On November 1, 1925, a child was born in San Francisco, California, destined to write and make a mark in the historical annals of Chinese America. The parents named their son Him Mark Lai, the first descendant of the Mai clan to be born in America. (Mai is Maak in Cantonese and is often anglicized as Mark in America.)

Origins

It is unclear who the first Mai was in China. One account in the Mai family genealogy says the Marquis of Mai was a descendant of Emperor Jing of the Han Dynasty and was granted a fief at Mai in Shandong by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty in 116 B.C. Thus the origin of the name Mai, which means “wheat.” Another account in a book on family names traces the clan origin to Mai Qiu Laoren
Maak Yau Loyan) ["The Old Man on the Wheat Mound"] who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.).

The first notable Mai is Mai Tiezhang (Maak Titjeung) ["Mai with the iron staff"] who was a bandit turned military official during the Sui dynasty (581-618 A.D.). He was from Shixing in northern Guangdong and died in 612, fighting in battle against the Koreans in northeast China. Mai is generally credited with being the clan's progenitor. To this day, members of the clan are found mainly in southern China, particularly Guangdong.

During the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1276), five brothers of the Mai clan and 92 other families living in Zhuji Xiang (Juegei Hong) ["Pearl lane"] at Nanxiong, northern Guangdong, migrated southward to the Pearl River Delta. One branch of the clan eventually settled in Nanhai on a branch of the North River. This village was Dashi (Daishup) ["Great 10th"], named after the eldest of three brothers and was also known as Congxia Nanxiang (Chunghaa Naamheung) ["South mist of the stream village"]. Pingshu, the second brother, is the progenitor of the lineage from which Him Mark Lai traces his ancestry.

Maak Becomes Lai

Mai Ding (Maak Ding) was a descendant of Pingshu. He was a peasant who rented land to cultivate mulberry leaves and pond fish. His son Mai Zhi (Maak Ji) was a hand loom operator who wove silk textiles at a small factory in the village of Dasha (Daisha) ["Great sand"]. Maak Ji had two sons and a daughter. The eldest son Maak Wobing (Maak Yook Bing) was to be Him Mark Lai's father.

One wintry afternoon around the turn of the 20th century, Maak Ding was getting ready to harvest his fish. But the weather dipped below freezing and all the fish died. Maak Ding was unable to pay his rent or to repay his debts, and he died the following year. Maak Ji returned to the village but the family's situation continued to decline. He eventually persuaded a fellow villager Mai Tu (Maak Tu) to take sixteen-year-old Yook Bing to Singapore as an apprentice in the tailor business.

Yook Bing's mother had a widowed sister living in Xiajiao (Haagao) Village. Her name was Li Run'ai (Lai Yoen Oi) and had emigrated to the United States during the 1880s or 1890s. While living in San Francisco she did needlework and also worked as a hairdresser and maid. She retired to Guangzhou (Canton) shortly before the 1906 San Francisco earthquake with enough savings to purchase several houses in the city's Xiguan (Saiguan) district. Lai

Yoen Oi also invested in Chinese businesses in America which included the Long Sing Ti art goods store in New York and the Fook Tai lottery in the San Francisco Bay Area. She helped her relatives in Haagao come to the United States. Shortly after the San Francisco earthquake, she convinced one of her cousins returning to China to bring her nephew Yook Bing to America as a paper son.

Maak Ji immediately went to Singapore to summon Yook Bing back to China. Maak Ji stayed to worked in the tin mines of Malaya and passed away within a year. He was about 50 years old. To this day, no one knows where he was buried. Shortly thereafter, Maak Ji's wife also passed away in China. This left Yook Bing as head of the family.

On December 17, 1909, Yook Bing boarded the S.S. Siberia in Hong Kong. Along with 84 fellow passengers, he was among the first batch of detainees sent to the newly opened Angel Island Immigration Station. He stayed there until he was admitted to the United States on February 7, 1910. He entered as Bing Lai, minor son of Poon Lai of Haagao Village and partner of the Tuck Chong and Company, a dry goods and clothing store at No. 10 Sullivan Alley, San Francisco.

