

Writing the Past in the Present

Henry Yu

My grandmother was born in 1918. This is what my family has always known. Her government ID cards list her name, Suey Fun Low, followed by her date of birth, October 28, 1918, and each year we counted out the candles for her birthday cake accordingly. When she turned eighty years old several years ago, she had two birthday parties—one with all her friends and relatives in Vancouver, and another larger one with all our relatives in Zhongshan County in southern China, just north of Macau. So it was a bit of a surprise when I discovered that she was actually born a year later in 1919.

This summer, I attended a pair of conferences in Australia on the history of trans-Pacific Chinese migrations. I was in my guise as a scholar of Asian migrations to the Americas, and the conferences were a chance to collaborate with researchers in Australia and New Zealand who have been doing wonderful work on Chinese Australian and Chinese New Zealander history. While at the conferences, Michael Williams, an Australian researcher who is completing his Ph.D. at the University of Hong Kong, was explaining how to use the National Archives of Australia to find immigration files for Chinese migrants. I had only a two days free outside of the conferences, thus I had not expected to be able to do any historical research on this trip. But seeing how efficiently organized the Australian archives were, I decided to use one of my off days to search for the records for my great-grandfather, who had spent almost his entire life in Australia. I knew that he had gone there as a teenager, returning only twice to China, fathering a daughter each time. After the birth of my grandmother (the younger of these two children), he left for Sydney, never to return. Other than his Chi-

HENRY YU is Associate Professor of History and Asian American Studies at UCLA. He is the author of *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

nese name and the dates of his trips to China, which coincided with the birth years of my grandmother and her sister, I had little other information with me.

It was quite surprising that I found his records. It was even more surprising that it took less than an hour, perhaps the shortest time it has ever taken in my professional career as an historian to find a document in the archives (those who have ever done any archival research will know that it is a laborious, time-intensive process that has a very low yield rate). Perhaps most surprising was that according to the Australian records, my great-grandfather had returned for his second, and last, trip to China between January and December 1919. Given the biological realities of conception and birth, my grandmother could not have been born in 1918—she must have been born in 1919.

I open this issue of *Amerasia* with this story because it helps introduce some of the dominant themes of the articles that follow. First of all, the difference between 1918 and 1919 is a difference between memory and history, between the understandings of the past with which each of us operate in everyday life and the official recorded histories that government clerks and professional historians produce. Accuracy is one of the goals of scholarly history, but it is not always a necessity for personal and family memories to have meaning. Historian Carl Becker once asked whether it mattered that the Declaration of Independence was not actually signed on July 4, 1776—that, in fact, historical records showed that the final signature was probably inked on some other day. There was a difference between the historical date that Americans commemorated as the moment of their national creation and the date that scholarly researchers knew to be accurate, but Becker urged professional historians to not ignore the meaningful importance of our collective memories of the past, even if these beliefs were factually wrong.¹ Becker emphasized how everyday people made sense of their lives by sorting things from the past, creating a sense of who they were in the present. This process of historical understanding meant active re-collection, at the same time discarding what was forgotten as meaningless. Historians too create their stories about the past while living in the present, and if metaphors of remembrance, re-collection, and retrieval have resonance in these acts of creation, it is because history can only come alive through this retrospective sifting.

It is the meaning of the past in the present—the ways that historical narratives are created in the present-day—that is the cen-

tral theme of this issue. Whether commemorating historical events and giving them a renewed meaning, or looking back and weighing the legacies of an individual's life, the past is, as one of my students once said, "where we have all come from. . ." But there are many levels at which history operates, and it is the need for historians to appreciate these many levels of historical existence in both their research and their teaching that is the major point of this introduction. The political history of nations and the family histories of students may seem worlds apart, but it is in tracing the connections between these two that historians can create a powerful relevance for their interpretations of the past.

The Remembered and the Forgotten

Political struggles over what the past is to mean in the present have been central to Asian American Studies from its very beginnings. History books that left Asians out of the national story of the U.S. were attacked as exclusionary and incomplete. Charges against the inaccuracy of such narratives became a rhetorical weapon to change the ways that history was researched and written. This project is still incomplete and continues to be fought in schools and museums and local historical societies across the country. However, simple dichotomies between "true" historical narratives and ones that are factually incomplete or "wrong" can obscure rather than clarify the ways in which these questions are about political struggle as much as they are about truth and falsity.

