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SPEAKERS

Mae Lee, Connie Young Yu, Karen Wang

Mae Lee 00:14

I'm going to say a little intro. It's Tuesday, June 11, 2024, this is Mae Lee and Karen Wang, Mae Lee, I'm a faculty in Intercultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, and also Chair of Asian American and Asian Studies at De Anza. Karen Wang is a research intern with the Asian American Studies program. Here today, we are interviewing Connie Young Yu at De Anza College in Cupertino as part of the NEH grant on Asian American Storytelling in the Santa Clara Valley. And I just want to mention we have a tech crew here of Jiwon Jung, Karen Wang's also on tech crew, Lori Clinchard and Ed Breault. So with that, we'll start asking you the first question. So your work, we've, you know, listened to the life history that you interview with Yvonne, and reviewed some of your work. And we know that. You know, a lot of your work is meant to tell the untold stories of the Chinese American experience, and it spans decades. Your work spans decades, and it's included writing, speaking, advising, advocacy, institution building and community organizing. Can you tell us how your own consciousness as a Chinese American or an Asian American developed, how that consciousness developed and how it has informed your work over all these decades?

Connie Young Yu 01:38

Yes, well, certainly lofty credits here, yes, well, you know, I came, I was very fortunate. And I keep reflecting on this. You know, when people ask who, who inspired you most? Who are your mentors? It was my parents, my father, who was born in 1912 in the Chinatown that was called Heinlerville. And my mother born in San Francisco in 1908 and she told me stories of her ancestors that I always knew. And I'm very fortunate in this way. I always knew that my great grandfather worked on the Transcontinental Railroad because she was very proud of it. She always said, you know, you're going to do something. Don't forget the pioneers. You know the pioneers and do something for women. And it's it's interesting, because, you know, you think about Asian American parents as being pushing their kids. You know the to be, you know, doctors and engineers or something, accountants. You know, so, but my sister, three years older than I and my brother five years younger all, all three of us were encouraged to do whatever we thought we could be, that we loved and that we could follow our dream. But, you know, so. And my father was a Chinatown leader. He was a colonel in the US reserves and Chinatown San Francisco leader, community leader with the Chinese chamber of commerce. And he spearheaded the move to create the war memorial at St Mary's square to Chinese Americans who made the ultimate

sacrifice in World Wars one and World War Two. So I grew up seeing my father and my mother, and she was very active and more like collecting antiques and robes and documents and things that relate it to our history. She just did that. People said, you know, your parents, you're a historian because your parents are pack rats. But the thing is, I grew up with that, but when I went to Mills College, and this is true for going to other other universities. And you know, the first course you take is a Western Civ[ilization]. It's a requirement. You can't graduate. Then ours was great books, and, of course, it's, you know, starts with Socrates. But so I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but, you know, to succeed in college, you know, with this, this culture, this Western culture, you have to go with it and see and be excited about it. And I was, I loved English literature, and I loved what saved me was working on the school newspaper journalism, you know. And one of my first reports was on the House Un-American Activities, demonstrations at city hall in 1961 no, I'm sorry, it's 1960 in this. Um, where, you know, students protested, you know, the House Un-American Activities. I was there reporting, and I saw one of my high school friends saying, Oh, I'm so this today. I'm ashamed to be an American. And it really kind of stunned me, you know, is a white guy, you know, and, and, of course, I always identified with I always had a strong feeling of being Chinese American, because our culture was Chinatown San Francisco. We were so proud of it without the culture of our parades and our you know, the monuments and the festivities even Miss Chinatown USA gave us a sense of pride and identity, so I was proud of that, but it's nothing that I could convey or have other people share when they went to college, there was very few people of color. There was no black people in my class, and only a couple of Asians, few Asians. So anyway, I was an okay student. I excelled in writing poetry, you know, loved to I wanted to be a creative writer. And then in my senior year, where we had a senior seminar. And it was a senior seminar on Mark Twain and my professor, Dr Franklin Walker, was assigning topics everybody, this is your senior thesis. You're going to write something relating to Mark Twain, like Mark Twain, some aspect of his work. And when I was the only person of color in the room, and when it came to me, I said, Well, I'd like to write about Mark Twain and the short story. And the teacher looked right at me and said, How about writing about Mark Twain and the Chinese? And I just sat back, and I was kind of stunned. And one of my friends said, Oh, I'm so surprised. He said that to you, it's like I was being discriminated against. I could only but what he did was the biggest favor of my life. So I wrote my thesis on Mark Twain and the Chinese, and I did research on how Mark Twain was an advocate for the Chinese, how he was a cub reporter, and writing about the, you know, brutality toward a Chinese. And the editor, you know, tossed his story saying, you know, you're going to offend the Irish readers. And Mark Twain decided he would write about the Chinese and satirical articles and a wonderful story. So anyway, reading about him, and also about the Burlingame treaty and all the other you know, you know, anti Chinese laws and anti Chinese movement, and the fact that Mark Twain wrote so much about the Chinese it was, you know, I got an A minus, so, but it's, it suddenly connected me to the history that that I always felt and knew about. And here it was, you know, I was in this college that it was connected to a famous American writer, one of the, you know, the greatest cultural, you know, icons of American literature. So it was I wrote, later on, I wrote an article for Chinatown, a Chinatown booklet, and it was Mark Twain and the Chinese Mark Twain in Chinatown so it and then I my parents were so proud, but I didn't associate at all with their experiences or their their parents experiences. What I did know about racism and discrimination was the fact that we moved out of Chinatown to the Richmond District in a small middle class, middle middle class neighborhood, a small middle class home in an all white neighborhood, because my father was able to have his army buddy, a fellow reserve officer of the same rank, Lieutenant Colonel, buy the house first and then sell it to us. And we became the first Chinese in