Maak Yook Bing, now Bing Lai, began life in America working in the garment industry first as a general helper and later as a sewing machine operator. Ten years later, Bing decided to return to China for a visit. In 1922, he married his cousin Dong Hing Mui, one of Lai Yoen Oi's two adopted daughters.

A Family Begins in America

It was during a time when the United States was about to tighten its immigration laws against Asians and when Guangzhou was undergoing its own political unrest. Bing and Hing Mui decided to go to Hong Kong in 1923 to arrange for passage to America. The newlyweds were stranded in Hong Kong with their baggage in Guangzhou when public transportation was abruptly suspended between Hong Kong and Guangzhou. When communications were restored a few weeks later, their aunt Yoen Oi arrived with their baggage just in time to see them off to America.

Bing and Hing Mui landed in San Francisco as merchant and wife in 1923. Hing Mui also learned to operate a sewing machine. Working in the garment industry was to be the couple's livelihood for the rest of their lives.

On November 1, 1925, Him Mark Lai was born to Bing and Hing Mui. Four more children followed: William (Wo) in 1927, Henrietta
(Git) in 1930, Helen (Ha) in 1932, and Lim in 1934. Fearful that immigration officials would discover his paper son identity, Bing continued to use Lai as the family surname and Mark as the middle name for the children's English names, but for their Chinese names Mark is retained as the surname and Lai is used as the middle name. He also taught the children what to say should anyone ask them about their different Chinese and English surnames. However, his immigration status was never questioned by the authorities till the day he died.

Since Bing was the only Maak from the Chungaa Village to immigrate into the United States, the family had just Lais from Haagao Village for relatives. There were hardly any Maaks in San Francisco, much less a Maak family association.

The Lai family became an anomaly in Chinatown during the pre-World War II period because they lived in society where most Chinese were “bachelors.” They belonged to the working class and did not socialize with families of merchants and professionals. The children grew up in a strong Chinese environment (always eating Chinese food and the mother always wearing Chinese clothes), but they were seldom a part of traditional Chinatown organizational life.

The Lai children grew up during a time of severe economic depression. Millions were unemployed in the United States and the parents had to struggle to make ends meet. Burdened with heavy familial responsibilities, Bing and Hing Mui never had the opportunity or luxury to learn English. The father's knowledge was rudimentary and the mother's even less. The children were depended upon to interpret for the parents.

The Lais managed to survive. One of their neighbors was a cousin of Lai Yoen Oi named Pooey Lai. Up to the mid-thirties, Pooey worked at the docks sorting potatoes and would often bring home a sack of potatoes for the Lais. The children knew him affectionately as Ah Goong or Granduncle. Another neighbor worked at the Lotus Bowl Restaurant and would always bring back leftovers such as cashew chicken, fried shrimp, and fortune cookies for the children. Later, Him's brother William learned that workers at wholesale produce markets near the Embarcadero threw away or dropped still wholesome vegetables and fruits on the street. For a time period, Him and William would go there during weekends to salvage discarded produce.

During the depression, labor laws banned garment work at home, so Hing Mui had to leave the children at home to work in the factory. Being the eldest, Him was the baby-sitter for his younger brothers
and sisters left at home. His mother taught him how to wash and cook rice. Sometimes she would leave a little money for him to purchase some prepared dish at Woey Loy Guey Restaurant, such as steamed ground pork with salted fish, to eat with the rice. At one point when Hing Mui made arrangements to work at home, she picked up and brought home garments from the factory during hours when labor inspectors were not present, which was usually early in the morning. Many times Him accompanied his mother on these trips to help carry some of the bundled garments. Through hard work and frugality, the parents raised a family and held it together.

The Making of an Engineer

Although Bing and Hing Mui had limited schooling in Chinese, they were highly intelligent. When Him was a child, the mother taught him to recognize Chinese characters from Chinese primary school textbooks. Before Him entered school, the father already had told him tales of Chinese folk heroes such as Wu Song, Guan Gong, and Monkey.

