

CHINESE AMERICAN HEROES

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Today in Chinese American History - August 29, 1879

By Connie Zheng

On August 29, 1879, Ko Kun Hua appeared on the grounds of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife, five children, and two servants. Hired from China to teach Mandarin courses at Harvard, Ko would be the first Chinese faculty member at any college in the United States. At that time, uncertainty about his position reigned. An unidentified faculty member said, "Who is going to learn Chinese, and how it is to be got into our College, are questions that have not even been considered." These dismal views seemed to be borne out when Ko had only one student in his first year. At the time of his death by pneumonia two years later, that number had grown to five or six pupils, but his time at Harvard was considered to be a satisfactory success. One student had acquired the ability to easily converse in Mandarin and was ready to establish a business in China. Ko began a legacy of interest in China and Asian studies at Harvard. The books he brought to the United States were the first books in Chinese or of any other Asian language at Harvard. They were also the beginnings of the million-volume East-Asian collection at Harvard-Yenching Library, the largest collection of any academic library outside Asia.

More than a century later today, the number of Chinese Americans in U.S. academia has swelled, with scholars making significant contributions in many fields ranging from science, law, history, and the arts.

Numerous Chinese American scholars have won the Nobel Prize for physics and chemistry, making invaluable contributions to the world and scientific community through their research. Laureates include Tsung Dao Lee, Chen Ning Yang, Samuel C.C. Ting, Steven Chu, Daniel C. Tsui, Roger Y. Tsien, and Charles K. Kao. In 1957, Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang, the first laureates of Chinese origin, together won the Nobel Prize in Physics for their work in disproving the principle of the conservation of parity. In 1976, Samuel C.C. Ting won the award in physics with Burton Richter for their discovery of the subatomic J/ψ particle. In 1997, Steven Chu, who later became the Secretary of Energy for the Obama presidential administration, won the award in physics for his research in the cooling and trapping of atoms with laser light. In 1998, Daniel C. Tsui won the award in physics for his contribution to the discovery of the fractional quantum Hall effect. In 2008, Roger Y. Tsien won the award in chemistry with two other chemists for their discovery and development of the green fluorescent protein. In 2009, Charles K. Kao won the Nobel Prize in Physics. Kao is sometimes referred to as the "Godfather of Broadband" because the fiberoptic technology that he helped develop, for which he won the Nobel Prize, forms the backbone of Internet telecommunications.

Another notable scholar is Min Chueh Chang, the co-inventor of the first birth control pill in the 1950s. In 1990, Chang-Lin Tien was announced as chancellor of UC Berkeley by the University of California Board of Regents, establishing a milestone by becoming the first Chinese and Asian American head of a UC campus and a major research university in the United States. Tien became UC Berkeley's seventh chancellor during a time when charges of racism and anti-Asian bias in Berkeley's admissions policies were being leveled. Also in 1990, Wallace D. Loh became the dean of the University of Washington's School of Law in Seattle, the first Chinese and Asian American law school dean in the United States. Loh came into office during a time of national sit-ins and picketing against the dearth of minorities and women on law school faculties. In 2004, Frank H. Wu became the ninth dean of Wayne State University Law School in Detroit. In 2010, he became Chancellor of UC Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. In 2007, Jim Chen joined the University of Louisville as dean of the Louis D. Brandeis School of Law. A prolific and influential scholar, Chen clerked for Justice Clarence Thomas of the Supreme Court of the United States. He became one of only a handful of Asian American law school deans in the nation.

Dr. Betty Lee Sung was the first to inspire serious study of Chinese Americans with her publication of the book, *Mountain of Gold*, in 1967. This pioneering chronicle of the history of the Chinese in America later led to an invitation to initiate Asian American Studies at the City College of New York in 1970. Her courses were the first of their kind in the Eastern United States. She later wrote the 1976 award winning book, *Chinese American Manpower and Employment*. Scholars Him Mark Lai, known also as the "Dean of Chinese American History," and Philip Choy were the first to begin teaching college courses in Chinese American history in September 1969 at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). These college courses came during the civil rights movement and during a time of great changes in the Chinese American community as the immigrant population swelled after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended national origin quotas that had kept Chinese out.

Ming Cho Lee, theatrical set designer and professor, has been extolled as "perhaps the most respected and revered of living American set designers" by the influential *Playbill Magazine*. Known for minimalism, daring textures, and the use of non-traditional materials, Lee's work has been featured in theatrical, opera and ballet productions throughout the world. In 1983, he won the Tony Award for his famous set design of the "K2" production. In 2002, Lee was awarded the National Medal of Arts, the nation's highest honor for artistic excellence by President George W. Bush.

Despite such successful figures in Chinese American academia, their numbers still remain relatively low, especially in senior leadership positions. There are numerous reasons for the low representation:

- **Discrimination and racism:** Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-Chinese sentiment was manifested in the notion of the “yellow peril,” the suspicion and fear of Chinese that led to outright lynching and the Chinese Exclusion Acts, Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against the Red Chinese in the 1950s, and the Wen Ho Lee case in the 1990s. Chinese in America were viewed as racial inferiors bent on domination of whites, spies, communists, people not to be trusted, and disloyal. Such biases and national security concerns have held back their entry into sensitive areas of academia in the United States with untold consequences to American national power.
- **Stereotypes:** Chinese Americans are seen as model minorities who do not need help like affirmative action. They are also seen as compliant and willing to do any job given to them no matter how badly paid or demeaning. Due to their perceived passivity they are not considered leadership material and are frequently passed over for higher positions in leadership.
- **Lack of role models:** In general, Chinese American faculty tends to gravitate toward engineering and sciences and less toward the humanities, meaning that students have fewer role models to look up to other professions outside of the engineering and science fields.
- **Legal barriers:** Some attribute the problem to be linked to the passage of Proposition 209 and laws in other states inspired by it. The 1996 California ballot measure amended the state constitution to prohibit public institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in hiring. Universities like UC Berkeley saw a steep drop in minority hiring following passage both because of the new law as well as far fewer minorities wanting to work for the system. Proposition 209 inspired similar laws in other states, such as the Civil Rights Initiative in Michigan in 2006 and Initiative 200 in Washington in 1998.

Chinese Americans have always faced and conquered many challenges in making a career in academia and must continue to confront and conquer many challenges in the future.

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