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“LOVE BOAT”: ABCS CRUISING THE WATERS OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

by Ellen D. Wu, M.A. UCLA

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She attended the Taiwan Study Tour in the summer of 1996.

To most people, the phrase “Love Boat” conjures up memories of a late 1970s television show centered around the romantic liaisons of a cruise ship’s passengers. To many Chinese Americans, however, the “Love Boat” is the 33 year old summer camp that has become a community tradition. Dubbed by 1996 participant Denise Yee as the “quintessential Chinese American youth experience,” the Love Boat, a.k.a. Chien Tan, a.k.a. the Overseas Chinese Youth Language Training and Study Tour to the Republic of China, is an annual event for college aged ABCs (American Born Chinese) and their counterparts from around the globe. Each July, students gather on Taiwan soil—contrary to popular belief, it’s not a cruise—to partake in nearly six weeks of hard-core, “educational” play.¹

But why travel halfway around the world to sneak out of dormitories for a few hours of crowded night markets and Asian rappers’ renditions of the latest MTV hits? Is it more than just a month and a half of whirlwind romances and Taiwan Beer® hangovers? There seem to be too many factors involved to write off the Love Boat as merely an extended party for spoiled Chinese Americans. A critical look at the Study Tour, in fact, reveals much about the role of U.S.-born Asians in international relations.

So how exactly do ABCs fit into the bigger global picture? As theorists Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc point out in their book, Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States, governments have long looked at their emigrants as sources of real and potential political clout. Viewing them as citizens of the nation-state despite their new addresses, they work to foster the migrants’ activism on the homeland’s behalf by according them special recognition, treatment, and privileges.²

What the scholars fail to recognize is that descendants of these emigrants also engage in transnational ties. The Taiwan government has made a myriad of attempts to curry the favor of native-born generations of Overseas Chinese, a policy that UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies professor L. Ling-chi Wang has dubbed “extraterritorial domination.” According

to a 1995 Amerasia Journal article by Wang, the Republic of China (ROC) has been almost obsessed with “retaining the Chinese cultural identity, if not political and economic loyalty” of all Chinese in the diaspora through a complex system of ideology, theory, and policy. After the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Nationalists, were relegated to the tiny island while their adversaries loomed large on the Mainland, fortified their efforts. Enter the Love Boat.³

The Study Tour is a 33 year-old Cold War baby born in 1966. Sponsored and staffed by Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission and the China Youth Corps, the program targets college-aged Overseas Chinese, serving them a smorgasbord of summer activities in hopes of “increasing their ability to use the Chinese language, to understand Chinese culture and history, and to see first hand the achievements of the Republic of China,” as stated in the itinerary handbook.⁴

Based on the steadily increasing numbers of participants each year, it would be hard to find a more popular and well-known program among ABC co-eds. The Study Tour started in 1966 with five people from the U.S. and Canada; the next year, there were 102. Since then, sign-ups have skyrocketed to 945 in 1989 and 1075 in 1997.⁵

So what exactly draws the big crowds to the Love Boat? When the students arrive, they do indeed encounter a slew of programs designed by the ROC bigwigs “to give the students a multi-faceted and deeper understanding of their motherland, that they may experience for themselves the true meaning of the phrase ‘blood is thicker than water’”—in other words, extraterritorial domination. Mandarin training, Chinese cultural classes such as folk dancing, stick fighting and zither playing, and field trips to local attractions like the National Palace Museum and Yang Ming Shan have all been part and parcel of the Love Boat over the past three decades. Talent shows, speech contests, and a student council of sorts spice up the mix. At the tail end of the five week stint, the students pile on buses for the “trip down South”—the “Tour” after the “Study.” Again, they hit the hot tourist spots—Sun Moon Lake, Hualien, Kenting’s National Park—and a few tepid ones, like the Kaohsiung Air Force Academy, all part of the “master plan.”⁶

But when school’s out, do “model minority” types *really* want to sit in the classrooms practicing their *bo po mo fo*’s? Some, like Angela Lee, a 1995 attendee, look forward to the chance to beef up their linguistic capabilities and cultural know-how, but those who sacrifice demerits (given as “punishment for breaking rules) for sleep are definitely not in the minority.⁷

Students have varied reactions, particularly to the language course. Leilynne Lau, a 1991 alumna, noted an improvement in her Chinese, but Angela Lee was disappointed with the result, believing the trip to be the “wrong setting,” leaving little time for homework. Tony Yang, a 1992 participant, concluded that he learned “very little,” adding that it was not so much due to the curriculum, “but the fact that everyone on campus spoke English and we were bused everywhere in our own group, never really being forced to speak Chinese for anything.”⁸

The impressions of the planned activities range from outright enthusiasm to sheer,

almost cynical, boredom. Much of this is probably linked to where the students grew up. Lillian Lee, an appreciative 1996 Love Boater, points out, “This program was meant for people that never had the Chinese culture, that was kind of like me, raised in Texas with no idea of what it’s like to be Asian. They want to show you exactly what it meant to be Chinese and how the culture is so full and vast....” On the other hand, a Southern California native says of her 1988 trip, “We’ve seen all that before. We used to go to Chinatown every weekend when we were kids.” Others with the “tell-me-something-I-don’t-already-know” attitude have more than likely visited Taiwan on previous occasions.⁹