In fall 1931, Him enrolled in Nam Kue Chinese School in Chinatown. As soon as he learned enough Chinese characters, his parents and granduncle encouraged him to read classical stories such as *Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Monkey*. Him began with picture storybooks and later worked his way to reading the original full texts. Confucian doctrines, and classical Chinese poetry and prose were also an important part of the curriculum. By the time Him quit Chinese school in 1941, he had had ten years of Chinese and was well grounded in the fundamentals of the Chinese language and its classical literature, history, and philosophy.

When Him attended Nam Kue Chinese School, Japan had seized portions of China and was threatening the country's existence. The students were constantly exposed to propaganda advocating resistance to Japan and urging action to save China. The strong nationalism expressed in Chinese school added to the discrimination against the Chinese in America at the time and also served to inculcate in a young Him a strong identification with the Chinese and Chinese culture.

Him never went to kindergarten but was admitted directly to first grade in Commodore Stockton Elementary School at the beginning of 1932. Hing Mui could not speak English, so she asked a childhood
neighbor from China named Dorothy Lai who was attending San Francisco State Teachers College to enroll him in school.

Him began his first day in Commodore Stockton speaking and understanding no English. He relied on a classmate for translation. One time he did not understand that there was a school holiday and went to school only to find it empty! The teacher gave him several "U's" for unsatisfactory performance. But Him persevered. By the fourth grade, he was among the top students of the class.

When the teacher introduced her students to the public library, Him immediately became an omnivorous reader and devoured books on a variety of subjects: fairy tales, classical and medieval myths, the "Oz" books, American Indians, dinosaurs, animals, biographies, China, the American West, and works by such authors as James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, Pearl Buck, Mark Twain, and Lin Yutang. He borrowed books at least once or twice a week from the library. Immersing himself in books, Him developed an introvert, shy personality with awkward social manners and verbal skills. His manual dexterity was likewise poorly developed. He became extremely nearsighted and began wearing eyeglasses at the age of ten or eleven.

When Him was promoted to Francisco Junior High School, he found a mixed student body consisting mostly of Chinese and Italians, with a few Japanese and other ethnic groups. For the first time in his life, he had non-Chinese classmates. Since Francisco was too far to walk home for lunch, Him ate at the school cafeteria, where he mastered the use of the knife and fork for the first time.

In 1941, Him graduated to Galileo High School. He majored in mathematics and took courses in the physical sciences; but history was a favorite subject. In 1943, he represented Galileo to win a citywide high school scholastic competition in U.S. history. Since the students at the school had not distinguished themselves for several years in any citywide scholastic or athletic competition, Him was specifically honored at a school rally.

While Him was attending high school, Hing Mui found him a job working twenty hours a week at 25 cents per hour as a helper in W.A. Leon, a Chinatown garment factory that sewed work pants for the army. Consequently, Him had no opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. Instead, he immersed himself further into the world of books. He began to spend some of his meager earnings on inexpensive books to build his own small library of non-fictional works that had an emphasis on the social sciences.

America had entered World War II when Him was a high school student. Wartime prosperity helped to improve the family's economic situation. By cashing in the father's insurance policy and using their life savings, and with the help of a small bank loan, the Lai family managed to scrape together enough to purchase a dilapidated building on the outskirts of Chinatown. This was the first piece of real property in America that the family could call as its own.

Him graduated in 1943 after he finished his graduation requirements by going to summer school at Mission High School. He wanted to continue to college, but Bing opposed it, pointing out that a garment factory owner they knew was unable to find employment after graduating with a mining engineering degree from the University of California. The father suggested working in the shipyards. On the other hand, Hing Mui was sympathetic to his eldest son's ambitions and supported him. She won the argument, but the purchase of their home left them with no savings for a college education.

In fall 1943, Him enrolled in tuition-free San Francisco Junior College with a major in engineering. At the time, the war had reached a climax. Him was summoned to take a pre-induction physical examination for selective service. He was rejected because of his poor eyesight, so he continued his college education while working part-time at the garment factory.

