

HIM MARK LAI

—BECOMING—
Chinese
American



A HISTORY OF COMMUNITIES
AND INSTITUTIONS

Becoming Chinese American

A History of Communities and Institutions

Him Mark Lai



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Becoming Chinese American

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A Note on Transliteration

In this book all transliterated Chinese geographical names, except for widely accepted ones such as Hong Kong and Macao, are given in Hanyu pinyin. For institutions and individuals, the spellings customarily accepted by society at large are preferred. However, it should be noted that English names of many organizations are often not systematic, and the spelling of geographical references may conflict with standard transliterations. If only the Chinese characters of a name are available, it will be transliterated into pinyin using the putonghua pronunciation. Where deemed necessary for clarity in the text, as for example in the case of the name of a Chinese individual in America, transliterations from Cantonese and other dialects, or transliterations other than pinyin, will be shown in parentheses following the pinyin spelling.

Preface

I have researched and written on Chinese American historical subjects for more than three and a half decades. Throughout these years, it has been a constantly evolving process of learning. Whatever I may have accomplished during this period would not have been possible if I had not had the help and support of a number of individuals and institutions to whom I now wish to express my gratitude and thanks. First and foremost, I am indebted to the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) for providing the platform from which I launched my career in Chinese American historical research during the mid-1960s. Editor Maurice Chuck and Publisher Gordon Lew, started me on my writing career in late 1967 when they encouraged me to contribute articles on Chinese American history to *East/West, the Chinese American Journal*. These early activities prepared me for the opportunity to team-teach, with Philip Choy, the first college level course in America on Chinese American history offered by San Francisco State University in 1969.

During this same period, I also had the chance to consult frequently with the late Yuk Ow, who since the mid-1940s had done research and accumulated extensive files on the history of the Chinese in California. His research was conducted before the recent surge in interest in the history of American minorities and thus his writings remained unpublished and his research has gone largely unrecognized. Mr. Ow was a firm believer in using Chinese language sources whenever possible to research Chinese American history, a view that I eventually came to share at least partially.

Following his lead I also began collecting clippings on Chinese America from English and Chinese publications. Mr. Ow was also interested in the history of Guangdong and the Cantonese, a fact that encouraged me to pay close attention to the history of Guangdong, and more particularly that of the Pearl River Delta from which most of the emigration to America originated. In another sector, it was his preliminary work on the involvement of the Chinese Six Companies that motivated me to probe deeper into the development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/*Huiguan* system.

During the early 1970s a conversation at a restaurant with President Dick Quock of the Sam Yup Association led to the forming of an editorial team led by Yuk Ow, with Philip Choy and myself as assistants, to compile the history of the association, one of the oldest *huiguan* existing in Chinese America. While working on this project I had access to the organization's records, which date back as far as 1881. This experience opened my eyes to the rich and complex history of the association and inspired me to do research on other locality and dialect group communities, such as the Hua Xian (Fa Yuen), Huangliang Du (Wong Leung Do), and non-Cantonese locality and dialect group communities.

In my research on these groups, the newspaper clippings and organization publications that I accumulated over the years proved to be invaluable. On the Fa Yuen and Wong Leung Do projects, I also benefited greatly from information and materials provided by friends and contacts. Kun Don of the Fa Yuen community thoughtfully saved and passed on to me his copies of Fa Yuen Association publications, which provided a wealth of information on the community. Other contacts in different parts of California provided helpful information and introduced me to other informants. They included David G. Chan, Kan Don, Albert and Edith Gong, John Gong, Homer Jung, George Lau, Yvonne Lee, Him Lew, Gange Coy Lowe, John S. Lowe, Chin F. Sun, Ernest Wong, Richard Wing, and Howard Young. In the Wong Leung Do community key individuals who provided information and helped me make contact with individuals to interview included my late brother-in-law Philip Fong, Judy Yung, and Connie Young Yu. Interviewees included Gordon Chan, John Chan, Kong Chow, Man Quong Fong, Robert Fong, Lawrence Jue, Kam Hong Kwong, Mamie Leong, John Mock, Norman Mock and his mother, Shek Ng Mock, William Mock, J. P. Wong, Mary Wong, and John Young. Another resource was the files of the Immigration and Naturalization Services at the National Archives Regional Archives (NARA) that were a rich source of historical data. The NARA staff, and especially Neil Thomsen, was always helpful.