Historical narration itself has been so aligned with the politics of nation formation (in particular the politics of incorporation and assimilation that have marked settler nations such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, and many Latin American countries), that we are sometimes blinded to the stories that fit uncomfortably within such national histories. The narrative shape of Asian American histories have long been dominated by desires for inclusion into the general history of the United States (the term "Asian American," coined by Yuji Ichioka decades ago as a politicized term of coalition at that moment, generally uses "Asian" to modify the central subject of "American"). The political goals of legal and civil rights for Asian Americans has been accompanied by rhetorical claims to be equal citizens, sharing a common history with other Americans. However, one of the costs of this emphasis on national inclusion has been the loss of other kinds of stories, and the eclipsing of other kinds of politics.

Many Asian American histories, for instance, have emphasized

the one-way journey of migrants. Locations of Asian origin served as the back-story for the real setting of the movie, the United States. Leaving the old-country, the journey across the sea, adjusting to the new home were the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Often the only variation other than the specific details were whether the story was a triumphant one with a happy ending (heroes struggle against and overcome adversity), or a tragic one with a sad ending (heroes struggle against adversity and are crushed), or sometimes a bitter tale of resistance that seemed endless (struggle and more struggle). It was the United States, and its willingness or unwillingness to accept people of Asian descent, that provided the framing device. However, if national histories are only one kind of story—albeit powerful stories often supported by state governments—what kinds of stories are we forgetting if we only watch the same movie over and over again?

My grandmother's story spanned nations. She was born in southern China, into a family that was well accustomed with sending sons overseas. Other than her father in Australia, she also had relatives in Trinidad, Hawai'i, the U.S., and Canada. Michael Williams, the Australian scholar who helped me find my great-grandfather's immigration files, discusses in his doctoral research family migration in Zhongshan county, of generations of sons going to Hawai'i, or to the U.S., or to Australia—and how such movements were a kind of investment. As Williams, Madeline Hsu, Yuen-fong Woon, and others have suggested in their work on rural villages marked by migration networks, family strategies in choosing where a son should go could encompass many nations, from Australia and New Zealand and Hawai'i, all the way through the Americas.² My great-grandmother mortgaged her land in China to pay for her younger brother's passage to Trinidad, and my great-grandfather loaned money to his son-in-law's cousin to move from Victoria, B.C. to Sydney, Australia to open a restaurant. As Adam McKeown and Chan Kwok Bun have observed, migration could be an investment strategy, borrowing the price of passage in the hopes of a long-term return of remittances and savings. Paul Siu discussed in his study of Chinese laundry men in Chicago in the 1930s that the basic plan for many of these men was to make enough money to send back regular remittances and to eventually go home rich.³ For a woman, marriage to an overseas man could be a financial opportunity, becoming a family partner in a long-term investment plan, and both my grandmother and great-grandmother married not just men, but into a village economy supported by

My grandmother Suey Fun Low (1938).



Photograph courtesy of Henry Yu



Photograph courtesy of Henry Yu

My great-grandfather Low Lin (1918). He was also known by an English name Allen, which was likely a transliteration of "Ah-Lin."

regular dividends from overseas.

These were powerful links of trust, loyalty, and dependency—links that could survive decades of physical separation. That these links could be forged and weather the erosion of time is remarkable. I used to marvel at how my grandparents and their parents before them each remained true to their family commitments, clinging to memories of a childhood village long unseen or to a husband long gone. I often wondered which was harder—the withering effects of lonely work in a laundry, a restaurant, or a market garden far away from home, or living alone amongst your husband's relatives, your survival dependent upon the money he sent. During World War II and the Cold War of the 1950s, my grandfather's money, earned through a hard life in the kitchen of an Alaskan cruise ship, could not get through, and my grandmother scratched out a difficult subsistence in China. When she finally joined my grandfather in Canada in 1964, she brought along a twenty-seven-year-old daughter who had never met her father.

If these links survived the corrosive effects of nationalist conflicts and the flames of ideological Cold War, the history of these links has not always survived within the frameworks of national histories. In my own family the stories about my great-grandfather, who had left his home village for Australia when he was fifteen years old, came to me as snatches about his owning a grocery store, and how he had married an Aboriginal woman and had a son by her. I glimpsed other relatives through cautionary tales and faded pictures—my grandmother's uncle who died choking on a duck bone served as a warning to not eat so quickly, an old photo of my grandmother's cousin in Trinidad was the first and only indication to me that someone Chinese could look like Dean Martin.