When Him graduated from junior college in 1945, he was the valedictorian and was one of five permanent members of the Alpha Gamma Sigma honor society in the class of 150. He was then accepted to the University of California at Berkeley. He commuted daily across the Bay by electric train. Again, he did not have time to participate in any intercollegiate activities nor did he cultivate any close friendships among his classmates even though he was respected as a good student. The academic load and part-time job proved to be too much as he finally decided to quit the garment factory job by his senior year.

Him graduated in 1947 with a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering. It was a proud moment for his parents because he was the first member in the family to receive a university degree. His educational training taught him to use an analytical, logical, and rational approach to solve problems.

Despite the well-publicized shortage of engineers, it was difficult for an inexperienced, and even more difficult for a Chinese American, engineer to find a job. After a short sojourn as a clerk at T. Kong Lee's Lee's Agency, Him found a position as a junior civil engineer at
the Bureau of Reclamation Office in Antioch. The office had just been established and was not ready to start design work. Him sat idly in the office for two months. Meanwhile, he passed a civil service examination for the City and County of San Francisco.

In 1948, Him accepted a position as junior mechanical engineer at the Utilities Engineering Bureau to design trolley overhead systems for trolley coach lines. He was also exposed to the uglier side of office politics when he saw two colleagues, one Indian and the other Jewish, prevented from getting promotions because they were not part of the inner circle, while the person who belonged to the circle was successful in getting a promotion despite doing poorly in the examinations. Him resigned from the job in 1951, when he decided to pursue graduate studies in engineering at U.C. Berkeley. In 1952, he found a part-time job being a junior engineer at U.C.'s Richmond Field Station.

Activism Beyond Books

Many events occurred after graduation that eventually shaped Him's life. In 1948, he discovered the newly opened Oasis Bookstore located in Chinatown. Still deeply interested in China and Chinese culture, he became a frequent customer and began to build the nucleus of his library of Chinese books focusing on subjects related to Chinese history. He also developed a close friendship with the proprietor Thanh Hing Leong, who introduced Him to a number of Chinese progressives and liberals. As a result, he joined the Chinese League for Peace and Democracy founded by General Feng Yuxiang in the United States to oppose American interference in the Chinese civil war. Later, Him joined Chinese student groups such as the New China Study Society and the Chinese Scientific Workers in America, where for the first time he was able to use the Mandarin he learned in Chinese school and Mandarin classes.

On October 9, 1949, Him was among the audience in the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (C.A.C.A.) Hall celebrating the founding of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) eight days earlier. Soon after the program began, hired tongmen invaded the hall, seized the P.R.C. flag hanging on stage, and threw dye on the audience as they tried to break up the meeting. Two people in the audience were injured, but Him escaped unscathed except for a little blue dye splattered on his sport jacket.

Undeterred by this violence, a group of businessmen headed by Sam Wah You and Joe Yue purchased the historic Chung Sai Tat Po in late 1949 and published it as the first San Francisco Chinese daily newspaper to support the P.R.C. Him became a very small shareholder and a volunteer worker at the paper on Saturdays. However, the daily ceased its publication during the Korean War in January 1951.

The year 1949 also saw Him joining the Chinese American Democratic Youth League, better known as Mun Ching. He became its president in 1951 and was reelected to that position seven more times. During the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, the organization changed its English name to the Chinese American Youth Club and concentrated on cultural and recreational activities. It introduced to Chinatown the songs and music, folk dances, and vernacular dramas of the new China. It was also one of the earliest organizations in America to use simplified characters and the pinyin system. Mun Ching disbanded when it was evicted from their 812 Stockton Street location in the summer of 1959. The members then reorganized themselves as the Haiyan (Petrel) Club and started the Chinese Folk Dance Group (now known as the Chinese Folk Dance Association). Him and Laura had recently purchased their home on Telegraph Hill and decided to convert a portion of their garage to be used as Haiyan's headquarters where they continued with their various cultural activities until the club slowly dissolved by the mid-1960s. The knowledge and experience gained from this important time period served Him well in later life.

