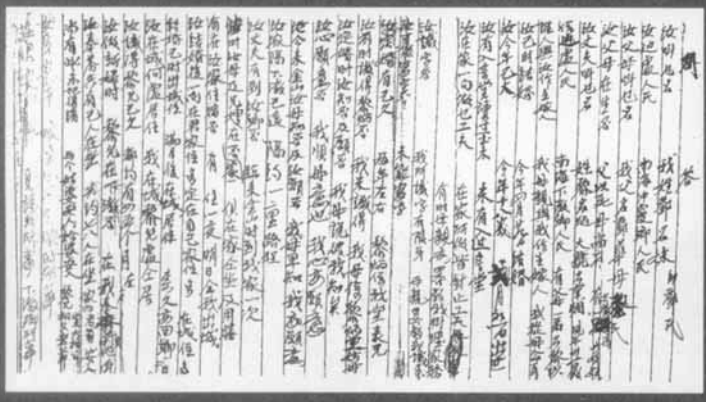
Forbidden City, San Francisco 1950.



Him Mark Lai's practice sheet.

The Lai family, 1940 (Him Mark Lai is standing, center).

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Musings of a Chinese American Historian

Him Mark Lai

No Tradition of Scholarship

Among my forebearers, there was no tradition of scholarship. Thus, my deep involvement in Chinese American historical research was largely due to fortuitous decisions made at important junctures of my life.

My father Bing was the eldest son in a poor peasant family surnamed Maak (anglicized Mark) in rural Nanhai, part of Sam Yup, west of Guangzhou (Canton). He came to America through the generosity of his maternal aunt who had retired to Guangzhou after sojourning in San Francisco Chinatown as a hairdresser and maid at the turn of the century. She not only provided financial aid but also persuaded her cousin, a merchant with the surname Lai, to bring my father along as his son. Hence my father embarked on the *S.S. Siberia* and arrived at San Francisco during the beginning of 1910 as Bing Lai, a merchant's paper son. He was among the Chinese immigrants transferred from the dilapidated shed at the Pacific Mail Steamship Company wharf to become the first tenants of the newly opened Angel Island Immigration Detention Barracks. I am doubtful whether my father was in any mood to savor this historic occasion.

After entering the country and working a few years, my father saved enough to return to China after the First World War to marry his aunt's foster daughter, Dong Hing Mui, who was raised in Guangzhou. In 1923 the young couple left for Hong Kong to arrange for passage to America just before a warlord's army was

Him Mark Lai is an active member of the Chinese Historical Society of America and the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

Bing Lai and Dong Hing Mui, 1923.

threatening to invade Guangzhou and communications between Guangzhou and Hong Kong were severed for several weeks. They could not even return to Guangzhou to pick up wedding gifts stored there, and my father's aunt had to bring the lot when she took the ferry to Hong Kong to see them off. This experience appeared to have so traumatized my parents that it may have contributed to their lack of desire to return to China again even though they continued to maintain contacts with relatives in China. Neither did they ever encourage their own children to go back.

Bing Lai and his bride landed in San Francisco about a year before enactment of the 1924 Immigration Act that imposed more restrictions on Asian immigration. I came into this world in San Francisco Chinatown in 1925 as the first-born of five children. We were similar to many other Chinese immigrant families of that era in that we were at the lower end of the economic scale. During the first eleven years of my youth our family lived on Grant Avenue at the north end of San Francisco Chinatown where there were Sam Yup organizations, businesses, and other Sam Yup people. In fact we lived about half a block from Philip Choy, whom I later met in the Chinese Historical Society of America; however, we did not know each other during this period. Our family lived in the former clubrooms of the notorious Wah Ting San Fong, a secret society (tong) with a Sam Yup membership.[1] I remembered the numerous artifacts and documents left by the society as well as a council chamber with teakwood furniture and an altar to Guan Di, the god of war. Regrettably, I was too young then to appreciate the historic value of these artifacts. By a strange coincidence, after World War II the same site housed the Chinatown branch of Federal Savings and Loan Association from which manager J. K. Choy launched in 1965 the founding of the Chinese Culture Foundation, which I was destined to serve as a member of the board of directors for more than two decades

starting in the mid-1970s.

Lai family portrait, 1937.

In spite of my father's merchant status, both my parents were sewing machine operators at Chinatown factories manufacturing workers' clothes and overalls during their entire working careers. They were both very intelligent individuals, but my father had only the equivalent of an elementary school education in the village and did not learn much more than the rudiments of English; my mother could read some Chinese but her knowledge of English was even less than that of my father. Although my parents always followed Chinese traditions, they were fairly lenient about enforcing them on their children. Being working class, my parents did not feel comfortable mixing with the merchant leaders of our district associations and rarely did so. Thus I did not have much contact with traditional Chinatown society during my youth. On the other hand, neither did they encourage me, nor did I have the inclination, to participate in the YMCA, the Christian church, or similar institutions. Like many San Francisco Chinese children of the period, I attended Chinese school until I entered high school in the public school system. Since my mother spoke and taught us the city dialect, which was standard in the Chinese schools, it probably facilitated my learning the Chinese language, and I became proficient in the fundamentals of the language and culture.

I enrolled in public school a semester after I started Chinese school. The school was 100 percent Chinese except for the teachers. I did not have non-Chinese classmates until I attended junior and senior high school, but even then there were high percentages of Chinese Americans in the schools.

The environments of the Chinese school and of the public school were worlds apart. My attendance in Chinese school coincided with the period when Japan was invading China. The curriculum was colored by Chinese nationalist sentiments. Besides advocating resistance to Japanese aggression, the teachers also and often touched upon injustices afflicted upon China by

the imperialist powers during the past century. In public school the major effort was to guide the Chinese American students toward assimilation. By the third grade the teacher had convinced most of the students with Chinese personal names to change to western names, but somehow I escaped the teacher's attention and my name remained unchanged. Usage of Chinese was discouraged in the schools and Chinese Americans were often made to feel, sometimes in not so subtle ways, that China was a weak nation and that the Chinese language and culture were not as acceptable as western languages and institutions.