The students and the administration differ on a lot more than just a thumbs up or down for the attempts to celebrate and reinforce Chinese-ness. Two such tugs-of-war are the perceptions of ethnic identity and homeland. Clearly, the KMT exercises “extraterritorial domination” by calling the participants “Overseas Chinese” rather than their personal preferences for “Taiwanese American”, “Chinese American,” or the generic “Asian.” The Nationalists also repeatedly refer to Taiwan as the “home-,” “mother-,” or “fatherland.” Some attendees, such as Glenn Mar, a 1984 alumnus, disagree with this designation. “The program, they’d say, ‘Welcome back. Welcome back to your homeland.’ And we all knew enough to realize, geographically, that was not our homeland, but they would say that to us.” So that had to make you think, what’s going on?,” asked Mar. The fact that participants hail from a number of places—North America, Europe, Africa, Australia, Central and South America—complicates the notions of identity and “home.”¹⁰

The most significant butting of heads, however, comes with the political motivations behind the Study Tour. Clearly, the Nationalists—booted out of the United Nations in the 70s—has always been interested in rallying the support of the campers—or face losing their sympathies behind the Bamboo Curtain. In a 1972 issue of the Asian American-interest Bridge magazine, for example, an official for the ROC’s San Francisco Consulate unabashedly explained, “We ask them if there is anything they can do diplomatically, through their own Government, to help us.” An orientation letter dated 19 May 1989 addressed to the participants’ parents warned, “Pro-Communist publications and dangerous drugs are strictly prohibited.” Even the name and purpose of co-sponsor China Youth Corps points to the Nationalists’ agenda: the literal English translation of their name is “Chinese Youth Anti-Communism Nation Saving Organization,” and their mission statement vows “to promote the concept of democracy” in Taiwan’s “fight against Communism.”¹¹

The administration delivers its message both blatantly and subtly on the tour. During the 70s and 80s, doctrination methods included daily flag raisings, singings of patriotic songs, visits to military bases, and Mainland refugee testimonies, all preaching a pro-Nationalist stance. Throughout the 90s, the Nationalists has continued its crusade with speakers and slide shows. Schenley Chen, who viewed a video during his 1995 trip, recalled a film, juxtaposing the ROC and PRC’s histories, was “obviously propaganda... It’s all negative negative negative about China, and here’s positives about Taiwan.” Mar described a similar slide show on the 1984 trip: “They said, in 1952 [sic], the government

of China moved to the island of Taiwan. Like it was it. Like they moved into a bigger house, or something... We didn't lose a war, or anything. We didn't get our butts kicked or anything. They didn't even mention Mao.”¹²

The government also rolls out the red carpet for the students—police-escorted motorcades and air-conditioned rooms, for example—as part of its strategy to up its international status. Subsidization of the trip is another aspect of the VIP treatment. This year, for example, the cost is astoundingly low—approximately \$400—considering that it covers nearly six weeks of room, board, tuition, entertainment, and travel.¹³

Participants definitely take notice. While 1989 alumnus David Hsu wondered “what they got out of sponsoring all these kids to visit,” Chen deduced, “Taiwan is promoting this trip at a reasonable price, in fact, probably a bargain basement price for us to pay in order to take a trip that would give us a mindset that when we got back to America... [we would] think Taiwan is great.”¹⁴

His remarks are very astute because the Study Tour is indeed aimed specially at Chinese Americans. The United States is the only country other than Canada that has consistently had student representation on the Love Boat every year since 1966. Also, ABCs comprise the majority of each cohort, and the bulk of the activities are conducted in English, rather than Spanish, German, or even Chinese.

But why put the red-white-and-blue Chinese on a pedestal? In a nutshell, this outreach is part of Taiwan’s larger plan to sway American foreign policy to its advantage. In his 1971 article, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” Robert O. Keohane suggested that many small and weak nations were able to influence the United States in the 50s and 60s in the context of the American-led worldwide anti-Communist movement, since the U.S. was aggressively interventionist at the time. The regimes of these smaller nations, including Taiwan, recognized this bargaining chip and sought to influence American leaders, sensitive to public opinion, by soliciting the support of their constituents, such Chinese Americans, with ingenious tools like the Love Boat. Some of these tactics remain in effect today.¹⁵

An economic agenda also underlies the Study Tour, since the ROC’s standing in international finance organizations is linked closely with its political status. The Nationalists have worked to encourage the flow of American capital into the ROC by including activities related to commerce and “economic progress” in the Study Tour itinerary such as visits to Taipei’s World Trade Center. In promoting itself as a bastion of capitalism, Western investment, and democracy, Taiwan implies that the PRC’s socialist system is inferior—an increasingly crucial point to make as the Mainland becomes more and more “liberal” and capitalistic, offering a vast, untapped market for American goods. Of these attempts, 1994 alumnus Garrick Yan simply stated, “Consider it a long infomercial.”¹⁶

The participants’ class and educational backgrounds further suggest that the Study Tour is in part an economically motivated program. Alumni themselves perceive their peers to be “upper middle class” and of “good pedigree[s].” The overwhelming majority are college students; the list of schools reads like an Asian parent’s ultimate dream—

UCLA, Cal, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, etc. According to Vincent Fan, a counselor on the 1994 trip, even the perceived status or prestige of applicants' institutions are important considerations in the selections process.¹⁷

For the Nationalists, selecting the "crème de la crème" increases the likelihood of having participants who will pursue careers that will allow them the capital to engage in transnational business practices and leisure activities to pad Taiwan's purse. Furthermore, they may have more access to political resources in the United States, such as influence on key figures or organizations, than the average Chinese American.