The unorganized memories of my family are in distinct contrast with the orderly progressions of nationalist histories. The former is contained in the oral transmissions of storytelling and gossip, riddled with half-remembered details and unexplained linkages; individuals can be lost to the family, cut off from the collective memory by imposed or self-chosen exile. In contrast, histories of nations like the United States have the solid stability of written texts, a literary crafting that gives every small thing a larger meaning within the whole. Here, individuals either contribute to the unfolding progress of that nation's history, or they are excluded as meaningless and irrelevant. My family's memories, strewn around the Pacific, do not fit well into national histories. There are ways that my great-grandfather could be made a part of Austra-

lian history, and my grandmother a part of Chinese history and maybe Canadian history. Both of them could even be brought into a greater United States history through their connection to me and my thirteen-year sojourn in the U.S. I am sure I would still recognize them, and perhaps they might even become heroic figures: immigrants struggling to make it, to find a new home, to belong. But in turning their complicated lives into the footnotes to a larger national narrative, something would be lost in the translation.

The Spoken and the Written

National histories have marked human bodies, branding them with dominant modes of inclusion and exclusion—nation, race, gender, class, sexuality. European and American colonial expansion across the Pacific and into Asia transformed categories of belonging for peoples living there—they became colonial subjects, or re-invented themselves as national citizens in overthrowing colonial rule. Labor recruiters enticed migrants to move great distances, forcing the creation of new modes to understand these bodies in new places. As my grandmother and great-grandfather migrated, their bodies were classified and simplified in meaning, whether from the countings and categorizations of Customs and Immigration officers who saw them as laborers, as merchants, or as Asiatics ineligible for citizenship by race, or perhaps at another point as potential Americans, Canadians, or Australians. When we look at government records, it is easy for us to see how migrant bodies bear the stamps of belonging—they cross borders and acquire identification papers, visas, passports. Most of these markings are imposed, but whether they are connected to larger stories about national belonging and exclusion, there are still other stories that can also be told about trust and abandonment, of hope and despair, about the dreams of gold and home that Madeline Hsu so eloquently captured in her study of Chinese migrants.

In the immigration files of the Australian Archives, and of those in Canada, the United States, Trinidad, Cuba, Mexico, we could find countless stories of men like my great-grandfather and connect to them other men and women, linked by family networks and village relations and business ties. Hundreds of thousands of men left Guangdong province in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to go overseas to work. Many returned to China to marry and have children, going out again and again, leaving wives and children at home. Each individual story is different, but there is a larger history within which these individual stories start to form

patterns, stories of a transnational network of family relations not easily explained or even told by national tales of belonging.

This is not to say, of course, that we should replace national histories with family histories, but rather, to emphasize how they can be two very different kinds of stories. That the second is usually associated with the realm of orally transmitted memories, while the first is inked in literate books, is a distinction that bears some examination. What are we trying to do when we convert the stories of migrants from Asia and their descendents in the United States, or of the native inhabitants of the Pacific Islands, which are overwhelmingly collected from oral sources, into the narrative forms of national histories of belonging? The collecting of orally transmitted histories for native peoples in Hawai'i and the Pacific, often centered on the genealogies of familial descent, plays a vital role in sovereignty movements, and there are many lessons to be learned from these processes of re-establishing communal links to a history often erased or distorted by the textual commands of colonial schooling. The texts of national belonging are not the only way to narrate who we are and how we relate to each other.

I am not arguing for the displacing of national settler histories by a set of diasporic histories centered upon discrete population migrations (such as the "Chinese," the "Japanese," the "Filipino," etc., that are somehow linked by familial or putative blood ties to some geographic site of origin). We cannot escape the one by embracing the other. The politics of nationalism exist as powerfully today as they did when my great-great-grandfather left China looking for work, and our stories have been as much written by nations as they have been gossiped about by families. Rather, I am arguing that in thinking about history on multiple levels, and as the intersection of a number of political projects (whether nationalist, anti-colonial, or race-, class-, gender-, or sexuality-based), we bring alive the "present politics of the past." Highlighting the ties that bind us to each other, whether familial or communal or national, and exploring how they intersect allow us to see how our devotions are often emotional in a powerfully personal way.