In 1978–1979 I was invited to team-teach the course on Chinese American history at the University of California, Berkeley for Ling-chi Wang,

who was on sabbatical. Following this course, in 1980–1982, I became a member of the advisory committee for establishing a Chinese language archives in the Asian American collection at the University. From 1986 to 1988 I was consultant for the archival collection. Working through Librarian Wei Chi Poon, the collection was able to obtain a copy of the Drum-right Report. This became a basic reference document for my essay on the Confession Program.

It was soon after my sojourn as lecturer at Berkeley that I was invited by Lucie Cheng to participate in the joint project with Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou to do research on the Taishan emigrant area. Through participation in the project I became acquainted with individuals in various offices of overseas Chinese affairs, associations of returned overseas Chinese, as well as scholars doing research in the field, which had just been revived around 1979. These connections proved to be extremely helpful in keeping up with developments in the field as well as collecting materials connected with the Chinese emigration to America. Thus it came to pass in the mid-1990s that Huang Kunzhang of Jinan University in Guangzhou and Zhou Nanjing of Beijing University called on me to contribute a number of articles on Chinese language schools in the Americas and Hawaii for the twelve volume *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas*. The research that I did for this effort laid the basis for two essays on Chinese language schools in America.

The writing of papers required typing and making copies. These tasks were particularly onerous in the 1970s when computer word processing and copying machines were not generally available. Fortunately, Ms. Victoria Chun and my wife Laura helped relieve me of much of this drudgery. Another service I enjoyed was my wife's willingness to drive me to various places to do research. I wish to express my sincere thanks to them.

It was Lorraine Dong of San Francisco State University (SFSU), while she was president of CHSA several years ago, who first broached the idea of publishing my collected essays. A few years later Madeline Hsu of SFSU made the arrangements with AltaMira Press to make this a reality, and also to write the foreword to the collection.

To all these individuals and institutions, I again wish to express my deepest gratitude and sincere thanks.

Foreword

The Life and Times of Him Mark Lai

Madeline Y. Hsu

The twentieth century has witnessed both the depth and the peak of American acceptance of immigrants and ethnic culture. In 1924 and 1965, Congress passed two very different immigration acts that represented both the closing and reopening of America's doors. The 1924 legislation strictly limited the entry of any but western and northern European immigrants while banning almost all Asians as "aliens ineligible for citizenship."¹ The 1965 Act abolished such nationally defined considerations for entrance into the United States and thereby enabled a renewed stream of migrants from around the world to come and make their home in America. These changing laws embodied shifts of American attitudes toward domestic diversity, definitions of citizenship and national belonging, and receptiveness toward heterogeneity in American society. These tremendous transformations are reflected in the life and research of Him Mark Lai. Professor Lai's pioneering role in the field of Chinese American studies is part cause and part product of the civil rights movement that facilitated the recent embrace of multiculturalism that has made possible the fields of Asian American and ethnic studies. Professor Lai's collection of historical essays serves as a potent record of how Chinese Americans have struggled and how much they have accomplished in claiming their part in America's past.

Professor Lai was born in 1925 and lived through the last decades of the harsh Exclusion Acts (1882–1943) during which Chinese were severely restricted as a race from entering the United States. Like most Chinese of

that era, Professor Lai's parents were working class and were restricted by discrimination to lifelong employment as sewing machine operators and residence within San Francisco's Chinatown. This segregation of Chinese extended to the native-born generations as well, and Professor Lai spent his childhood attending schools with predominantly Chinese classmates. However, even in the openly racist 1930s, American society was changing for at least he could attend American public schools where he learned English while studying Chinese after hours at Chinese school. Unlike most of his peers, Professor Lai managed to gain a fluent knowledge of Chinese culture and language through these schools although his facility in English was better. In another sign of the changing times, Professor Lai won a citywide history competition as a high school senior.