Still, even if alumni sympathetic to the ROC or its people do rise to positions of prominence, public support is not guaranteed. Monterey Park, California City Council-woman Judy Chu, a 1970 alumna, is a case in point. Since more than half of Chu's constituents are of Chinese ancestry of varying national origins, she focuses solely on American concerns. "As a local politician, I make a deliberate attempt to stay out of international politics, because people look at what I do," explained Chu. "If I go politically on the Taiwan side, then I may alienate those who are pro-China. That's not really my purpose here."¹⁸

Chu's comments point therefore to an important question: just how successful is the Study Tour in promoting Nationalists ideals? Not surprisingly, the results are mixed. A 1973 alumna, for example, saw that "capitalism was alive and living well in Taiwan. And... it didn't seem to, in my mind, benefit everybody." She returned home as a "confirmed Socialist." Similarly, Mar decided he wanted to go to China do "a little compare and contrast." Others emerge as staunch supporters of the Nationalists, but most probably would say that they are indifferent or more aware of the situation at best. In general, however, very few, if any, become activists on behalf of the island's plight.¹⁹

The Nationalists' inability to spur the majority of the students to advocate their views can be attributed first to the ways they present their information. Mar said that the OCAC's one-sided approach is ineffective "because Americans love to have a choice, and anyone telling you no, you have no choice... they're going to be met with more than skepticism." 1991 alumnus Alan Tien echoed similar sentiments, describing the "exaggerated glory" of the presentations as "a little gung ho for American tastes."²⁰

Interestingly, there is also little discussion on the Tour of native Taiwanese independence, which displeases some attendees. Ethelind Cheng, a 1996 alumna, and Jocelyn Wang, a 1997 alumna, both of whom identify as Taiwanese Americans, noted the OCAC's reticence on this issue, neither teaching Taiwanese language or acknowledging questions during lectures.²¹

The program's lack of political success can also be attributed to the lack of follow-up with participants as well as their general apolitical attitude. People are there, for the most part, to have fun; maybe they don't see how they can impact U.S.-Taiwan relations. Not everyone, of course, feel this way: 1994 alumna Felicia Sze expressed frustration at the lack of "valuable exchange" among her cohort. "I was trying to see if we could really try to build some sort of Chinese American movement," said Sze. "If anything... it really

disillusioned me for awhile.” If Sze had a hard time mobilizing her peers, what about the Nationalists?²²

To be fair, though, the Study Tour is often very successful in reinforcing the Chinese identities of the participants as well as fostering their interest in Chinese culture. Many return with arms full of Jacky Cheung CDs and a newfound fondness for boba milk tea. For 1989 alumna Ping Wei, an Arkansas native, the trip “was a critical point for self-discovery.” She transferred to a college with more Asians and changed her major from math to East Asian Languages and Civilizations as a result.²³

But it is the social nature of the Study Tour that truly takes the *dan gao*. Note the overwhelming evidence: first and foremost, the infamous “Love Boat” meat-market reputation, which kids, moms, and dads are all aware of (“It’s no accident that your parents tell you about this,” said Mar). The most memorable excursions for students are frequently the “extracurricular activities”—midnight runs to Kiss La Boca and 2 Kinky, shopping, eating, and other affairs that lead to gossip like “I heard that five girls got pregnant last year!”—rather than the classes and lectures.

The Study Tour has also resulted in countless lasting friendships that have led to a loose worldwide network of alumni. It is in many ways comparable to a fraternity or sorority. “... The entire experience itself... [is] like being initiated into a club of sorts where you can readily identify with a set of experiences (clubbing, drinking, skipping class, being brainwashed, etc.) when you meet someone else who went on the trip,” observed Cheng. The connections have also materialized into formal alumni groups, including the now-defunct CAUCUS and the current Monterey Park-based Study Tour Alumni Association (STAA). The activities of these groups—picnics, parties, ski trips—are predominantly social, again attesting to failure of the Nationalists agenda as well as the diversity of the members. As Pierre Wuu, founding director of STAA, explained, “We try to stay away from the political. Any non-profit, that’s probably a good idea.... We let other people make their own decisions.”²⁴

Considering the lack of U.N. protesters and other forms of Chinese American advocacy, why does the Love Boat continue to sail the open seas? Moreover, Taiwan’s political circumstances have changed significantly over the past 33 years—a growing pro-independence faction challenges the Nationalist’s long-standing goal of a Nationalist-dominated reunification with the PRC, for example. In addition, many Taiwanese tax-payers seem unhappy with what they perceive as an annual plague of disrespectful ABC locusts.

There seem to be several explanations. First, the Nationalists are far from abandoning their original mission and could be viewing the Study Tour as a purposeful, albeit indirect, far-reaching investment, the results of which may not be seen for decades to come. Second, as Joyce Hsu, a former Study Tour counselor, noted, Overseas Chinese pressure has kept the doors open. Ironically, then, Chinese Americans have wrested control of the program away from the Nationalists, who, after all, initially implemented the Tour as one facet of their “extraterritorial domination.” They now seem to dictate the logistics, appropriating the Love Boat for their own purposes. It has become such a significant part

of Chinese America that Chinese Americans insist on its continuation.²⁵

The Study Tour, therefore, is a prime example of conflicts between U.S.-born Asians and their ancestral nations over constructions of identity and their roles in international politics. A look at similar programs in other communities—the Nisei kengakudan Study Tours to Japan during the 1920s and 30s and the Korean American “Love Boats”—may shed more light on these questions. The future of the Study Tour is uncertain—each year reputedly seems to be the “last”—but it undoubtedly hinges on the continuing interest of Chinese Americans themselves.²⁶

The above article is drawn from my UCLA Asian American Studies MA thesis, “Chinese American Transnationalism Aboard the ‘Love Boat’: The Overseas Chinese Youth Language Training and Study Tour to the Republic of China, 1966-1997.” A slightly different version appears in the Summer 1999 issue of Gidra.