During this period, due to the numerous immigrants entering America by illegal means, fear of discovery by immigration authorities was constantly hanging like a sword of Damocles over the Chinese community. My father's status as a paper son brought this feeling to a personal level. My siblings and I all carried Mark as middle names in order to remind us of our origins and we always went by our Chinese surname in Chinese school. But, even as I began public school, my father taught me a concocted story explaining the discrepancy in surnames in case a curious teacher should ask. This bifurcated world with conflicting signals and behaviors was not at all unusual for San Francisco Chinese Americans of that period.

When I entered high school, I began working twenty hours per week as a helper in a Chinatown garment factory, which did not leave me much opportunity to participate in school activities. But I did well in class, especially in literary subjects and social sciences, and even won first prize in a citywide history competition during my senior year. However, a career in the social sciences never entered my mind since during those days the object of an education for members of families such as ours was to learn some marketable skill that could ensure making a living. Thus, I turned to engineering even though typically I was all thumbs when it came to working with my hands. In 1947 I graduated from University of California College of Engineering and worked in the field for more than three decades until my retirement from Bechtel Corporation in 1984.

Chinese American Consciousness

Although I was unaware of it at the time, World War II was a divide for minorities in America. Due to the labor shortage during the war, many Chinese Americans found skilled and technical jobs from which they had been barred during the exclusion era.

In 1943 Congress repealed the Chinese exclusion laws and granted Chinese the right of naturalization. After the war, an increasing number of Chinese Americans continued to find employment in professional, technical and clerical fields as racial bars relaxed in face of the need for such skills during the post-war prosperity. A Chinese American middle class grew in numbers and strength. As their interests became increasingly firmly rooted in this country, they overcame their feelings of alienation and their sense of identity with America grew. This was sped along by international developments when the United States engaged in hostilities with the People's Republic of China that had ousted the Kuomintang regime from the Chinese mainland; the U.S. imposed an embargo that in effect cut off Chinese in America from relatives in China. These developments forced Chinese Americans to reassess their situation and conclude that the future for themselves and their posterity would be in America.

During this period of great changes in the international and domestic scenes, I was among those who entertained great hopes for the New China in its struggle to overthrow foreign domination and feudal rule. These expectations had since been greatly tempered by the unfolding of subsequent events but I remained interested in developments in China. In the fifties I was active in Mun Ching, a progressive Chinese American youth club, and became its president. It was there that I met Laura Jung whom I married in 1953. Since most club members were immigrants who were more comfortable using the Chinese language, my Chinese that I had seldom used since my high school days now became more fluent due to constant practice. During this period I also acquired a better understanding of Chinese history as interpreted by progressive historians, as well as became acquainted with the writings of progressive writers such

Him Mark Lai and Laura Jung's wedding party at Mun Ching, 1953.

Mun Ching was a progressive Chinese American youth group.
Above, a Mun Ching chorus is performing at the Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association, 1951. Laura is right of conductor, Him Mark Lai is rear right.
Below, vernacular drama at Mun Ching. Laura is center stage.

as Lu Xun and performance arts of the New China such as the *Yellow River Cantata.* I also learned to use simplified characters and Hanyu pinyin after they had been introduced in China. This basic knowledge greatly facilitated my historical research and community cultural activities at a future date, but it also came at a price, for this period was at the height of the Cold War anti-Communist hysteria, and many club members and I came under FBI surveillance. In my case this continued at least until 1980 when I asked for and received a two-and-one-half inch thick, heavily censored copy of my files under provisions of the Freedom of Information-Privacy Act. Surely the tens of thousands of dollars spent to observe and record my personal life for three decades could have been better used on more worthwhile projects! The experience taught me that government was willing to wield its enormous powers to root out, intimidate and discourage what it considered to be political heresies in American society. It sensitized me to civil liberties issues, especially those concerning Chinese Americans.

In the meanwhile, ethnic minorities who had been asked to give their all to "defend democracy" during World War II returned to America expecting better treatment. By the late 1950s their persistent efforts demanding equal rights led to the emergence of the African American-led civil rights movement. The study of race relations and the ethnic minority communities became a topic of interest to the academic community. In 1957, Stanford Lyman, then a sociology doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, initiated a class, "The Oriental in North America," at the University of California Extension in San Francisco based on his research for his doctoral dissertation. This was the first semester-length course on Asian American studies taught at a major university.[2] Around 1960 I enrolled in the course and received my first exposure to the historical experiences of the Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos in America.

Soon afterward the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) was founded in San Francisco in 1963 as an expression of the growing Chinese American consciousness. Although I did not join until 1965, within a short time I became an active member committed to researching the history of the Chinese in America. I soon found that my knowledge of Chinese was a great advantage in research.

By the mid-1960s, the demand for change in American society expressed by the civil rights movement had spread to the Chinese American community where activists from the post-war

generation spearheaded it. They urged increased involvement and equal participation in mainstream American society. Within the Chinese community they pushed for changes to improve the quality of life and sought a share in the process of making decisions affecting the community. The bilingual *East/West, the Chinese American Weekly*, founded by Gordon Lew in San Francisco in 1967, became the first community newspaper to provide coverage expressing some of the concerns of these activists. At the end of 1967, the paper's editor, Maurice Chuck, invited me to help with the proofreading as a volunteer and also to write a series of articles on Chinese American history. Although I had never fancied my writing as having very high literary quality, the articles found a readership among the increasing number of Chinese Americans anxious to learn more about their historical heritage.

In the meantime, CHSA, in response to the growing interest in the history of ethnic minorities, had scheduled a seminar on Chinese American history in April 1969 at the Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance Hall targeting California school district educators. Early in 1969 Thomas Chinn, who led the effort, called upon Philip Choy and me to work with him to compile some reference materials to be distributed to seminar attendees. Actually the committee had only a vague idea of the desired end result when it was first convened. Taking the bull by the horns, I used my *East/West* articles, did additional research, added citations, and submitted them for inclusion as part of the reference materials. Within three months, the committee had compiled and published an 81-page syllabus, *A History of the Chinese in California* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society, 1969). This compilation has remained a basic reference work on Chinese American history even today, particularly on the role of Chinese labor in California during the nineteenth century.