Despite this early indication of historical promise, Professor Lai chose to be practical when attending University of California, Berkeley (U.C. Berkeley). He trained as an engineer and would work for more than thirty years at the Bechtel Corporation. He was among the first generation of Chinese Americans employed outside Chinatown in white collar and professional occupations after World War II.

Besides benefiting from postwar shifts in the job market and the expanding American economy, Professor Lai enjoyed other advantages as the first of his family able to claim citizenship by birth in this country. Immigrant Chinese lived precarious existences, and until the Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943, they were legally barred from gaining the protections of U.S. citizenship by naturalization. Even after 1943, they continued to face the fear of discovery and deportation because most had used false names and statuses of those few legally permitted to enter the United States: merchants, merchant family members, students, tourists, diplomats, U.S. citizens, or the children of male U.S. citizens. Professor Lai's own father lived with his paper surname Lai but ensured that the real family name, Mark, would be incorporated as the middle name for all his children. The difficulty of immigrating and the open discrimination generated more serious consequences by discouraging many Chinese women from coming to the United States. Complete family units like that of Professor Lai's were rare, and the emergence of an undeportable second generation of U.S. citizens was long delayed. Secure in his irrevocable status during the Cold War of the 1950s, Professor Lai was active in the leftist organization, Mun Ching, and pursued his interest in the Communist-controlled Chinese mainland. It was through Mun Ching that Professor Lai met his future wife and partner in research, Laura Jung.

During the 1950s Professor Lai developed his knowledge of modern China, Chinese culture, and Chinese language skills through his membership in Mun Ching and extensive reading on his own, even as the protests of America's many marginalized groups began resonating with

growing force. The civil rights movement originated in the Jim Crow South but soon transformed the lives of the disenfranchised throughout the nation. From this movement emerged greater consciousness of the rights of those excluded from a male-dominated, Euro American, heterosexual orthodoxy. Peoples of color, women, and homosexuals struggled to articulate their differences and sensibilities and thereby ended the historical silences that had so effectively erased their presence from the past. In the turbulent 1960s, Professor Lai would finally find a social and cultural milieu that encouraged him to work in his true vocation of researching and writing history.

Although he had lived through many of its key events, Professor Lai discovered Chinese American history as a scholarly discipline by taking a U.C. Berkeley course, "The Oriental in North America," created by then graduate student Stanford Lyman in 1960. Professor Lai shifted his political energies into history by joining the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) in 1965. He began researching Chinese American history as a columnist for the *East/West* newspaper and as an assistant to CHSA founder Thomas Chinn in editing *A History of the Chinese in California, A Syllabus* that is still a key reference work in the study of nineteenth-century Chinese America. Professor Lai and the other assistant editor, Philip P. Choy, would use this syllabus as the basis for the first Chinese American history course that they taught at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1969. This class was so successful that it became part of the regular curriculum and is still being taught [by myself] today.

Inspired by the ideals of the 1960s, a maturing generation of younger Chinese American scholars made their first forays into the American academy in the 1970s and found themselves forced to juggle the demands of traditional intellectual criteria with the often contradictory priorities of community organizing. Professor Lai continued working as an engineer by day, but by night, during weekends, and personal holidays, he conducted meticulous research in archives and libraries across the nation searching for information pertaining to the Chinese American past. His home became an ever-growing library and archive of carefully collected and organized materials about Chinese American history and society that to this day remains larger than that of any university or public library. This impressive accumulation of scholarship has earned Professor Lai international recognition from overseas Chinese historians of both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan as the leading scholar of American Chinese history.

Professor Lai became a leader in the field by studying the key institutions and organizations of Chinese America. Unlike many of his professional counterparts, Professor Lai had the advantage of being bilingual in

Chinese and English and able to access more fully historical documents. During the 1970s, he established the groundwork for Chinese American studies to take its place alongside the study of other ethnic groups by seeking out the history of the most important institutions such as the native place and kinship organizations, newspapers and the press, political parties, and schools. In early recognition of his expertise, the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* approached him to write "A Historical Survey of the Left among the Chinese in America" in 1972. Through his groundbreaking work, the history and experiences of Chinese Americans could be compared to that of other ethnic groups, which occurred with the entry of "Chinese on the Continental U.S." that he penned for the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1980).