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FOOTNOTES

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1999 LOS ANGELES CHINATOWN ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH WALKING TOURS

To celebrate both California's sesquicentennial and the 1999 Asian Pacific Heritage Month, the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California offered free, docent-led walking tours of Los Angeles Chinatown each Friday, Saturday, and Sunday during the month of May to the general public. The tours were chosen as L.A. Weekly's "Learning Pick of the Week" for the weekend of May 1.

Both novice and experienced guides attended a training session in April, which included an informative session on docenting techniques presented by Donna Dickerson, volunteer services manager for the Autry Museum of Western Heritage and a discussion on aspects of Chinese culture facilitated by Angi Ma Wong. "Leading the walking tour is a good way to get involved with the Asian American community," said Laura Ortaliza, one of the new recruits. "I'm glad I signed up."

Over 350 visitors of all ethnic and racial groups participated in the program, including students from Mt. Washington, Solano Street, and Castelar Elementary Schools and the University of California, Irvine, residents of Chinatown, and visitors from as near as Monterey Park and as far as Palatine, Illinois. "As someone who lives in Chicago Chinatown," said Candy Truong, one of the tourists, "it was great to experience L.A.'s Chinatown in a more in-depth, personal setting." The kick-off event for the tours was held on Saturday, May 1, with a performance by the Asian American theatre company *hereandnow*. "The show was wonderful," said Kate Burgess, a member of the audience. "*hereandnow* does an excellent job of bringing Asian American stories to life."

The 1999 Heritage Month Tours were made possible by generous funding from the California Council for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Los Angeles City Councilmember Mike Hernandez, and the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles.

Special thanks to Ella Quan for being the "MVP" of the May tours. She kept detailed paperwork, handled scheduling and reservations, and was on hand to help each and every tour.

Much appreciation to the docents — Elsie Chan, Bill Chun-Hoon, Susan Dickson, Sean Kanamori, Irvin Lai, Don Loo, Gene Moy, Laura Ortaliza, Ella Quan, Cy Wong, Ellen Wu, Allison Yee, and Sue Yee.

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Gum Saan Journal solicits manuscripts that explore the historical, cultural, and humanistic aspects of Chinese American experiences, particularly relating to Southern California, as well as contemporary issues of relevance to the Chinese American community. *Gum Saan Journal* also publishes book, media, and exhibition reviews. Original work is preferred, but reprints of significance will be considered. Students and community members are especially encouraged to submit items for consideration.

Manuscripts should be approximate 3000 words in length; endnotes should be written according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. All text must be double-spaced in a clear, easy-to-read typeface on 8.5 x 11 inch white paper.

Submit two hard copies of the manuscript and one disk copy (Microsoft Word for PC preferred, Macintosh accepted) to Editorial Committee, *Gum Saan Journal*, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, PO Box 862647, Los Angeles, CA 90086-2647. If your manuscript is accepted for publication, you will be responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce any copyrighted materials (e.g. reprints, photographs) used in your article.

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The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California was organized in November 1975. The purposes of the society are: 1) to bring together people with a mutual interest in the important history and historical role of Chinese and Chinese Americans in Southern California; 2) to pursue, preserve, and communicate knowledge of this history, and 3) to promote the heritage of the Chinese and Chinese American community in support of a better appreciation of the rich, multi-cultural society of the United States.

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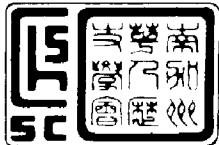
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“THREE-EYED YUAN-SHI”

The Story of My Father’s Chinese American Experience

by Miranda Y. Ko

Miranda Y. Ko is a second-year Linguistics major at UCLA.

She is currently working on a research project about the Opium Wars.

“In Chinese mythology there is a deity named Yuan-shi who resides in the Heaven of Jade Purity. He came into being as a merging of pure breaths and serves as a heavenly general, ruling over all of the other deities who live there. It was also said that he has a third eye between his brows; a symbol of good luck that also wards off evil spirits. You see this scar I bear between my brows? It is the result of a childhood accident that earned me the nickname of ‘Three-Eyed Yuan-shi.’ Now I don’t believe much in myths but I certainly have had much luck over the years...”

Wai Keung Ko

3 March 1999

My father, Wai Keung Ko, was born into a world of political turmoil and economic instability. The second of three sons of Zeng Ko and Lin Di Su, Wai Keung was born in a Guangzhou hospital on April 12, 1953. By that time, Communist officials were well in their way to transforming China into a Soviet model of socialist society and 1953 marked the beginning of The Five Year Plan, a “general program of transition to socialism.”¹ One of the main goals of the Five-Year Plan called for the doubling of Chinese industrial production, a feat which affected the lives of many factory workers, including Wai Keung’s parents.

