affected American policies? Another thing, how are the Chinese from different regions of America different because of demography, environment, historical period, and all that? Much of the previous history has been on San Francisco and Northern California, but in order to understand the whole picture and how the Americanization process works, you have to go into the history of other places like the Chinese in Hawai'i or in the South. There's a lot more work to be done. The problem is that the Chinese being a small minority, people are not willing to put a lot of resources on them.

Yung: What do you see as the future direction of Chinese American history?

Lai: Asian American studies is a natural place for it. But Asian American studies' main driving force is racism, political equality, and identity politics.

36. In April 1996, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) took in $140,000 at a fundraiser featuring Vice President Al Gore at the Buddhist monastery in Hacienda Heights, near Los Angeles. After the fundraisers were indicted for laundering campaign contributions from a religious organization, DNC admitted wrongdoing and returned the donations.

For that reason, other areas are neglected. It's very difficult to predict just where it will go or what discipline is going to come out with the key research topics, but I think academicians have to look at the larger picture. The Chinese are a part of American society and they need to be studied as part of U.S. history, but because of the overseas connections, they need to also be studied as part of Chinese and world history.