Teaching Chinese American History

After the CHSA seminar Professor Chester Cheng of San Francisco State College (known as San Francisco State University today) invited Philip Choy and me to teach an evening pilot course in Chinese American history. This was the first college level course in America on the history of the Chinese in America. The students in that first class were somewhat older than average college students of the day and included a number who had participated in the prolonged students' strike that had just ended with the establishment of a School of Ethnic Studies. More so than

younger students, they were interested in contemporary issues and one of the criticisms of our course at the end of the semester was that there were insufficient materials given on the contemporary Chinese community. Of course, the truth is that not much research had been done at that time on the subject, and even today, three decades afterward, there remain great gaps in our knowledge of that sector. But the pilot course was evidently substantial enough to satisfy the history department's criteria, whatever they were, for it was transferred to the Asian American Studies Department in the School of Ethnic Studies the succeeding semester and became a regular course offered by the department.

Since the relaxed immigration policy instituted in 1965 had not yet made an impact on the Chinese community at the time, most Chinese students were derived from the earlier Cantonese families. Philip Choy and I prepared an ambitious course outline starting with the history of Guangdong and the Cantonese people before launching into the history of the Chinese in continental America from 1785 to the 1960s, and then ending the course with lectures comparing the Chinese community of the continental United States with that of Canada and Hawai`i. However, we soon found that we had crammed too much material into the one-semester course. Thus, in subsequent teaching stints I limited the lecture material on Chinese history to cover only the period after the Opium War, which was relevant to any discussions on Chinese emigration abroad. I also deleted the sections on the Chinese communities in Hawai`i and Canada. This last deletion was unfortunate in view of the fact that many valuable insights could be gained by comparisons of the historical experiences of Chinese in the continental United States with that of these communities.

I had never considered taking up teaching for a permanent career and taught only when requested to fill a need. Subsequently, I taught at San Francisco State University from 1972 to 1975 and then at the University of California, Berkeley in 1978, 1979, and 1984, where I substituted for Professor Ling-chi Wang. The challenge of teaching had been of great benefit to me personally in that it pushed me to think through historical issues to reach conclusions that seemed rational and logical to me that I could present to the class. It is my firm belief that this is the only way to leave a lasting impression on the students' minds rather than presenting them a plethora of rhetoric and academic jargon and mumbo-jumbo.

Since I was already in my early forties, some fifteen to twenty years older than faculty members then running Asian American Studies, and also was only occasionally teaching, I never was an integral part of the discipline, although I was supportive and continued to maintain contacts with many faculty members and students. My situation precluded my being in any position to exert any direct influence on the course of development of Asian American Studies; however, it also freed me from involvement in the internal politics, intrigues and power struggles that seem to arise inevitably in organizations when strong and ambitious personalities interact. Not having academic status, however, also meant that I was free to undertake research without having to worry about academic guidelines to justify funding, tenure and promotion requirements.

Juggling Career, Community and Research

Writing projects and preparation of lecture notes forced me on a sustained search for resources. Since much of the materials relating to Chinese American history were scattered throughout numerous publications, I spent many weekends in various collections in the San Francisco Bay Area perusing books and periodicals. Continuing this single-minded quest doggedly through the 1970s, I did not let up even when I was on vacation trips. Sometimes such fishing expeditions led to unexpected finds. For example, a visit to the Library of Congress in 1972 resulted in the discovery of four declassified volumes listing all villages and hamlets, together with associated clan names, for Taishan (Toishan), Kaiping (Hoiping), Xinhui (Sunwui), and Zhongshan (Chungshan) counties. These had been compiled by the U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong during the 1960s to help detect immigration fraud.

However, I sometimes found it difficult to give a straight answer to curious friends who asked what project I was doing this for, since I did not have any specific objective except to gather as much materials on Chinese American history as possible. But, gradually, I built up an extensive and useful information file.

During this period I had the benefit of counseling from Yuk Ow, a history buff who since the 1950s had been quietly researching the Chinese American historical experience in California. Ow stressed the importance of bibliographic work, particularly on Chinese language materials. I soon added East Asian collections to the itinerary of my library visits. I also came to realize that Chinese newspapers provide far more information on

the Chinese community than English newspapers and began reading them regularly. Chinese newspaper clippings in my information files soon exceeded English language items for certain categories. The obvious truth began to sink in that since foreign-born Chinese outnumbered American-born for almost the entire history of the community, it was natural that much of the documentation would be in Chinese and I began to appreciate the importance of these sources for Chinese American historical research.

During the early 1970s Victor and Brett Nee came to San Francisco to do research and oral history interviews for *Longtime Californ'* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), a history on San Francisco Chinatown. Also entrusted with the duty of editing an Asian American issue for *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, they invited me to submit an essay for the publication. After some consideration, I picked a subject in which I had long been interested, the Chinese American Left, for I had been an active member in a progressive Chinese American youth organization in San Francisco Chinatown for a decade during the 1950s. My first attempt at a scholarly essay "A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left among the Chinese in America" was published in the publication in fall 1972. The subject aroused some interest, especially among activists, and UCLA's Asian American Studies Center included a revised version in its anthology, *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976). This was the beginning of my association with the Center.

Due to the scarcity of documentation on the subject, my essay had to depend in part on information gleaned from oral interviews. When citing such sources in this and subsequent essays I always tried to assess their reliability since the memory of individuals is not perfect and their accounts of events occurring many years ago often confuse details or embellish the facts. Also, accounts are usually affected by the individual's own bias. However, I feel that such sources are no worse than published accounts that are prejudicial. Certainly, for certain areas of Chinese American historical research they are the only sources available.