Professor Lai led the way in the study of the Chinese American press and in conjunction with Karl Lo, the East Asian Studies librarian at the University of Washington, compiled *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854–1975* in 1977. This research would enable Professor Lai to ensure representation for Chinese Americans with his article "The Chinese American Press" that appeared in *The Ethnic Press in the United States* in 1984.

Even as he helped Chinese American studies gain mainstream, academic acceptance, Professor Lai worked within the Chinese American community to raise consciousness of the importance of history and preservation. He actively worked to preserve the key site in Chinese American history that is comparable to the internment camps of Japanese America. The Angel Island Immigration Barracks remain the most evocative reminder of Chinese exclusion and all the institutionalized discrimination and limited opportunities that that era represented. Professor Lai ensured the preservation of many of the poems that adorn the walls and the memories of those incarcerated there by working with historian Judy Yung and poet Genny Lim to translate, record, and publish these historical traces in *Island, Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*. To this day, this remains the best known of Professor Lai's work.

Professor Lai has also worked extensively to involve the Chinese American community of San Francisco in historical projects. Through CHSA, he has raised public awareness by means of lectures, Chinatown tours, field trips, and museum exhibits such as "Journeys Made and Yet to Come," "The Promise of Gold Mountain," and "Chinese of America: Toward a More Perfect Union." With the sponsorship of the Chinese Culture Foundation, Professor Lai curated the "Chinese of America, 1785–1980" exhibit, the largest up to that time that traveled to several U.S. cities as well as the PRC. He helped to convene the first two Chinese American studies national conferences in 1975 and in 1980 in San Francisco.

For thirteen years beginning in 1971, he served as program coordinator for the radio show *Hon Sing Chinese Community Hour*, sponsored by

Chinese for Affirmative Action, and featured news commentaries and music and operas from modern China. He also used his historical knowledge and contacts with China to help establish the "In Search of Roots" on behalf of CHSA and the Chinese Culture Foundation to help Chinese American youths learn more of their family histories and travel to their ancestral villages in China. The degree of authority and trust he has developed is demonstrated in his coauthorship of *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association of San Francisco* that was published in 1975.² Professor Lai's reputation rests not only with the respect of an international and national elite group of scholars but also in the confidence of the often secretive native-place associations of San Francisco's Chinatown. Out of respect for his multifaceted accomplishments, Professor Lai has come to be known internationally as "the Dean of Chinese American Studies."

Despite this unofficial title, Professor Lai never held an official academic position, although he would regularly teach during the 1970s and 1980s at San Francisco State University and U.C. Berkeley in an adjunct capacity. Though many intellectuals are obsessed with titles and prestige, this independent status has in fact greatly benefited Professor Lai. He can research and write about those topics he considers most important and most interesting, free from campus politics or academic trends. Arguably, much of his work in laying the foundations of Chinese American studies stems from his greater latitude to pursue research for its own ends, unfettered by the need to publish to a certain schedule or in particular presses or journals.

The field of Chinese American studies has also benefited from this "amateur" status. Professor Lai has generously helped scores of other scholars by sharing the results of his dedicated research without the competition and staking of turf that mars many intellectual projects. The 1986 publication *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America* demonstrates Professor Lai's consciousness that in order for Chinese American studies to develop, resources and information must be collected, organized, and made generally available for other scholars to share.

Although Professor Lai's name may not appear on the cover, almost all the books and articles about Chinese in America published since the 1980s derive at least in part from the guidance and advice that he gave to their authors. His name appears in the acknowledgements of historians such as Ronald Takaki, Sucheng Chan, Judy Yung, John Wei-kuo Tchen, and K. Scott Wong, to name but a few. The January 2000 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article about his life and contributions, "The Scholar Who Legitimized the Study of Chinese America," is aptly titled for Professor Lai has been a true pioneer who sowed the seeds and encouraged them to take root and grow into the mature trees that now bear the fruit of Chinese American studies.