In my Introduction to Asian American History class at UCLA, I follow a technique I first learned in Michael Omi's class at UC Berkeley: I always assign an oral history paper as a way of giving students a chance to explore the connections between an individual's life and the historical processes which have shaped his or her history. Often, students choose to interview an older relative or a family friend. By trying to understand the historical contexts for a person's

life, students come to understand how their own lives have been shaped and structured by larger forces. The connection between an individual's oral history—a series of highly personal memories narrated through a series of stories—and the general historical patterns narrated in textbooks provide a foundational cement for students in their analysis of Asian American history. For a similar purpose, I assign a number of films in my class.

Documentaries such as Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* and Curtis Choy's *The Fall of the I-Hotel* offer compelling visual representations of history, providing a visceral impact which can have a powerful personal resonance. I am always amazed by the emotional responses that these films can provoke in students—many are in tears, others are angry. In the seminar discussions that follow the viewing, many students remark that they now understand issues surrounding anti-Asian racism, class conflict, and political activism much more viscerally than before. Films can trigger emotions in complex ways, sometimes providing the opportunity for activating students into the politics of coalition. First-year students now entering UCLA, for example, were not yet born when Vincent Chin died, and thus the film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* is an effective way of conveying the widespread anger that followed his killing, and thus why it triggered the creation of pan-Asian political alliances. I often save the showing of *The Fall of the I-Hotel* until the last week of class because it creates such a powerful sense of what activism can accomplish. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the International Hotel this summer, Julie Vo, one of the students from my class, took part in the commemorations. She linked her experience of the march at the former site of the I-Hotel with the mediated memories provided by the film: "As we continued down Kearny Street, it was then that the film came back to me, flashes of the scenes reminding me of the story of the manongs and their history." Vo remarked that she "could only imagine what it must have felt like to be there on that night in 1977," but the film played a powerful role in that imagining. The linkages between personal feelings and political activism can be messy, and those who have apprehensions about such messiness, who believe that all politics should be based upon the calm calculation of rational interests, will undoubtedly shrink from what they see as emotional excess. But without regard for the persuasions of personal involvement, the power of history would be misapprehended.

History is usually written as if the past wrote itself, and the his-

torian is just the instrument, channeling the voices of the past in a calm professional voice. If there is one powerful contribution that Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Studies have made to the study of history, it is to place at the center of knowledge production the position of the producer, and to be cognizant of the political purposes of that production. Self-indulgence and narcissism are not political acts, but if the inclusion of the personal reinforces the interpreter's purposes in writing history, then the detached, omniscient pretenses of so much historical writing will be more readily revealed. In other words, one of the most compelling attributes of Asian American Studies is its encouragement of a personal connection between the studier and the studied. Not all studies should be researched and written this way, but it is out of these connections that a strong community politics is built.

I will end this introduction as I began it—with my grandmother. On my last morning in Sydney, Australia, I took the train across the harbor to North Sydney, looking for the address, 100 Walker Street, where her father had owned a grocery store. I had been cautioned that there would be little trace of any building dating from 1919, since the area (at the time mostly market gardens farmed by Chinese producing vegetables for the Sydney markets) had been substantially redeveloped in the period after 1937 when the famous Harbour Bridge had been built connecting Sydney and North Sydney, and again during the 1970s when office buildings, high rise apartments, and other skyscrapers arose. I went with little hope of finding any trace of his presence, just to visit perhaps the ground where he had lived and worked. Exiting the train station, the area was precisely as I had been warned it would be—glass facades adorning recently built concrete and steel. Passing the rising street numbers—32 Walker, 46 Walker—I expected little. At 88 Walker Street I saw the old North Sydney Fire Station, built in 1895, which was now a Malaysian restaurant. The building was intact, however, with the date marking its presence through the years that my great-grandfather lived nearby. He would have passed the fire station almost every day, and as I stopped to touch the walls that he may have touched, I felt a little closer to the ground upon which he had stood. Another fifty feet down the road, a new office building occupied 100 Walker Street. It had clearly replaced a half a block of existing buildings. A sign announced that a Methodist Church had stood there from 1931 until 1970. Had the

church replaced his grocery store? Or had it arose next to it? A bank machine stood near the entrance to 100 Walker Street, and since I needed money to get to the airport, I went to make a withdrawal. As twenty dollars slipped out, I was struck by the thought that this money came to me from hallowed ground. Staring at the orange Australian bill in my hand, I suddenly became convinced that I needed to make an offering of some kind. There was a small plot of ornamental bushes in front of the building, a patch of green amidst the grey concrete. Taking the last dollar coin in my pocket, I dropped it into the bushes as an offering and bowed my head three times in respect.

