

FEATURE

High Noon for Higher Education

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By Beth Finke

Don't let her quiet elegance fool you - nothing could stand in Betty Lee Sung's way as she wrote the record of her people Fifty years ago Betty Lee Sung '48 LAS decided to do some research on the history of the Chinese people in America. She figured the task would be easy.

"I had the best libraries," said the East Coast resident.

"I had the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, I went to the Yale Library, I went to the Princeton Library," said the spunky 81-year-old, still exasperated by the memory. "I found nothing! Well, nothing except real derogatory stuff about what bad people the Chinese were."

Determined to set the record straight, Sung wrote "Mountain of Gold: The Story of the Chinese in America" (Macmillan, 1967), among the early published histories of the Chinese in the United States written by a Chinese-American. Sung's landmark book, which played a role in the Asian-American consciousness-raising movement of the 1960s, became part of the initial efforts that built the field of Asian-American studies, where it became a standard text in those fledgling courses.

The book's success prompted administrators at the City College of New York to ask Sung to start a new department there. The CCNY program she established in 1970 was the first Asian-American studies program east of California.

Being among the "first" or "only" was nothing new to Sung. Her teen-age job interpreting Chinese maps for the U.S. Army map service was hardly typical for a 17-year-old girl

in 1942. "It was during the war years," explained Sung, seated comfortably in the office/bedroom/multipurpose-room of her apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown. "Very few people who knew Chinese and English were in the United States at the time."

Fluent in both languages, Sung was born and raised in Washington, D.C. She was 9 when her Chinese-born father decided to relocate the entire family to Guangdong, China, during the U.S. Depression. Four years later, Japan invaded China, and the family returned to the United States.

Back in Washington, D.C., the Army map service job paid well enough for Sung to save a little money and eventually announce she wanted to attend college. Her father had other ideas.

"My father said he'd find a nice husband for me, and I'd get married," she said. If she disobeyed him, he'd disown her.

Sung's older sister, Rose, had followed orders, but Sung had ideas of her own. "I told him I was going to college anyway," she said. "[Tuition] was \$80 a year, but I couldn't afford even that. I knew I had to figure out a way." After applying to a number of colleges, Sung accepted a four-year scholarship to the University of Illinois.

When she stepped off a bus in 1944 and took her first look at the sea of students milling about the campus, Sung found only one other face that looked anything like hers.

"I was one of only two female undergraduates with a Chinese background.

There were about a hundred overseas Chinese male students at University of Illinois, along with two or three American-born Chinese,” she said with a mischievous laugh. “I had a lot of dates!”

Her voice still rings with the enthusiasm of the rebellious young girl who packed her bags for Urbana 62 years ago.

“I had a lot of fun in Illinois,” she said, explaining that racial prejudice had kept her from going to movies or other public events in her hometown. “Washington, D.C., was still segregated back then,” she said, “but Urbana was a college town. They were a little bit more open-minded.”

Sung said her memories of the University are all fond ones, even though much of her time there was spent washing dishes and cleaning toilets in exchange for room and board.

“That was the beginning of my life,” said Sung, who graduated in three-and-a-half years with a Phi Beta Kappa key. “That’s how I got started.”

And what a life it’s been. After graduating with majors in economics and sociology, Sung moved to New York City and was hired by the overseas broadcasting network Voice of America to write programs on the Chinese in the United States.

“That was 1949, when the Communists took over [China],” she said. “Voice of America wanted people to broadcast, um” Her voice trails off as she decides how to put it. Finally she gives a characteristic, knowing laugh. “You know - propaganda to China!”

During her five years at Voice of America, Sung developed an interest in the Chinese living in the United States. That interest led her to try to incorporate existing information on the Chinese in North America into her radio scripts. Those scripts prompted Sung to write “Mountain of Gold,” which, in turn, led CCNY to become interested in offering Asian- American studies.

“Suddenly the Asian students here - many of them had read my book, and others on the West Coast had read my book - their eyes were opened,” Sung said. “And so they clamored for an Asian-American studies department; they petitioned to have me teach Asian-American studies courses,” a step which inaugurated a 22-year affiliation between Sung and CCNY

Sung moved up from instructor to professor to head of the Asian-American studies program before her retirement from CCNY in 1992. While teaching, she carried on her graduate studies, earning a doctorate in sociology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 1983.

During those years of research, writing and teaching, Sung and her husband, Charles Chung, formerly with the United Nations, managed to raise eight children. “I wrote in between bottles, diapers and all that,” she said.

Betty’s oldest daughter, Tina Sung, describes her mother as strict and practical while they were growing up. “My mother is very organized,” said Tina, who is president of Synergy Works LLC, a management consulting firm in Silver Spring, Md. “A woman at her level of accomplishment has to be organized.”

