

CHINESE AMERICAN HEROES

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November 1, 1925 – Him Mark Lai: Dean of Chinese American History

On October 28, 2007, the Chinese Historical Society of America announced the creation of the Him Mark Lai Digital Archive Project which will provide a single portal to the historian's numerous groundbreaking writings in English and Chinese—to date, 10 books and over 100 articles—as well as his extensive collection of research and interpretative materials in the University of California at Berkeley's Ethnic Studies Library and the Chinese Historical Society of America. Such an extensive archive of work would be impressive for an individual whose entire professional life had been dedicated, with institutional/financial support, to researching and writing about the Chinese American experience. That Him Mark Lai did not begin until his 40th year—and then for two decades remained an engineer by day and has never sought institutional/ financial support—makes his accomplishments nothing short of heroic.

Born on November 1, 1925 in San Francisco's Chinatown, Lai was the first in his family to begin life in America. His mother, Dong Hing Mui, had been raised in Guangzhou. His father Maak Bing—from Chunghaa Village, Nam Hoi District—had entered the United States under the paper name of Lai. But he passed his true ancestral roots to his five children by giving them each the middle name of Mark.

As a child, Lai loved listening to his father's tales from the *Water Margin*, Chinese legends of errant knights. And when he discovered a cache of Chinese novels in the communal area of the former Wah Ting San Fong, where his family lived in an 8' x 10' room, Lai began reading such stories for himself. His appetite for books extended to those in English, which he borrowed from the Chinatown branch library. Yet he started Commodore Stockton School knowing only the alphabet, taught him by his father, and almost failed first grade.

In Lai's teens, his parents' low wages as workers in Chinatown's sewing factories compelled him to take a part time job. Nevertheless, he maintained a high ranking at both Francisco Junior High and Nam Kue School. During his final year at Galileo High, Lai even won a citywide essay contest for which he was honored at a student body rally. When he expressed his desire to go to college, however, his father urged him to go after the good wages in the city's shipyards, pointing out that racism had prevented Lai's employer, a university graduate, from working in his profession. Lai refused and was supported by his mother. Continuing to work part time for 25 cents an hour at a sewing factory, he enrolled in San Francisco Junior College, then the University of California at Berkeley, graduating in 1947 with a degree in mechanical engineering.

Between the demands of work, study, and a lengthy commute, Lai never had the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. Once he started earning a comfortable living as an engineer and had the luxury of free time, he embarked on building a personal library. Lai returned frequently to the Oasis Bookstore, a gathering place for young progressive writers like its proprietor, Thick Hing Leong, to make purchases, then linger and talk. These discussions led Lai to join the San Francisco chapter of the Chinese League for Peace and Democracy, an organization opposed to American interference in China's Civil War. In late 1949, he started volunteering for *Chung Sai Yat Po*, the first daily paper to support the People's Republic of China, and became a member of organizations active in persuading students to return to China to serve the new government. He also joined the Chinese American Democratic Youth League, more familiarly known as Mun Ching, where he met Laura Jung, a new immigrant, whom he married in 1953.

Lai's own attempts to go to China thwarted, he worked for Bechtel Corporation as a mechanical engineer. He had chosen this profession out of practicality, and he relied on his activities outside of work to nourish his real passion: Chinese history and culture. In the 1950s, introducing the Chinese community to the songs, music, folk dances, and vernacular dramas of the New China through Mun Ching—now renamed the Chinese American Youth Club—proved immensely satisfying despite the cost of FBI surveillance. Moreover, Lai found his spoken and written Chinese gaining fluency, and he learned to use simplified characters and the pinyin transliteration system.

When Mun Ching, losing its clubrooms in 1959, was compelled to close, Lai felt mentally restless. The following year, he enrolled in "The Oriental in North America," a relatively new course taught by Stanford Lyman at the University of California Extension in San Francisco, which exposed him to the histories of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos in America. He subsequently read the half dozen or so titles on Chinese in America published in the early 1960s and joined the Chinese Historical Society of America soon after its founding in 1963. These events, together with contemporaneous changes in the status of minorities spurred by the Civil Rights movement, led Lai towards developing a Chinese American identity, and in 1967, he accepted a proposal by Maurice Chuck, editor of the bilingual *East/West, the Chinese American Weekly* to write a series of articles on Chinese American history. This marked the beginning of Lai's career in reclaiming the Chinese/American experience—a fortuitous confluence of his passion for history and his deep commitment to his bicultural heritage and democratic principles.

His *East/West* articles—revised and annotated—became the cornerstone for the classic *A History of the Chinese in California, A Syllabus*, co-edited with Thomas W. Chinn and Philip P. Choy, as well as the basis for the first Chinese American history course in the United States, which Lai team taught with Choy at San Francisco State College in Fall 1969 and which resulted in another classic *Outlines: History of the Chinese in America*. Lai's first scholarly essay, "A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left Among the Chinese in America," published in the Fall 1972 issue of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*—together with subsequent revisions—remains a standard reference. So is *Island*:

Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940, co-authored/translated with Genny Lim and Judy Yung; Lai's "Chinese on the Continental U.S." in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*; his *From Overseas Chinese to Chinese American: a History of the Development of Chinese during the Twentieth Century* (in Chinese) and articles in the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* and *Huaqiao Huaren Baike Guanshu* [Encyclopedia of Chinese and People of Chinese Descent Overseas]; his studies of Chinese newspapers and schools, district associations, and communities in the Pearl River Delta.

In pursuit of information, Lai has climbed into dumpsters; combed through thousands of newspapers, unpublished manuscripts, and documents; traveled to archives and Chinese/American communities on both sides of the Pacific; interviewed hundreds of people. To share his discoveries, he has not only taught and written articles and books but provided text and translations for exhibits; compiled bibliographies of Chinese newspapers and Chinese language materials; served as consultant for individuals, historical projects, institutions, and documentaries in China and the United States; enabled hundreds of Chinese American youth to find their ancestral homes in the Pearl River Delta; given talks at conferences in America, Australia, Canada, mainland China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Hong Kong; donated his decades of accumulated research to public institutions.

Somehow, Lai has also maintained his cultural and political commitment to community: For thirteen years, he coordinated a group that produced *Hon Sing*, a weekly radio program of news commentary, community announcements, and Chinese music under the auspices of the Chinese for Affirmative Action; and he has served multiple terms on the boards of many organizations—such as the Chinese Culture Foundation and the Chinese Historical Society—often assuming the responsibilities of president. He has, as well, generously encouraged and brought to light new research by others through his decades of work on the editorial committees of *Amerasia Journal* and *Chinese America: History & Perspectives*.

Not surprisingly, his awards have been many and authors of almost every work on Chinese America published in the past thirty plus years have noted their indebtedness to Lai. Footnotes often reference data he has unearthed. So it requires no exaggeration to make the claim that his prodigious scholarship, soon available worldwide through the Him Mark Lai Digital Archive, will continue to provide the foundation for all future work in Chinese American history, and he will forever retain the position of Dean.

Prepared by Ruthann Lum McCunn