The Ko family resided in a first floor penthouse apartment in the city of Guangzhou, where both Zeng and Lin Di were employed in a lantern factory which Zeng co-owned with several partners. Unaffected by the negative effects of political change, the family lived well for several years after Wai Keung’s birth from Zeng and Lin Di’s factory earnings and the three boys enjoyed relative comfort in their early childhood. However, this period of economic stability would not last for long. Explains Wai Keung:

The Chinese are superstitious about names and my father was no exception. He named his three sons “Wai Mun,” “Wai Keung,” and “Wai Guo.” My father wanted a fourth son which he would have named ‘Wai Fu’ but after my younger brother was born my mother felt that she was too old to have another baby. You

see, in Chinese the middle name “Wai” means “great,” and the latter parts of our names would have formed the words “Mun Keung Guo Fu,” or “People Strong, Country Rich.” There was never a “Wai Fu,” and so our family became poor.²

By the late 1950s, things took a bad turn for the Ko family when Zeng was denounced as a “rightist” in the anti-rightist movement of 1957. Charged with trying “to drive [the] country from the path of socialism to the path of capitalism” by the Party, persecuted rightists like Zeng had a “cap” placed on their records and many, including Zeng, had their business ownerships revoked and their salaries cut in half.³ Daily living became continually difficult as supplies began to be rationed:

Everyone was allowed 3½ “liang” of rice, oil, and coal per month, which we purchased at the city food hall with colored stickers.⁴ My parents had an earthen jar of peanut oil, which they had bought with meager savings from peddling villagers, and it was a most valuable commodity. I had two dogs, Little Black and Little White, and one day while they were playing they knocked over the jar and it shattered, spilling precious oil all over the floor. A month later, pets were prohibited by the Party and my parents threw a great feast, serving dog meat as the main course. I didn’t speak to them for two months.⁵

Wai Keung attended a local neighborhood lower (elementary) school with his brothers until he was twelve. It was 1965, the first year of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” and life in China was severely altered. From city to countryside, laws were imposed that affected students, intellectuals, and farmers alike.⁶ Wai Keung’s teachers, like other intellectuals, were denounced by “dazibao” (large character posters) and banished to “work teams” in the countryside.⁷ By 1965 Wai Keung had stopped attending school altogether.

The Communists took all of our teachers and we stopped going to school. For a couple of years, me and six other boys from my street went swimming everyday in the Ju Gong River, which was of course prohibited. We would climb onto the backs of the small cargo barges carrying vegetables and fish and then swim back across the banks. That was how I trained myself to be a strong swimmer, a skill that would change my life later on.⁸

Mao fever had spread across China early into the Cultural Revolution and by the end of its first year, Chairman Mao was looked upon as a god-like figure by Party supporters across the country. Taking advantage of this hysteria, Party officials saw the opportunity to revive China’s dormant “Communist Youth Leagues” by sponsoring “Long Marches” for Chinese youth in 1966.⁹ Offering free use of transportation and complimentary room and board during their stay, thousands of Chinese youth flocked to the city of Peking to gather at mass demonstrations, hoping for the chance to catch a glimpse of their hero, Chairman Mao. 14-year-old Wai Keung participated in a 1966 Long March:

All of us students wanted to go to Peking to see Chairman Mao. We couldn’t get any of the free transportation passes issued by the government so we decided to

backpack out of Guangzhou, hitchhike to Zhuoguai, and board a train from there. It took us four days to get to Zhouguai, and when we got to the train station we were so anxious that we hopped the first train in sight. It turned out that the train was bound for Peking but sported a different placard to deter students from getting on. We were lucky. We stayed in Peking for twenty-six days. At all of the demonstrations we sat on Peking's sidewalks, watching the Party officials cruise down the road in their Jeeps. We stayed until we were all told to go home, and we boarded the train back to Guangzhou. The walk home took two hours, but we were proud, strolling along with our Red Guard armbands.¹⁰

Author Liang Heng recounts a similar experience in his book, Son of the Revolution. Heng also took part in a 1966 Long March and upon seeing Chairman Mao in Peking, Heng "...[bawled] like a baby, crying out incoherently again and again, 'You are our hearts' reddest, reddest sun!"¹¹

Upon returning to Guangzhou from Peking in 1967, Wai Keung was met with more travel news. Like other boys his age, he would have to leave the city to go live at a people's commune in the remote China countryside. People's communes were first organized in the winter of 1957-58 for "mobilizing labour on a sufficiently large scale for carrying out water conservancy and irrigation projects"¹² but at the time of Wai Keung's enlistment in 1968 they had become major sources of production as well. Fused with "hsiangs," or basic village production units, communes provided crops, livestock, tree gum for rubber, and other raw resources for Party use. Organized during the five-year "Great Leap Forward" period that followed the end of the "Five-Year Plan," people's communes were intended by the Communist Party to continue the rate of production set by the Five Year Plan.¹³

Directed by the "Workers' Chairman Mao Thought Propaganda Teams," lower and middle-school graduates were sent "...up to the mountains and down to the countryside" to turn Mao's province into a "beautiful park" and achieve "revolutionary glory."¹⁴ Wai Keung chose a farming village named Jhu Hoy and he departed for the commune in the summer of 1968.

The age of enlistment was sixteen, and although I was only fifteen at the time, my parents didn't object since no one knew just how bad it would get out there in the countryside. My older brother did not go since he was in poor health and my little brother did not go because he was too young. So I left home, thinking it would be all fun and games; a real vacation.¹⁵

When Wai Keung arrived at the Jhu Hoy commune in the stifling summer of 1968, the village consisted of a series of primitive adobe mud huts and when he left for good five years later, Jhu Hoy boasted modern brick houses, hundreds of acres of gum trees, and a water irrigation system, all built with the sweat and labor of the hundreds of young men who toiled there. Wai Keung and his peers worked from sunrise to sunset at a series of tasks which included farming, constructing brick houses, digging water trenches and wells for irrigation, and raising livestock. They were given room and board but had to pay for their meals and necessities out of their monthly pay, which barely covered their expenses.