The following year the president of Sam Yup Association invited me to join a committee to compile the association's history. Yuk Ow became the chief editor and Philip Choy and I assisted. Yuk Ow played a key role as he contributed the fruits of his years of meticulous research on the subject, which, adding to information from the association's existing records dating back to 1881,

oral interviews, and research materials founded by the committee, resulted in the publication of *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association in the United States, 1850-1974* (San Francisco: Fook Chong Hong Sam Yup Association, 1975). It is up to the present the only documented, detailed history of any of the *huiguan* in San Francisco. In 1998 I became involved again in the revision of this history which will probably be published in 2000. A striking fact was that this time, unlike the 1970s, there was practically no one left who could offer much useful historical information on the pre-World War II era, demonstrating the importance of timely action to record the experiences and thoughts of individuals that can add to the understanding of historical events and make available additional materials for researchers. This was particularly important for Chinese American history where much was undocumented, or where documented, was distorted or even falsified.

As I became more immersed in Chinese American historical research from the late 1960s on, life became hectic as I juggled my limited time between an engineering career, community activities and historical writing. Around 1971 the Chinese Media Committee under the civil rights group Chinese for Affirmative Action negotiated free air time for Chinese American radio programming and put the weekly Hon Sing Chinese Community Hour on the air. This Cantonese language program included news analysis free from the Cold War anti-Communist rhetoric as well as news of community activities. It also introduced to the radio audience for the first time Chinese folk, classical and operatic music that had been composed or rearranged in China since 1949. The activist who was the program coordinator soon retired from the scene and by fall 1971 I found myself shouldering the responsibility of supervising the weekly tape recording of the program as well as compiling the program notes for the musical selections. This chore as volunteer producer lasted thirteen years until the mid-1980s.

The Chinese Media Committee also successfully lobbied Channel Four television station to agree to produce the first television series on Chinese American history. In 1972 Philip Choy and I became volunteer consultants for the production of the six-part *Gam Saan Haak*. During the development of the script Philip and I met with the program producer almost weekly after my workday at Bechtel. The program premiered on the air in 1974; however, the original scheduled date had to be postponed due to preemption by a live broadcast of the police shootout with the Symbionese Liberation Army, a radical group that had earlier kidnapped news-

paper magnate William Randolph Hearst, Jr.'s daughter Patricia. Eventually the program was aired, but soon after it had been broadcast several times, the station erased the program without even the courtesy of notifying us or making us a copy. In subsequent years I also acted as consultant for other film and television productions on Chinese American history such as Felicia Lowe's *Carved in Silence* (1981-87) and *San Francisco Chinatown* (1995), Loni Ding's *Ancestors in America* (1989-1998), Jennie Lew's *Separate Lives, Broken Dreams* (1993).

My community activities sometimes also opened new areas for research. In 1974 I became member of a California State Legislature appointed advisory committee to make recommendations on the preservation and restoration of the Angel Island Immigration Station detention barracks. The interest stimulated by this activity prompted poet Genny Lim to ask writer Judy Yung and me in 1976 to join her to publish a translation of the poems carved by Chinese immigrants on the barracks walls, together with a history of Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island. Subsequently the scope was expanded to include interviews of detainees. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* (San Francisco: Hoc Doi, 1980) was finally published in 1980. The effort, which I had joined mainly to provide a technical service in translation, appears to have withstood the test of time, for it is still on the market today two decades later. It was fortunate that the team decided to undertake the extra work of interviewing the detainees to preserve their experiences on record, for by the end of the 1990s many had passed away and their experiences would have been lost to posterity.

Even while I was busy with community activities, I never ceased my never-ending search for historical materials. During the 1970s, I had corresponded with university libraries to seek information on their Chinese American newspaper holdings. Karl Lo, head of the East Asian Collection at the University of Washington who was collecting the same information, contacted me and suggested that we collaborate to compile a bibliography. This resulted in the publication of *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1977) which included an historical introduction that in 1987 was revised and published as "The Chinese American Press" in Sally Miller's *The Ethnic Press in the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987). By coincidence, the chapter "The Japanese American Press" in the same book, was written by Professor

Harry Kitano of UCLA, who was my classmate in Galileo High School in 1941!

In 1977 my association with UCLA's Asian American Studies Center became closer when Russell Leong, editor of its *Amerasia Journal,* invited me to join its editorial board. In 1978, he asked me to compile *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1986), based primarily on collections in the San Francisco Bay Area. This, together with the work on newspapers, filled a gap in Chinese American bibliographic literature. Although both bibliographies contained obvious gaps and much more material is now available in collections all over the country, the bibliographies can still function as starting points for researchers. As for myself, I benefited greatly by becoming more familiar with the availability of Chinese language source materials. That may have been one of the reasons that led the Asian American Studies Library, University of California at Berkeley to invite me in 1979 to join an advisory committee for starting a Chinese archival collection. I continued to work closely with the librarian and periodically would donate books, directories, newspapers, periodicals and other documentary materials to the collection, which had become one of the leading collections of Chinese American materials in America.

Trans-Pacific Links

Even while Chinese American historical research was taking root in America during the 1970s, diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were also improving. Chinese Americans were once again allowed to travel to the PRC. In July 1976, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, I led a delegation that included volunteers from the Hon Sing Chinese Community Hour to visit China. On this trip my wife and I reestablished contacts with relatives that we had lost contact with for several decades. Soon after our group left China, Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong passed away; a *coup d'état* overthrew the "Gang of Four" who had ruled the nation with a fanatical reign of terror. This opened the way to a policy of economic reform and ending of China's isolation in the international community. One of the changes was the reactivation of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) and the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (FROC) and implementation of a policy to win the support of Chinese abroad.

In 1979 UCLA became the first American university to collaborate with a Chinese institution of higher learning on a scholarly project when Professor Lucie Cheng of the Asian American Studies Center signed an agreement with Zhongshan University of Guangzhou to interview emigrant families in two villages in Taishan County. She invited me to be one of the participants on the American team, probably because there were at the time not many in Asian American Studies who were fluent in both Chinese and English. Although I had just been on another visit to Guangzhou the previous year and had not thought of going again so soon, I decided to join this groundbreaking project. Using accumulated vacation time, I spent a week researching pertinent materials at the Zhongshan University library, another week in Taishan examining its archival material and spending a night with the project team at one of the target villages. Also I visited several of the *qiaoxiang*, or emigrant areas, with the help of the provincial and local OCAO and FROC.