“Reading was always important in our family; all my brothers and sisters - our houses are just full of books and magazines,” Tina said, recalling with a laugh how all the children had to read the book “Cheaper by the Dozen” when they were little. “We all had to read it [because it was about a large family], and we all had chores,” she said, describing every day as a huge logistics operation.

“Lists were a big thing at our house,” she said. “Who would make lunch, who would make breakfast? Who would do the dishes? The laundry? We learned to do all of those things, and I think as a result we were very talented young kids.”

According to Tina, her mother adjusted her schedule to suit her children’s needs. “She got

a job at the library so we'd have to go there to do our homework under her watchful eye," Tina recalled. "We had to learn how to use the card catalog, find our own books and read all sorts of books. There was always multiple learning in everything that she laid out for us."

That learning had a lifelong impact. Betty runs out of fingers when listing the universities her children have attended and the number of degrees they've received. Seven children have college degrees, two have doctorates, one has a medical degree, and one graduated Phi Beta Kappa, just like her mom. "They're all interesting," the modest mother said.

Sung and her husband also have 13 grandchildren. "She's very proud of that," Tina said. "You know, when older Chinese women come together, before they say anything else, they say, 'How many do you have?' They mean how many grandchildren, of course. That's how you judge the hierarchy. So she's doing great!"

Sung is also proud of the seeds she has sown for Asian-American studies departments across the country, particularly at her Alma Mater. "I am just flabbergasted at the extent Asian-American studies has blossomed at Illinois!" she said. "I was surprised - a Midwestern college, very few Asian communities around and yet such a strong Asian-American component."

While "Mountain of Gold" proved a jump-start for Asian-American studies, Sung has also written countless articles in journals, encyclopedias and magazines. She published six more books about Chinese-Americans, including two for children and the award-winning "A Survey of Chinese-American Manpower and Employment" (Prager, 1976) which explains how federal exclusion acts limited the number of Chinese allowed to immigrate to the United States in the early 20th century.

While Sung is among the most prolific Chinese-American women writers in the country today, she is also an activist in New York's Asian

community. In 1996 she organized a protest at City Hall against a New York City Council member who had made disparaging remarks about Asian-Americans. When that council member left office in 2001, she was replaced by John Liu, the city's first Asian-American in that position. That same year, Sung co-founded the Asian American/Asian Research Institute, which is partially funded by City University of New York.

Sung's energies appear unflagging. Her retirement from CCNY gave her time to feed a curiosity that had been gnawing at her since she started researching her first book. "Everyone thinks of the history of the Chinese in America starting from the West Coast," she said. "I thought, 'Hmm, there must be something different here on the East Coast.'"

She started "nosing around," as she puts it, and came across disorganized documents and Chinese immigration records inside a warehouse on a pier in Bayonne, N.J. Employees there had no idea how the papers were filed or how important they were, Sung said. "They told me that many times they had thought about just dumping them into the ocean."

The records would have made quite a splash. The first box she grabbed from the stack just happened to house records of Chinese living in New York City in the 1860s. "We weren't supposed to have been here until the 1870s, when the railroad was constructed," Sung said. "But here they were, all these people who were here in the 1860s and had established businesses and whatnot."

The significance of this discovery lured Sung out of retirement. Procuring a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, she assembled a team of associates that indexed and catalogued the 581 boxes of files in three years. Today the database of information serves as a source for genealogical research, enabling scholars to re-create the early history of the Chinese in the United States.

These days, Sung is indexing and archiving another mountain of written material - the academic and personal materials she's gathered on Chinese-Americans during her lifetime. The collection is being sent to the Library of Congress, which recognizes it as the core of its Asian-American collection.

Despite her acclaim, Sung, who is a member of the prestigious Committee of 100 (outstanding Chinese-Americans) never spoke to her father about any of her accomplishments. "He said if I disobeyed his orders, he'd disown me. And he did," she said matter-of-factly. "I went to school in 1944. The war ended in '46, and the minute the war ended, he got on a boat and went to China."

But Sung's achievements are highly appreciated by others. "The Library of Congress considers [Sung's materials] one of the most valuable research resources available on the subject," said Hwa-Wei Lei, chief of the library's Asian division. "Betty Lee Sung is a leading scholar of Chinese-American studies with a worldwide reputation."

Recalling how difficult it was for her to find information on Chinese-Americans six decades ago, Sung is thrilled to be providing plenty for scholars now. "It makes me happy to know my collection will be used and preserved," she said, "[that] other people will use it, and it will be referred to and so forth.

"It helps me believe I really have made some sort of impact."

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