Trips home to visit family were allowed only once a year, and were limited to eighteen days. Overall, commune life was physically demanding for young men like Wai Keung:

Life in the commune was hard, especially for young boys who were beginning to go through puberty. We needed to eat, and they never gave us enough. For breakfast we had rice gruel flavored with a tablespoon of salt water, and for lunch and dinner we had a small bowl of rice with green vegetables sautéed in a bit of oil. We were hungry so we stole food anywhere we could find it. We stole sweet potatoes and pineapples from neighboring farmers and ate them secretly in the dark.¹⁶

Work on the commune was hard, but Wai Keung found ease in house construction. Houses in the commune had to be built from scratch and raw materials had to be gathered from around and within the commune. Wai Keung and the other young men would hike to nearby mountains and forests on foot to gather materials; rock and stone for making bricks and wood for door and window frames. Wai Keung worked on construction detail until his visit home in 1969.

Wai Keung was called home in 1969 by Zeng, who wanted the 16-year-old to return to Zeng's home village of Gong So San to care for his mother, who was terminally ill. Wai Keung stayed in Gong So San for a year until he was summoned back to the Jun Hoy commune in 1970. The Cultural Revolution had just ended and the country was slowly undergoing reform and consolidation.¹⁷ On his way back to Jhu Hoy from Gong So San Wai Keung was stopped by a patrolling Red Guard officer who asked for his residence card. Wai Keung's card was expired, and he was put into jail for a night. In the meantime, Zeng's lantern factory had been seized by the Communists and he, along with Lin Di and their two sons, was transferred to a mountain commune named Yung Yun. In 1973, when Wai Keung was twenty, he was allowed to visit his family there.

When I went to Yung Yun to visit my family I was introduced to a family named Jiao. They were known throughout the commune because they had a daughter who had unsuccessfully tried to escape to Hong Kong three times. I met her and she introduced me to her friend, Ling, who was planning to run away again. I decided then and there. I was going to Hong Kong.¹⁸

Hong Kong in the early 1970s was the ideal refuge for those hoping to flee Chinese Communism. Although it was still legally a British colony, Hong Kong had a Chinese population of 98 percent.¹⁹ The “open-door” capitalist policy of Deng Xiaoping’s new reformist regime in China and its inattention toward Hong Kong ensured the colony’s independent economic future and there was little worry of political repercussions as the Chinese Communist government and Hong Kong’s British colonial government had little, if any, interaction at all.²⁰

By the mid-1970s, Hong Kong’s population had nearly doubled to 4.7 million people, half of whom were immigrants from mainland China. Author Jan Morris describes Hong Kong as the “pressure valve”²¹ for China, and in the 1970s there were two main types of Chinese refugees: the Shanghaiese entrepreneurial elite who looked to take advantage of

Hong Kong's economic upsurge and impoverished proletariats like Wai Keung who wished to make new lives for themselves.²²

Access to Hong Kong from China was uncontrolled until 1940, when Red Guard soldiers were posted at its borders at the South China Sea to prevent escape.²³ Refugees attempting escape who were caught by the Guards were punished by extensive jail sentences before being sent back to their home villages. The actual escape route was harrowing, involving a ten-hour swim across the frigid South China Sea.

While at Yung Yun Wai Keung had used the excuse of a back injury to request an additional eighteen days to be added to his family visit. With the added time, Wai Keung and his new friend Ling prepared for their escape to Hong Kong. First they created false identification papers for themselves from legitimate copies Ling had managed to obtain, imitating the calligraphy and carving imitation seals out of wood.

We left Yung Yun with our false papers and enough food rations for ten days. That was how long it was supposed to take for us to walk to the bank of the South China Sea. The home-made compasses we had were poor, and we ended up walking for sixteen days. When we arrived at the coast, we were hungry and scared. We had timed the trip so that the moon would not be full when it came time to swim. Since we were six days behind, we had to swim in the daytime, when the coast guards would be resting.²⁴

Wai Keung and Ling reached the Hong Kong shore on March 31, 1973, after sixteen days of walking through Chinese countryside and two hours of swimming across the South China Sea. Wai Keung was taken to his aunt's house in North Point by a friend of Ling's and he lived there for seven months while taking on odd carpentry jobs. He eventually found an apartment of his own in North Point and lived there until he married Sau Wan Lo in 1979.

Wai Keung and Sau Wan had three children; Miranda in 1980, Rita in 1982, and Bill in 1983. The family lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the commercial district of Quarry Bay for four years before moving to a thirtieth-floor high rise apartment in the more suburban Chai Wan in 1985. By this time, Wai Keung was the owner of a successful interior design and carpentry business and was able to purchase the Chai Wan apartment.

In the early 1980s, citizens of Hong Kong began to seriously ponder the fate of their city. Resumption of Chinese sovereignty was a looming issue and the impending hand-over was a little more than a decade away.²⁵ In 1987 the Hong Kong government proposed a "White Paper" of electoral procedures that suggested the Hong Kong people be consulted over the question of direct elections but it was criticized by the Chinese government as being contrary to previous declarations between China and Great Britain. The "White Paper" was also a complex document that few Hong Kong citizens understood, and it served to broaden the already uncertain state of Hong Kong's future.²⁶

Nobody knew what was going to happen after 1997. We didn't know what the take-over would bring. The one thing I was afraid of most was restriction of movement by the Chinese government. Look at my parents. They can't leave

Guangzhou without a lengthy visa application process, even for a vacation in Hong Kong. I wanted my family to be able to travel without restriction. There were so many places I wanted visit: Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines. I was afraid we wouldn't be able to once China took over.²⁷

Many in Hong Kong began leaving the “Fragrant Harbor” for the United States, Canada, and Australia in the early 1980s. Under the amendment of the Immigration Act of 1965 in 1981, an annual quota of 20,000 immigrants from the People’s Republic of China were allowed into the United States and many, including several of Wai Keung’s family members, were taking advantage of this newfound opportunity.²⁸ Wai Keung’s younger brother Wai Guo had married a Chinese-American and immigrated to California from Guangzhou in 1985.