During the next two decades, contacts in both OCAO and FROC facilitated numerous visits to emigrant areas in China as well as meeting with returned overseas Chinese. My understanding of Chinese emigration and its effects on China broadened considerably. I also gathered additional materials relating to the Chinese in America. For example, on one trip during the mid-1980s I bought a book that included drafts of reports that San Francisco Chinese Consul-General Huang Zunxian made during 1882 to Chinese envoy Zheng Zaoru in Washington DC, discussing efforts to found the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in San Francisco.

The Taishan project tapered off after the principals departed for greener pastures. One essay was published in *Amerasia Journal* (Spring/Summer 1982); however, most of the data and information collected in Taishan are still awaiting further analysis. The project was followed in 1981 by another agreement among Zhongshan University, Hong Kong University, and UCLA for a joint five-year project to research Chinese American history. In the same year Zhongshan University published a bibliography *A Reference Guide to Overseas Chinese History* (Guangzhou: Zhongshan University, 1981), listing articles in publications in the Guangzhou area, but the other two parties never did publish corresponding bibliographies for Hong Kong and California per the agreement. The project, however, did convene two conferences, one in 1984 hosted by Hong Kong University and a second in 1985 hosted by

Zhongshan University. At these conferences I began to establish useful contacts with scholars from China doing research on Chinese overseas.

Full-time on Research

The years ending the 1970s were busy and productive. In 1976 and 1977, I became president of the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) and on behalf of the society applied for and received successive grants to design a traveling exhibit *Journeys Made and Yet to Come* that was completed in 1987, followed by a permanent exhibit *The Promise of Gold Mountain* for the CHSA museum that was unveiled in 1979. As the project approached completion, the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco (CCF) board of directors appointed me to supervise the completion of the large-scale exhibit *Chinese of America, 1785-1980,* and the planning of the second conference on Chinese American studies to accompany the opening of the exhibit in 1980. I collaborated with Joe Huang and Don Wong to write the illustrated history and catalog for the exhibition; project coordinator Jack Chen, in a parallel effort based largely on the research for the exhibition, also published *The Chinese of America, from the Beginnings to the Present* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

After the *Chinese of America* exhibit had toured several American cities, CCF as a gesture of friendship gave the exhibit to the All-China Returned Chinese Association for its proposed museum of overseas Chinese. In 1985 I accompanied this first large-scale depiction of the Chinese American experience to be sent to China and spent two weeks in Shanghai translating the captions into Chinese for its premiere showing. The next year I returned to help curate its opening in Beijing. Subsequently the exhibit traveled to Guangzhou, Taishan, Zhongshan, and Hong Kong.

As mentioned previously, 1980 saw the publication of *Island.* In addition my long essay on the Chinese in the continental United States was published in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980). Shortly afterward, Maurice Chuck worked with me on a Chinese translation of the essay for publication in *San Francisco Journal.* I soon concluded that the article was too skeletal to have sufficient details to satisfy the Chinese reader and decided to expand the essay using materials from accumulated lecture notes and file documents. I soon found that these too were often inadequate and needed additional research. By the time I realized

this, I was well into the weekly series and could not extricate myself gracefully. All I could do was to continue to forge ahead doing research on the fly to meet the weekly deadline. I had optimistically entitled the series "A Brief History of the Chinese in America," but the series dragged on for four years and ran some 200,000 characters. One benefit of this entanglement was that my Chinese composition writing showed great improvement!

I was leaving for a visit to China in 1984 when Teo Ng, manager of Eastwind Books and Arts in San Francisco, suggested that I submit the manuscript to Joint Publishing Company, the leading book dealer and publisher in Hong Kong. I did as he suggested, but without any high expectations. To my surprise, after reading the manuscript, the company not only agreed to publish the work, but also offered a contract. I decided then and there that I had given enough of my life to Bechtel Corporation and took early retirement in order to devote more time to prepare the manuscript for publication. At that time I was not quite fifty-nine years old. After making revisions and additions that almost doubled the word-count, *Cong Huaqiao dao Huaren* (From overseas Chinese to Chinese American) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1992) was finally published in 1992 as a 544-page work with 380,000 characters. It was the first general history of the Chinese in America in the Chinese language written from the perspective of an American-born Chinese.

In 1987 CHSA decided to begin publishing a scholarly journal and appointed me to serve on the editorial committee. When the publication was about to go to press, committee members racked their brains to find a suitable name. I suggested *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* since it appeared to be broad enough to cover a wide variety of writings. To my surprise the suggestion was adopted. *Chinese America* was not the first non-academic scholarly journal on Chinese American history and society, but in the 1990s it was the only one still being published. In order to draw upon the expertise of Asian American studies, CHSA invited the Asian American Studies Department of San Francisco State University to become a cosponsor of the journal in 1989. This has proven to be a mutually beneficial arrangement that enhanced the image of the publication.

In 1991 Albert Cheng and I became co-coordinators of the CCF and CHSA-sponsored "In Search of Roots" program that had been set up in the aftermath of a family history/genealogical seminar sponsored by the same groups in 1989. In that annual

program, ten Chinese American youth interns under guidance researched their family histories, visited their ancestral villages in the Pearl River Delta as guests of the Guangdong Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and then displayed their findings and family histories in an exhibition at the Chinese Culture Center. The program was geared toward encouraging the interns to relate their family histories to the historical experience of the Chinese in America. Information and materials I had picked up in visits to the Pearl River Delta during the 1980s proved to be of great help for planning the group's travel itinerary. I also rewrote my 1969 lecture notes on Guangdong history, expanding them to cover the geography and histories of the Guangzhou (Sam Yup), Zhong-shan, and Jiangmen (Sze Yup) regions.

Most participants in the program did not come from Chinatown families and were highly assimilated and English-speaking. A common thread among them was a search for their identity in American society. It is gratifying to note the progam had been of assistance providing some guidance in this quest, and many interns have exhibited an increased awareness of Chinese American and Asian American issues.