A Partner for Life

During the early 1950s, Mun Ching encouraged members to acquire technical skills and scientific knowledge. They organized tutorial help for immigrant high school students. It was volunteering on one of these tutorial assignments that Him came to know Laura (Yook Ying) Jung as more than an acquaintance from earlier Mun Ching social activities. Laura's father was a paper son, his real Chinese surname being Jeung. She had recently immigrated in 1949 from Hong Kong and was attending Galileo High School. Laura needed help with her English and Him became her tutor. He was shy and she was outgoing, but the two eventually fell in love. They married on June 12, 1953, immediately following her high school graduation. After celebrating their marriage in the Mun Ching clubhouse, the young newlyweds went on a honeymoon bus trip touring the west to places like Portland, Boise, Salt Lake City, Denver, Grand Canyon, Phoenix, and Los Angeles.

The couple had barely anything left in their savings accounts when they returned from their honeymoon. Laura found a job as a file
June 1953

clerk and eventually became a keypunch operator at Union Oil. As for Him, he began work as a junior mechanical engineer in the Power Division of Bechtel Corporation designing thermal power plants. He was to work there for thirty-one years until he retired in 1984. By the 1970s, Him's performance and hard work enabled him to become the supervisor of a mechanical engineering group responsible for designing a major nuclear power plant. During this time period, he felt uncomfortable shouldering the administrative burden of running a project, and especially with its accompanying personnel problems and office politics.

During the 1950s, the federal government launched intensive investigations and prosecutions of immigration fraud among Chinese Americans. Laura's family was implicated in the early 1960s. Because Him was a native born U.S. citizen, and could enter and leave the country legally, the Jungs asked him to accompany Laura's bedridden and gravely ill mother to Hong Kong to join her husband who had left for Macau earlier. This was the first time Him traveled outside North America. On his return trip, he also went to Tokyo and Honolulu. His deepest impression was the sight of many Asians in positions of authority and responsibility, which was quite different from the situation Him was accustomed to seeing in the continental United States.

The Historian Is Born

While working at Bechtel, Him decided to attend evening classes at the University of California Extension Division for self-improvement. Around 1960, he took one of the first experimental courses offered in Asian American history. It was taught by Stanford Lyman. This sparked Him's interest in the history of the Chinese in America. In 1965, Him joined the Chinese Historical Society of America (C.H.S.A.) which was founded in 1963. He became an active member, served on its Board of Directors for a number of terms, and became its president in 1971, 1976, and 1977. During the late seventies, Him was involved with the planning of two C.H.S.A. exhibits, Journeys Made and Yet to Come and The Promise of Gold Mountain. After that, he was particularly active in various C.H.S.A. projects that dealt with the dissemination and publication of Chinese American history, culminating with the Society's annual journal, Chinese America: History and Perspectives, which was inaugurated in 1987. Him finally found his calling—to apply his love for and knowledge of Chinese and Chinese and American history into Chinese American historical research.
The 1960s also saw the Civil Rights Movement stimulating activism in the Chinese American community. In 1967, Gordon Lew founded East/West, a bilingual weekly and the paper's editor Maurice Chuck asked Him for articles on Chinese American history. Even though this was not the first time Chinese American history was published in a newspaper, the time was ripe to attract an audience with a rising ethnic minority consciousness. Thus began Him's writing career.

Immersing and devoting himself wholeheartedly into the task, Him began conducting intense research while still working full-time at Bechtel. He did not drive because of his poor eyesight; so Laura, who was now working at the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, drove him to all the public, university, and historical society libraries on weekends to search for and make copies of materials on Chinese America. Their vacations were all dedicated for this purpose also. Him began to accumulate a huge collection of resources that has literally made his house a wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor library.

In 1969, C.H.S.A. convened a seminar on Chinese American history for San Francisco Bay Area educators. Him's East/West articles were revised and expanded, and became a part of the text for A History of the Chinese in California, A Syllabus, which was co-edited with Thomas W. Chinn and Philip P. Choy, and published for the seminar participants. The editing was rushed and completed in about three months. To this day, the book remains as a classic and basic reference text on 19th century Chinese American history.