In 1987 the annual United States immigration quota for Hong Kong had increased from 600 to 5,000 and Wai Keung’s brother encouraged him to move the family to California.²⁸ In May of 1988 Wai Keung obtained travel visas from the US consulate in Hong Kong and the Ko family moved to Sylmar, California in July of 1988, becoming a part of the massive group of middle- and upper-class Chinese who left the political uncertainty of their homeland in the late 1980s to seek opportunities abroad.²⁹

The settlement pattern of the Ko family differed from other Chinese-Americans in that they did not fit either pattern of the “modern” Chinese-American family that immigrated to the United States after 1965. Wai Keung settled his family directly into the suburbs instead of Chinatown, breaking the molds of the “downtown” families, direct Chinatown settlers, and the “uptown” families, those who have moved into the suburbs from Chinatown.³⁰ The Ko family resided in suburban areas in Sylmar and Glendale before settling in Valley Village, a middle-class neighborhood near Sherman Oaks, California.

Wai Keung continued working in interior design and carpentry and in 1998 re-established his ties with China by starting a Chinese granite import business, following the trend of Chinese American involvement in small businesses that started with the mom and pop grocery stores and restaurants of the late 1800s.³¹ A business trip to inspect granite mines in mainland China in 1997 marked Wai Keung’s first visit to Guangzhou in more than twenty years. He reflects upon his China trip:

What a difference twenty years can make. Guangzhou was like a little Hong Kong. There were McDonald’s restaurants everywhere. I even saw a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. But as modern as Guangzhou had become, some things never change. The traffic was still congested, the city still overcrowded, and I think that it has gotten even dirtier since I lived there, if that’s possible.³²

Although Wai Keung’s experience fully qualifies him as an Asian American, he himself does not fully embrace the identity. Like many other recent immigrants, Wai Keung views himself as a Chinese living in America, an identity described by author L. Ling-chi Wang as “luoye guigen,” a Chinese term meaning “leaves that must eventually...return to their roots in Chinese soil.”³³ This definition is reinforced by the fact that although Wai Keung has been living in the United States for over ten years, many

aspects of his life are traditionally Chinese. He reads the Chinese newspaper, eats traditional Chinese food, and instills many traditional Chinese values upon his family.

Wai Keung's attitude toward his homeland and adopted home is not uncommon among Chinese Americans, as Chinese immigrants have always displayed resistance toward complete cultural assimilation and a tendency to exclude themselves from larger society.³⁴ For Wai Keung, his resistance toward cultural change stems from his preference for doing things the "Chinese" way, as he explains:

There are some strange things about America that I don't understand. I think the biggest surprise for me was the lack of respect between kids and their elders. Even the Chinese kids here don't know any traditional manners. When we were young we had to acknowledge all of our elders when we saw them. Here the kids don't do that; they hardly even say "hi." You wouldn't have that in Hong Kong, or China.³⁵

At present, Wai Keung is uncertain about his future in America. He has established a secure living for his family, but he feels that he will return to Hong Kong after his retirement. Like many other Chinese Americans before him, Wai Keung saw the "Gold Mountain" as a sanctuary from political uncertainty and found it to be a land of opportunity for himself and his children. But like a leaf returning to its roots, Wai Keung will visit China this summer on a business trip. "I think it does feel like going home again," he states, "because my heart belongs to China."³⁶

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Asian American Studies 130E
Chinese American Experience
Professor Ellen D. Wu
March 18, 1999

FOOTNOTES

1. Jean Chesneaux, *China - The People's Republic, 1949-1976* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) 57; George Moseley, *China Since 1911* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 120-121.
2. Wai Keung Ko, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, 3 March 1999.
3. Moseley, *China Since 1911*, 133.
4. A "liang" is a Chinese unit of measurement equivalent to approximately 1.76 ounces.
5. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
6. John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 316-317; Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 767.
7. Chesneaux, *China*, 141; Jean Daubier, *A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 82.
8. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
9. Chesneaux, *China*, 160; Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution*, 323-324.
10. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
11. Liang Heng & Judy Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 124.
12. Moseley, *China Since 1911*, 144.
13. Chesneaux, *China*, 88-89; Moseley, *China Since 1911*, 144-145.
14. Liang Heng & Judy Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*, 142.
15. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.

16. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
17. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution*, 342.
18. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
19. William van Kemenade, *China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inc.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) 61.
20. William van Kemenade, *China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inc.*, 60-61.
21. Jan Morris, *Hong Kong* (New York: Random House, 1988) 309.
22. William van Kemenade, *China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inc.*, 60.
23. Jan Morris, *Hong Kong*, 309.
24. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
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26. Frank Welsh, *A Borrowed Place - The History of Hong Kong* (New York: Kodansha International, 1993) 517.
27. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
28. Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Americans." *Asian Americans - Contemporary Trends and Issues* pp. 58-94 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995) 67.
29. L. Ling-chi Wang, "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States." *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Tu Wei-Ming, pp. 185-212 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 197; Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Americans." 67.
30. Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Americans." 71.
31. Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Americans." 77.
32. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
33. L. Ling-chi Wang, "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States." 187.
34. Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Americans." 85.
35. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.
36. Ko, interview by author, 3 March 1999.