During the last half of the 1980s, the convening of a number of conferences on the Chinese overseas indicated that scholars worldwide were increasingly interested in the subject, and conditions were ripe for the appearance of an international coordinating group. In 1992 I joined a committee headed by Professor Lingchi Wang of the University of California at Berkeley to make plans for a *Luodi Shenggen* international conference in San Francisco on the Chinese diaspora. After the successful conclusion of the conference the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (ISSCO) was established to serve as a liaison among scholars in the field. The network has facilitated the staging of subsequent international conferences at Shantou (1993), Hong Kong (1994), Xiamen (1996), Manila (1998) and Havana (1999). Attending some of these conferences enabled me to have useful exchanges with scholars from other countries and to keep abreast of developments in the field. Understanding more of the experiences of Chinese in other countries has been particularly helpful in developing a broader perspective. I personally feel also that by comparing the experiences of Chinese in other countries with that of Chinese in the United States, one can gain insights that are helpful for more in-depth interpretations of certain phenomena and issues in Chinese American history. However, so far conferences

of this nature have attracted only a few scholars from Asian American Studies.

In 1992 I also became consultant and contributor to a proposed *Asian American Encyclopedia* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995). Involvement in that project really exposed to me the fact there were only a limited number of scholars versed in Chinese American history and society despite the three decades that had elapsed since Asian American Studies began. A number of proposed articles, particularly ones on biographies and institutions that should have been included, had to be dropped for lack of knowledgeable writers. Apparently many Chinese-Americanists, in spite of their protestations of working to advance the interests of the Chinese (or Asian) American community, meant it only in the abstract. The reality is that many Chinese Americans, particularly the American-born and even immigrants who arrived at a tender age, had become familiar and comfortable with only the English-speaking and westernized sectors of the Chinese community due to the effectiveness of the assimilation process. Most felt out of place in the immigrant-dominated Chinese-speaking community and hence had only limited understanding of its history, personalities and institutions.

After this project, I was engaged to write a long essay on Chinese in the United States for *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago, 1998), a work published in three different editions—English, traditional Chinese, and simplified Chinese characters. During the same period, I also was asked to submit several dozen articles on Chinese schools and Chinese American scholarly organizations for *Shijie Huaqiao Huaren baike quanshu* (Encyclopedia of Chinese and people of Chinese descent overseas) (Beijing: Overseas Publishing Company, 1999).

While all these activities were of great help to me personally for gathering and organizing my understanding of Chinese America, they took up time that could have been used to make headway in an English-language version of *From Overseas Chinese to Chinese American* that I had initiated earlier. Of course, it may be that since I had already done the book once in Chinese, there was a subconscious reluctance to revisit the subject matter. However, completion of such a work still remains on the agenda.

Pages Yet to Be Written

A major factor in American society that defined the course of the long and complex development of the Chinese community in

America was racism. Thus it was not surprising that many researchers focused on race relations between Chinese and the dominant white society. As Chinese Americans strove to attain equal status in American society, they in turn stressed areas that demonstrate that their community had been and is an integral part of American society. On the one hand, they concentrated on "accurate" and positive accounts of the Chinese role contributing to American society and, on the other, made strenuous efforts to combat and dispel stereotypical images of Chinese Americans current in mainstream America. However, since the Chinese American community is complex and diverse, its complete historical experience covers much more than the aforementioned phenomena. During the three decades since 1970, some researchers have plowed some new ground delving into such topics as Chinese in California agriculture; Chinese in different regions such as the South, New York, Monterey Peninsula, Stockton; Chinese American women; Chinese Americans in World War II. Others probed contemporary communities such as Sacramento, Flushing and Monterey Park.

As for myself, publication of my initial research paper in 1972 helped crystallize my thinking as to the direction I should take in Chinese American historical research. I decided to focus on the twentieth century, which to me was the principal arena where many Chinese institutions and attitudes evolved that are essential to any understanding of the community. I had written essays on social history covering such topics as Chinese newspapers, Chinese language schools, political and social organizations, regional and dialect groups, China politics in the community, as well as some biographies. But in spite of all the new areas that had been probed, there are still too many blank pages, and even more that are incomplete or poorly defined, that await further delineation. Some of these are described below:

- ❖ Immigration

  Chinese emigration was a phenomenon that arose out of the intersection of a number of local and international factors—economic, political, and geographical. Beginning with mid-nineteenth century a large part of the emigration from the Pearl River Delta was directed toward the Americas and Hawai`i. However, not all counties in the region contributed equally to the flow, and the flow to different destinations differed in composition with respect to their geographical origins. Thus, immigrants from Sze Yup, mostly from Taishan, predominated on the American

continent, while the great majority of emigrants to Hawai`i came from Zhongshan. What factors led to these differences? What effect did this difference have on the subsequent development of the local Chinese community? Why didn't other areas along the China coast become major sources of emigrants to the New World during this same period? Chinese immigration is an interlinking global phenomenon. Economic and political developments in the host countries were factors that led to adjustments in the emigration flow to various destination. One such major development was the anti-Chinese Movement and Chinese exclusion in the U.S. that caused part of the emigration flow to be diverted to southeast Asia, Canada, Mexico, and the Hawaiian Kingdom. What were the magnitudes of these diversions? What was its effect on the development of the new host countries?

❖ Race Relations

Much has been written on race relations between Chinese and the dominant white society. How were the relations of Chinese with other ethnic groups? With Native Americans? With Mexicans? With African-Americans? With Jews? With other European immigrants? With other Asians? Did they influence one another's culture and society?