As a consequence of this seminar, Him and Philip were appointed to co-teach an evening course in Chinese American history in the fall semester of 1969 by the History Department at San Francisco State College. This became the first college-level course in America to focus solely on the history of the Chinese in America. The course was subsequently housed in the newly established Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State, where Him continued to teach it from 1972 to 1975. The Asian American Studies Program in the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley also appointed him to teach a similar course in 1978, 1979, and 1984.

Another classic reference book resulted from this collaboration between Him and Philip. The two co-wrote Outlines: History of the Chinese in America (1971). Several years later, they worked with Yuk Ow and published another book, A History of the Sam Yat Benevolent Association of San Francisco (1975). A third collaboration between these two pioneer Chinese American historians resulted in another first-of-its-kind project: a six-part series on Chinese American history
entitled *Garn Saan Haak*. It was first broadcast in 1974 on Channel 4 KRON-TV and has become a documentary classic.

In 1969, the civil rights organization Chinese for Affirmative Action (C.A.A.) was founded in San Francisco. The media committee of the organization sponsored Chinese American programs on radio and television, one of which was the aforementioned *Garn Saan Haak*. In 1971, Him became the coordinator of one of the radio programs. It was a weekly, hour-long Cantonese language program called Hon Sing. For the next thirteen years, together with Laura, Ellen Yeung, Victoria Chun, and other volunteers, Him produced the weekly program comprising of news commentaries, community announcements, and Chinese music.

The year 1972 marks the publication of Him's first scholarly essay on Chinese America, "A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left Among the Chinese in America." It appeared in the fall issue of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* and was later revised for inclusion in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* that was published in 1976 by the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.). Later in 1977, Him and Karl Lo saw the publication of their landmark reference book, *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854–1975*, which lists all the available Chinese newspapers published in America and where they are archived.

In 1973, Him joined another organization that sparked his interest, the Chinese Culture Foundation (C.C.F.) which was founded in 1965. He has remained an active member, having served on its Board of Directors from 1975–1985 and 1987–1994, and as its president in 1982. Him's membership tenure in both C.H.S.A. and C.C.F. saw the materialization of two major collaborative projects between the two organizations: a 1980 national conference on Chinese American Studies of which he was the Project Director; and the ongoing *In Search of Roots* Program which began in 1991 with Albert Cheng. The latter program helps Chinese American youth to research and trace their family history and involves a trip to the youth's ancestral village in China.

Him's reputation as an expert in Chinese American history landed him an appointment in 1974 to the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee to study and make recommendations on the preservation and restoration of the detention barracks. Two years later, he began to work together with Judy Yung and Genny Lim to write a history of the Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island and to translate the poems left by them on the barracks walls.
This resulted in the 1980 publication of *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, which received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1982.

The 1970 decade was also significant in that Him began to visit China on a more regular basis. In 1976, he organized a group of relatives (Laura, brothers-in-law, etc.), volunteers of the Hon Sing radio program, and others to visit P.R.C. for the first time. Being on a business trip for Bechtel, Him went to London and Singapore before his rendezvous with the group in Hong Kong. The year of this first trip was also a fateful year in Chinese history. Premier Zhou Enlai had died earlier in the year, the Gang of Four was trying to seize power, Marshal Zhu De died when the group was at Tianjin, and when the group returned to America, Chairman Mao Zedong had also passed away. On a personal level, Him was able to reestablish ties with his uncle's family in Foshan and Laura was able to return to Zhuhai where she spent her childhood. Because the group was closely chaperoned and watched by the Chinese government every step of the way, Him was unable to visit his ancestral village in Nanhui on this first trip. However, he was able to do so on subsequent trips, one of which occurred in 1992, when he donated money in memory of his parents to a primary and middle school in his ancestral village in Nanhai.