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3. Fairbank, John King. *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.
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CHINESE AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN ON THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

by Kerry Brinkerhoff

*Park Ranger at the Golden Spike National Historic Site
and President of The Friends of the Native Americans of Northern Utah*

Some 13,000 or more years ago prehistoric Asian families wished their pioneering friends and family good-bye as they headed off to a new land. Many crossed a land bridge that would bring them to present day America. It seems only right that some day they would meet again and that the encounter in America would be recorded. The next generation of Asian pioneers in America would be in the 1800s. They were traveling to America to work in the Gold Mountains. By the early 1860s the Chinese in California were being legislated and driven out of the gold fields. When the Central Pacific Railroad started hiring Chinese workers they easily found employment, and at a good pay for the day (now that they could no longer work in the gold fields). It seems only right that both the Chinese and the American Indians would call the new railroad the "Iron Road" and it would be on that Iron Road that the two people would once again meet.

In California, bigotry and cruel treatment was not directed only toward the Chinese but also to the Native Americans. In 1863, the Anglos of Sacramento Valley rounded up the Native Americans and sent them to reservations. However the Anglos also were using Native Americans for slaves, so they kept the healthy ones for free labor. It is estimated that California had over 10,000 Native American slaves and that around 4,000 were children. So as the railroad started in Sacramento in 1863 I'm sure no Native Americans could be found in the area, and if there were any that were free I'm sure they were hiding from Anglo Society.

The government knew that the Central Pacific Railroad would be encountering Native Americans in the Nevada deserts. The Central Pacific Railroad was offered Army support for protection from the Native Americans. The first encounter that I can find recorded happened as the Chinese workers moved out of the Sierra Mountains into the Nevada flatlands. It was said that a party of Chinese workers, working on the grade ahead of the tracklayers, was attacked by a war party of Paiute Indians. One worker was wounded as the others got away to safety. Central Pacific dignitaries were sent to meet with the Chiefs and offer them treaties. They were warned if they gave the railroad problems that the railroad had a great army of men and would defeat them. They were offered free lifetime passage on the trains, the chiefs got first class, and the others were to ride on the freight cars. They were also offered jobs. The Central Pacific hired both Paiute and Shoshoni workers as they went through their territory. The Central Pacific used both Native American men and women. The only women recorded as working on the Central Pacific Railroad were Native American. It was written by an observer of the day that those Native

American women were stronger than the men in the backbreaking work. The Central Pacific also hired Chief Winnemucca and his tribe to be tourist attractions. People traveling across the country could see a traditional Native American tribe. Many travelers later would write about Native American working and riding the railroad in the Nevada area. They either criticized the practice or talked about how it added to the romanticism they felt they would see in the West.

The Paiute and Shoshoni worked along side the Chinese workers. One of the most interesting stories of this association was a trick played on the Chinese by the Native Americans. The Native American workers told the Chinese workers that in the Nevada Desert were great lizards large enough to swallow a man whole. The next day when the foremen got up the Chinese were gone. They had left in the night. The foremen had to chase down the Chinese on their horses. It took the foremen some time to convince the Chinese there were no dragons in North America before they could get them back to work. The Native Americans also tell stories of the Chinese. Mae Parry, Shoshoni Matriarch, tells of her grandfather Yeager Timbimboo who worked on the railroad in the Promontory area in 1869.

The railroad only fed the white workers, so Yeager asked the Chinese for food. They offered him food, but had no bowl, so he took the hot rice in his hands. It burned his hands and he dropped it. He grabbed his knife and cut the Chinese man's queue (long braid of hair worn hanging down the back of the neck) off his head. Leland Pubigee, Shoshoni Elder, told me of stories he has been told about gambling and bronco busting with the Chinese. Also the Shoshoni of this area talk about grandparents who worked on the railroad who called the Chinese the "Yellow Ant People". They were most impressed with their industry, which reminded them of the hardworking industrious ant colony. The Chinese also have stories to tell. Bill Chew and Johnny Yee have told me about young Lee Sing, orphaned, when his father was killed while working on the Central Pacific railroad. He was adopted into a Shoshoni tribe and became known as "Sharp eyes". Murray Lee wrote of his grandfather Lee Yik-Gim, who was nicknamed "The Elephant" because of his size. He was captured by a Native American tribe and became a part of the tribe; living with them for two years and becoming a minor chief of the tribe.

As I learn of these stories I think there must be more out there and I hope that with time we can gather many more of these stories. I believe that the Chinese workers and Native American workers had a great deal in common. They both were misunderstood, massacred, and harassed. They both gave up much to help build a country that they would not be given equal right to. I believe that to put their story together is to honor both people. It helps their children to be proud of the sacrifices and the work their fathers did before them. Of all the people impacted by the building of a transcontinental railroad, the Native Americans would be the most affected. They were fighting to keep from losing their home and culture. Others fought to protect the rails to bring in outsiders. Still others worked on the railroad, hoping those jobs would help them to become a part of the new civilization. The building of this railroad would help the new civilization on its road to becoming the

greatest nation on earth. However, that great push to make America a single nation would begin the extermination of the Native Culture. The government was given the means to force Native Americans onto reservations. It also would bring on more discrimination against the Chinese who had worked to build that railroad system. The Chinese workers were the most important link in making this country successful, with their hard work and determination in building the rail system in America. However, in the end, the people who would give the most in building this country to greatness would still not be given a piece of the pie.



CHSSC Members at Promontory Summit, Utah, May 10, 1998

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