❖ Organizations

For many years historians had not done much research on organizations in the Chinese American community and had often used sources of limited reliability. A case in point is the well-known Chinese Six Companies or Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) in San Francisco. For many years and even today the most widely quoted source had been William Hoy's *The Chinese Six Companies* (San Francisco: Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, 1942), a pamphlet that was commissioned and published by the organization to project a better public image during World War II. Gunther Barth in his *Bitter Strength* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) was first to work out the history of the district associations, or *huiguan*, up to 1870 based on documentation. During the late 1960s, Yuk Ow pointed out to me the numerous errors in Hoy's work. After collecting pertinent documents for almost two decades, I finally published "The Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/*Huiguan* System" in 1987 to settle many of the questions concerning the founding of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in San Francisco.[3] However, the origins and history of Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations and district associations in most other Chinese communities as well as other important Chinatown organizations such as clan

associations, secret societies, labor guilds, chambers of commerce, and political, civic and religious groups are still sketchily explored, if at all. How did these organizations begin? What roles did they play in the Chinese community? How did they change over time? Why was there such a proliferation of secret societies and internecine conflicts in the continental United States in contrast to the relatively less violent environment in Canada and Hawai`i? Since the activities of these organizations played important roles in shaping the Chinese community, more knowledge is essential to better understand some of the dynamics driving the development of the community.

❖ Businesses

Many early Chinese business firms in America were engaged in merchandising and labor contracting. Later there was an increasing number of small industrial firms, followed by major modern commercial, industrial, and financial enterprises although the bulk of Chinese businesses remained small scale. What was the historical process followed by Chinese businesses as they developed through the various stages? How did these changes affect the Chinese community and its relations to mainstream American society? How were regional solidarities and inter-regional rivalries expressed in the business sphere? Major Chinese merchandising firms in America established networks of associated firms in East Asia as well as in the Americas. These networks still exist today even though the firms involved may be different. How were these networks formed? How did they function?

❖ Paper Sons

It is a known fact that during the exclusion era many immigrants assumed exempt class, or "paper son" identities, in order to skirt the exclusion laws and enter America. The *gamsaanjong* had been the principal vehicle facilitating such transactions between would-be immigrants and the "owner" of such identity documents. How did the *gamsaanjong* system originate? How did they become involved in immigration to the United States? How did the system function? What caused this system to decline and disappear? What was the role played by the embargo placed by America on the PRC? There was a confession program during the mid-1950s to adjust the status of Chinese who had immigrated using fraudulent identities. How did this program affect the Chinese community?

❖ American-born Chinese

The exclusion period saw the emergence of a growing group, mostly American-born, who were influenced strongly by west-

ern institutions and partially or wholly assimilated into the American cultural tradition. Studying the historical experience of this group would shed more light on the dynamics of the assimilation of the Chinese into American culture. What is the historical experience of the American-born group and what was its place in the Chinese community? What are the differences in the timing and pace of development between the American-born group in Hawai'i and on the mainland, and on the mainland between San Francisco and other communities? The social needs of members of this group led them to set up their own institutions and organizations, many of which were modeled after and were parallel to corresponding groups in mainstream America. What is the history and function of organizations and institutions of the American-born? How were they different from traditional Chinese organizations and institutions?

❖ Nationalism

During the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese nationalist sentiments attracted many Chinese in America alienated by lack of opportunities for Chinese in America. How were nationalist feelings manifested in the Chinese community? How did they function as a causative factor spurring modernization of the community infrastructure, or as a divisive factor leading to intra-community strife? Some Chinese Americans, influenced at least partially by nationalist feelings, traveled to China for a Chinese education and to seek career opportunities. Many studied in universities such as Lingnan in Guangzhou, St. John's in Shanghai, and Yen Ching in Beijing. Some carved out careers in China, but many eventually returned to America, where their bilingualism often helped to win them entry into community leadership circles. Who were some of these leaders? How influential were members of this group in the community leadership? Similarly, nationalism also was a driving force inducing more affluent Chinese to invest at least some of their capital in China and Hong Kong enterprises. What effect did this outflow have on the growth of the Chinese enterprises in America?

❖ Extraterritoriality

Extraterritorial political influence from China has long been a factor affecting developments in the community. How was this influence exhibited during different periods in history? As part of the monarchist-republican rivalry? As part of China's fight against imperialist domination? As part of the Sino-Japanese War? As part of the conflict between the PRC and Taiwan? What was the effect on the Chinese American community? On mainstream society?

❖ Labor

A large percentage of the Chinese in this country belonged to the working class, but little research has been done on Chinese American labor history. How did workers protect their interests? How were labor-management disputes resolved? How were workers organized? What was the relation of Chinese worker organizations to labor organizations in mainstream America? When did Chinese first join labor unions in the American mainstream?

❖ Overseas Students

Students had come from China to study in America since the latter part of the nineteenth century. During the exclusion era they had their own organizations and institutions that interacted with the mainstream and Chinese immigrant communities. Some also participated in Chinese community activities. Most returned to China upon completion of their studies. After World War II, another wave of students arrived, mostly coming from Taiwan and Hong Kong. A third wave came with the opening of the PRC in the 1980s. Each of these groups in turn formed its own organizations and institutions. Due to a more relaxed immigration policy in America, many post-war students were able to stay for extended periods in America; many successfully acquired permanent resident status and became part of the Chinese American community. What were the historical experiences of the three waves of students? What were their organizations and institutions? How were they affected by events in China and in the United States? What were their relations to the Chinese American community? To mainstream American society?

❖ Chinese American Consciousness

The improved social and economic status of Chinese Americans during the post-World War II decades led to a change in psychology among many immigrants from an orientation toward China to an attitude that America is the permanent home for themselves and their posterity. What was the historical experience of Chinese Americans as they underwent this change? This change coincided with the rise of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and development of tense relations with the United States. What role did U.S.-China hostility play in this change of attitude? How did this change in attitude affect existing community traditions and institutions? How was this change expressed in the relations of the Chinese community with mainstream society?

❖ Middle Classes

During the quarter century after the end of World War II, a middle class with interests rooted in America increased in numbers and influence when many Chinese were able to enter occupations in the professions, sciences, and technology, fields where entry had hitherto been severely restricted; others became successful entrepreneurs in modern businesses. What had been the historical experience of Chinese in academia? In engineering and the professions? What was the history of development of Chinese American scientific and technological enterprises in America? How was this reflected in American politics? In international relations and the global economy?