Despite his groundbreaking role and research, many of Professor Lai's own articles are inaccessible to most American audiences. The majority of his articles have appeared in a journal with highly limited distribution, the CHSA annual publication *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*. His book-length study of Chinese America, *Cong Huaqiao dao Huaren: Ershi shiji Meiguo Huaren shehui fazhan shi* [From overseas Chinese to Chinese American: a history of the development of Chinese American society during the twentieth century], is available only in Chinese. These chapters, which present much of Professor Lai's essential work on the key issues and institutions in Chinese American life, are long overdue. Through this book, scholars and interested readers of American history, ethnicity and immigration, and both Asian and Asian American studies will be able to learn how the Chinese adapted their imported traditions and organizational practices with the goal of claiming America as their home.

This book is divided into three sections: historical overviews, traditional organizations, and cultural retention. These nine chapters represent a singular breadth of knowledge about the Chinese American past. Rather than emphasizing experiences of discrimination, they focus on how Chinese Americans developed community sensibilities and institutions that enabled them to test the racially imposed boundaries on their lives in the United States. As demonstrated in many of these chapters, Chinese Americans constantly and creatively negotiated between the waves of rejection and reception in the United States and the embracing but exploitative nationalist stance of China.

"Guangdong Origins" begins this book by laying the groundwork for our understanding of Chinese American history. It traces the roots of Chinese migration to the United States. Contrary to many perceptions of Chinese as inward-facing and land-bound, centuries before coming to America adventurous Cantonese were experienced international traders and merchants. They were well prepared to quickly shift gears and adapt their entrepreneurial energies to North America by the time of the gold rush. In part I, Professor Lai also confronts the continuing legacy of the illegal immigration that dominated the exclusion period in chapter 2, "Aftermath to Exclusion: The Confession Program." Perhaps Professor Lai's most important work appears in the next two parts covering traditional organizations, and cultural retention, and the press. Most readers will know that native-place and kinship organizations played essential roles in organizing and protecting Chinese during the first century after the gold rush. However, apart from a few superficial, and often biased, descriptions by journalists and missionaries, much of what we do understand of how these key institutions operated and developed stems from Professor Lai's research in chapters 3 and 4, "The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/Huiguan System" and "The Sanyi (Sam Yup)

Community in America." The value of Professor Lai's work in this area is compounded by the complexity and secrecy of these organizations and their relationships to each other. Chapters 5, 6, and 7, in part II, "Chinese Regional Solidarity: The Hua Xian (Fa Yuen) Community, "Flower Growers and Political Activists: The Huangliang Du (Wong Leung Do) Community," and "Expressing Their Commonality: Chinese Locality and Dialect Group Associations," offer an important updating of the role these kinds of organizations continue to play in Chinese American lives.

In part III, "Cultural Retention," Professor Lai systematically charts the changing influence and scope of Chinese American attempts to educate children on how to be Chinese. In a masterful overview that covers the entire twentieth century and both the U.S. mainland and Hawaii, he traces the evolution of the Chinese language schools that absorbed much of the community's energies into the goal of reproducing Chineseness in native-born youths. The preservation of ethnicity and culture met with varying degrees of success conditioned by pedagogical approaches, convenience of attending the schools, extent of political influence, and options for employment in the United States.

In sum, these chapters represent the vision and dedication of the pioneering scholar who "legitimized the study of Chinese America."³ The life and writings of Him Mark Lai vividly convey how much Chinese Americans have accomplished in the past century and the strength of mind and spirit it has taken to be recognized as woven inseparably into the fabric of America's past.

NOTES

1. Only Filipinos, as American nationals, could still enter unchecked. Congress would end this free passage, however, in 1934 by passing the Tydings-McDuffie Act.
2. This history has been updated and reissued in 2000.
3. This description is taken from the title of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article about Professor Lai by Peter Monaghan.

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