Normal diplomatic relations were restored between the United States and P.R.C. in 1979, and the Asian American Studies Center at U.C.L.A. made an agreement with Zhongshan University in Guangzhou to conduct a joint study of two emigrant villages in Taishan. At the invitation of Lucie Cheng, Director of the Center, Him became a participant of the project and was able to travel extensively among the emigrant areas in the Pearl River Delta region. This was the beginning of his many trips to China where he broadened his horizons and made invaluable friends who helped him collect materials on Chinese American history from the emigration perspective.

In 1979, Him was also appointed by C.C.F. to be the project director of a large-scale exhibit entitled *Chinese of America, 1785-1980*. In 1985, after retiring from Bechtel, Him spent two weeks in Shanghai to translate the English captions into Chinese. In the following year, Him was invited to the exhibit’s opening in Beijing. He served again as curator for the exhibit in 1988 during San Francisco Week in Hong Kong.
By 1980, when Him's "Chinese on the Continental U.S." a 13,000-word essay, was published in the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, Him had already written over 35 essays on Chinese America and his reputation as a Chinese American historian had reached an international level. In 1986, U.C.L.A.'s Asian American Studies Center published his first solo authored book A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America, and from 1986 to 1988, he worked as a consultant for UC Berkeley's Asian American Studies Library's Chinese archival collection. Him was one of the few, if not the only, Chinese American scholar born in America dedicated to writing and conducting research in both English and Chinese.

It was not difficult to understand why Maurice Chuck once again approached Him in 1980 to write Chinese essays on Chinese American history for weekly installments in the Shidaihao, San Francisco Journal. Him began the series by translating from his Harvard encyclopedia essay, but his over zealousness led to the expansion of the essay with the inclusion of his lecture notes as well as findings resulting from his personal research in America and abroad. His series entitled "Meiguo Huaqiao jianshi" [A brief history of the Chinese in America] ran for four years.

Teo Ng, manager of Eastwind Books and Arts in San Francisco Chinatown, was impressed with Him's series and suggested that when Him goes to Hong Kong in 1984, he should contact Joint Publishing Company for possible publication of a Chinese language history book on Chinese America. Joint Publishing immediately signed a contract with Him. This surprising turn of events contributed to Him's decision to finally retire from Bechtel so that he could devote full time to writing the book. An enthusiastic Him underestimated the work involved as he could not refrain from adding even more new research findings, while still writing other papers and consulting on a variety of projects at the same time. It took almost eight more years for the book to be finally published in 1992. The milestone Cong Huaqiao dao Huaren, ershi shiji Meiguo Huaren shehui fazhanshi [From overseas Chinese to Chinese American, a history of the development of Chinese American society during the 20th century] is the first history book written in Chinese about Chinese Americans from a Chinese American perspective. At present, Him is rewriting his book into English for the Stanford University Press.

A Historian's Legacy

Him Mark Lai continues to research and write about Chinese American history. He is consistently invited to and sought after for conferences, publications, and consultation. His love for Chinese America has opened his accumulated store of knowledge to many students and scholars who have yet to attain his level of experience and wisdom. Not only has he been recognized for this achievements in the engineering field when he received the Chinese American Institute of Engineers and Scientists Distinguished Service Award in 1983, but more importantly, in the field of Chinese American history he has been duly recognized with various service awards received locally from C.H.S.A. (1985) and C.C.F. (1987), and nationally from the Association for Asian American Studies (A.A.A.S.) once in 1990 and again in 1993 when he received the A.A.A.S. National Book Award for Lifetime Scholarship.

Asian American Studies did not begin in the late 1960s and early 1970s from a vacuum. It had pioneers like Him who were already in the field when no such field existed. Books and formal education do not necessarily make a historian or scholar. A grand historian is someone like Him Mark Lai who possesses a unique conviction and courage, someone who is driven relentlessly to seek out the hidden and to tell the untold. Not only has Him written the annals for Chinese America, he is an integral part of Chinese America. Him Mark Lai is and will forever be the "Dean of Chinese American History."

Lorraine Dong
October 28, 1995