❖ Ethnic Chinese Diversity

The rapid influx of immigrants since the 1970s was accompanied by a phenomenal growth and diversification of the Chinese population in America into several major groupings as follows: 1) Cantonese-speaking immigrants arriving before the 1960s together with later arrivals from Hong Kong and from the PRC, many of whom were connected to the Chinatowns; 2) Immigrants, mostly from Taiwan, many of whom arrived as students after the late 1950s and subsequently stayed as professionals, scientists and engineers in new concentrations such as the San Gabriel Valley in Southern California, Flushing in New York, and Bellaire in Houston; 3) Refugees belonging to several Chinese-dialect groups who arrived after the end of the war in the IndoChina Peninsula and Vietnam's persecution of ethnic Chinese with many settling in the existing Chinatowns or new concentrations such as in Westminster and Sacramento; 4) Immigrants from the Fuzhou area, many of whom were smuggled into the country during the 1980s and settled on the east coast; 5) Mandarin-speaking students and intellectuals from other regions of China who decided to stay when the PRC was founded and ex-officials and other Nationalist supporters who arrived after the Communist triumph in China, mostly via Taiwan and Hong Kong; 6) Mandarin-speaking students, intellectuals and business representatives from the PRC, who began arriving after the PRC relaxed emigration restrictions at the end of the 1970s. There are also smaller sub-communities of Chinese from Cuba, Latin America, Burma, countries of Southeast Asia, and other regions. In addition there are the English-speaking Chinese, who are descended from earlier immigrants, mostly Cantonese. However, increasingly their numbers are being augmented by the second and third generations of the other more recent groups. Except for the Cantonese group on which much of the attention of scholars has focused up to now, little research has been done on the society and history of the other groups.

❖ Ethnic Enclaves

For many decades, San Francisco has been considered the political, cultural, and political center for the Chinese in America. Thus, more documentation is available from this location than any other, and many Chinese American historians tend to focus much of their research on developments in San Francisco to the neglect of communities in other areas. However, in a way, the San Francisco community is rather atypical in that the large concentration of Chinese exerted a conservative influence that tended to help the population to preserve its Chinese language and culture and to slow their assimilation into mainstream culture. Also, the pervasive oppressive discrimination against Chinese resulting in *de facto* segregation of the community during the Exclusion era also had a significant impact in shaping psychological attitudes somewhat different from those among Chinese in other communities. Thus, even though the San Francisco community no doubt plays an important role among Chinese in America, there is a definite need to examine in more detail the historical development of Chinese Americans in other communities, such as New York, and Los Angeles, as well as smaller towns, to reach a fuller understanding of the dynamics of development of Chinese American society. During the decades after World War II Hawai`i had not seen as large an influx of immigrants as the mainland. How did this affect the post-war development of the Chinese community in Hawai`i? What role is being played by Chinese in Hawaiian society?

❖ Biographies and Life Histories

A characteristic of many current Chinese American histories in the English language has been the fact that the Chinese appeared to be faceless and nameless. Surely such personalities as Norman Assing, Tong K. Achik, Li Po Tai, Wong Ching Foo, Ng Poon Chew, Look Tin Eli, Tan Foon Chew, Lew Hing, K. C. Li, Kathryn Cheung, Louise Leung Larson, Walter U. Lum, Lue Gim Gong, Chun Quon and others have contributed to the building of America and merit mention in historical chronicles. There is a definite need to develop more Chinese American biographical materials for historical research.

❖ A Comprehensive History

Lastly, there is a need for a comprehensive work tying together the many threads of the Chinese American historical experience. Such works have been available in the Chinese language for some time; however, existing works in the English language are either too uneven in coverage, with emphasis on nineteenth century Chinese labor but scant attention paid to developments in

the twentieth century, or are so abbreviated that many details on events and personalities are omitted and Chinese come across as faceless and nameless.

One problem faced by the field is that many scholars in Asian American Studies have appeared to favor literature, identity and other issues as research topics in recent years. While there is no question as to the value of such studies, the result is that only a limited number of scholars are engaged in Chinese American historical research. Another problem is that most researchers do not use, or underutilize Chinese-language sources. Since the Chinese American community has had a predominantly immigrant population during practically all of the historical period, most documentation was necessarily in Chinese; hence, Chinese-language materials are essential for in-depth investigations of many facets of the Chinese American historical experience, especially those connected with the community's internal dynamics. Asian American graduate programs up to now have resisted making knowledge of the Asian languages a requirement. Since nature abhors a vacuum and Chinese American historical research is not a private preserve, scholars proficient in Chinese have entered the field. Some of these have also come up with some fresh interpretations of Chinese American history.

The Chinese in America are a major Asian group with a long history in this country whose experiences played an important role in the development of America. Studying Chinese American history will provide valuable insights into the complex process whereby a non-European, non-Caucasian, ethnic-minority community survived and developed to eventually become an integral part of American society. Given the need for a comprehensive record, surely there must be scholars who will rise to the challenge and publish such work in the foreseeable future, thus building a new tradition of Chinese American scholarship.

Notes

1. The Wah Ting San Fong was still active in 1913 when it was one of the 27 secret societies in San Francisco signing a compact agreeing to the formation of the Peace Society to mediate disputes by peaceful means. But by the mid-1920s when our family moved in, the group was no longer active and only a few old members were living in the clubrooms. Sam Yup means "three counties" and refers to three counties adjacent to Guangzhou—Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde.

2. "Acknowledgments," in Stanford M. Lyman, *The Asian in North America* (Santa Barbara: American Bibliographical Center-Clio Press, 1977), ix-xii. The interest in race relations and ethnic minorities continued to be evidenced by publication of several academic works on the Chinese in America during the early 1960s: Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960); S. W. Kung, *Chinese in American Life* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962); Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963), and Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). Soon afterward came Betty Lee Sung, *Mountain of Gold* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1967), targeted at the general reading public.
3. *Chinese America: History and Perspectives, 1987* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1987), 13-51.

"Peace Sunday," Los Angeles Little Tokyo, 1969.
Gidra Photographer. Courtesy of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center Movement Archives.