My mother explained on the phone later in the week that when she told my grandmother that I had visited the site of her father's store, and that I had made an offering before leaving, my grandmother began to quietly cry. I remembered that my grandmother over the years had occasionally spoken to me about someday going to Australia, but she had only mentioned it as a sightseeing trip, to go play (*wan*). Now it made much more sense. Her father had gone to Australia in 1895 at the age of fifteen, and when he died in 1947 she had lost touch with her half-brother in Sydney. My mother suspected that my grandmother had always wanted to make a pilgrimage, to pay respects to her father and perhaps meet this lost side of her family. In recent years, my grandmother could no longer make the trip—she had suffered a stroke and was now bedridden. To my mother, the silent tears meant many things—that my grandmother was relieved that I had gone in her stead, that she could now be at peace. Perhaps, my mother speculated, my grandmother also felt at peace that she herself would be remembered, that my pilgrimage signaled future remembrances when she herself was gone. My mother also believed that there were ties that only people who have known them can understand, that sometimes people are connected. A daughter understands her mother's tears. My grandmother helped raise me when I was a child, when my mother was working long hours cleaning motel rooms, and even though I had not planned or expected to find my great-grandfather when I went to Australia, she believed it was no coincidence that I had. How did my mother explain it? That sometimes there are ties that cannot be explained, ties that go through the heart. Two weeks after I left Australia, my grandmother passed away. She knew I was returning from Los Angeles to Vancouver that day and managed to wait until I arrived from the airport so that I could hold her hand during her last hour.

Officially, my grandmother was born in 1919, but in our memo-

ries and on the headstone we will remember her by, she was born on October 28, 1918.

Notes

I would like to give thanks to all the contributors who made this volume possible, and to the editorial and production staff of *Amerasia*—Russell Leong, Mary Uyematsu Kao, and Brandy Liên Worrall—for their hard work in putting together this special issue. My thanks also to co-guest editor Mae Ngai for putting together the section commemorating Vincent Chin's murder.

1. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932), 221-236.
2. Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Michael Williams, "Destination *Qiaoxiang*," Ph.D. diss., University of Hong Kong, 2002; Yuen-fong Woon, *Social Organization in South China, 1911-1949* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1984). My thanks to Henry Chan, John Fitzgerald, Helen Fong, Paul McGregor, Chi-Kong Lai, and Michael Williams for their hospitality during my recent trip to Australia, especially to Henry for organizing the international gathering of scholars in Brisbane and Sydney. For a sense of the rich work being done in Australia on Chinese migration, see Henry Chan, Ann Curthoys, Nora Chiang, eds., "The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions," Proceedings from the Symposium held in Taipei, 6-7 January 2001 (Taipei and Canberra: Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies, National Taiwan University and Center for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 2001). There are a multitude of other scholars working on what might be labeled transnational migration studies, and they are too numerous to list in this note, but just within studies of Chinese migration, some names include Yong Chen, Adam McKeown, K. Scott Wong, Ling-chi Wang, Wong Gungwu; Clara Chu on Chinese in Latin America; Evelyn Hu-Dehart and Walton Look Lai working on the Caribbean and Trinidad; Anthony Chan, Wing Chung Ng, David Lai, Peter Li, Yuen-fong Woon, and Paul Yee on Canada; Anthony Reid on Chinese in Southeast Asia; Shirley Fitzgerald, Jane Lydon, Jan Ryan, Bryan Moloughney, and Manying Ip on Australia and New Zealand; Edgar Wickberg on Chinese in the Philippines and Canada.
3. See Adam McKeown, "Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943," and Chan Kwok Bun, "A Family Affair: Migration, Dispersal, and the Emergent Identity of the Chinese Cosmopolitan," *Diaspora* 6:2 (1997), 195-231. Also, Adam McKeown, "The Sojourner as Astronaut: Paul Siu in Global Perspective," Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa, eds., *Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 127-142; and *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).