that that whole area of the Richmond District, 37 the avenues, and we were blockbusters, and I had no idea that my neighbor, whom I loved, Mrs. I won't say her name, Mrs. Dear One, who she was, who was a friendly neighbor to me, and you know, until my mother told me years and years later, the person who circulated a petition against the Chinese, against our moving in was Mrs. Dear One, you know. And I go, I can't believe it. And so it just showed me that the fears that people had about Chinese that the stereotypes that they thought a Chinese family would move in and start a tong war, but once they saw us, and then my father, being a reserve officer and all that, and businessman and respectable, and the cute little kids, we were the only my sister, brother and I were the only Chinese kids when we first moved in at Lafayette grammar school, so, but once we were there, it was just, I felt really, very happy. You know, I felt, I didn't feel the discrimination, except once in a while, you know, you always feel you're different. But in high school, I think I became, this is the first time, this is Washington High School, and there are a lot of you know, Asians, African American kids, large my friends were Jewish Americans, and they were very activists, and I learned from them about the anti Defamation League, and one of them, Alice Huberman, invited me to speak at her temple. It was B'nai B'rith on prejudice. In those days, they talked about prejudice, not racism. And so I spoke as a Chinese and there was an African American woman who spoke, as you know, and then, I don't know at that time if there was a Latino, but we all spoke about, you know, what it felt like to be what our civics teacher called us hyphenated Americans. Because I remember when he used that term, I said, What's a hyphenated and he looked at me, and he goes, well, like a Chinese American. And then I thought, that's kind of, you know, but anyway, I went to Mills College. He heard about my experience there, and then, when I graduated, I got married right away to Dr John Yu, who grew up in the Philippines, born in Shanghai, but went to Stanford Medical School. Was very, very true humanitarian, and was very interested in all these things. So we had when I was 27 I already had three children under five. I got married at 21 so anyway, and I was very, I think, by then, busy as I was with the family, and I loved, you know, you know, being with, I love the family. Love being, you know, the housewife, the mother, activist, because I was so inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and also extremely emotionally involved with the anti war movement and seeing what was happening in Vietnam. I mean, it was just, you know, it's hard to imagine now, but in every day, you'd see the news of American soldiers fighting Vietnamese in the news, you know, during this the late 60s and then 70s, Kent State, where students were shot, protesting. And anyway, I my son Martin. Was born in September of October of 1969 and I named him after Martin Luther King because that was the year the Tet Offensive. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Robert Kennedy was assassinated. It seemed like the war would not end. If war would not end, unless there was just, you know, huge domestic unrest and protest and demonstrations, the people had to be the conscience of the country, like now, like the students now with the genocide in Gaza. So when we moved to Los Altos Hills in 1970 I met some fellow peaceniks there. Is really interesting, because at that time, was very rural and and then the the local Peace Center was in Palo Alto, and I helped. I worked with some friends, and everybody was white at that time. You know, in the peace movement, I worked with them to form an organization called the Peace Union, which met there and and we organized demonstrations. We supported the demonstrations at Stanford, and that's where I met Asian American radicals for the first time. And it was very, very exciting to see, because what they were demonstrating was against the racism of the war, the imperialism, the war, the making connections between the struggles at home and the struggles abroad and you know, and I took up the chant, one struggle, many fronts and the third world movement. What was it? The people united will never be divided. You know, I was out there, and I was very good at writing leaflets, so I kind of started giving up on creative writing, because it was just

like, this is the need, this is what has to be done. And I started writing essays and newsletters and then that led to, well, I also wrote an article on this is getting back to close to my parents' narrative. You know, they were going to go to the 100th anniversary of the Golden Spike. This is the 100th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Point. And my father was Vice President of the Chinese Historical Society of America. Phil Choy was the president. And Philip was invited to give the keynote speech. He was invited to give a speech, let's say not the keynote and and I knew all this was happening, and I thought, I'm going to write an article. And that's when I started doing research, deep research, into the Transcontinental Railroad. And I found out all about the anti Chinese movement and the struggle and the fact that the railroad workers. After they completed the job, they tried to find work, other elsewhere, and they were driven out of town. They were there was a violence, and, you know, finding that out. But what I wrote was the story, and it was on the incredible achievement of Chinese that has been ignored, and so it was called the Unsung Heroes of the Golden Spike. And I did a lot of my research at the Graduate I bought a special pass at the Graduate School Library at Stanford, and I was able to go through the stacks and read the newspapers of the time. And I really got excited about and shared that with my parents, my article, was published May 10, 1969 and I was at home with the kids, and my parents were in Promontory, and at that moment, you know of the dedication of, you know the Golden Spike and the meeting of the rails, the grand speech by the the Secretary of Transportation, John Volpe, Phil Choy, was supposed to go up and present a plaque. And it was to Chinese, you know, in honoring Chinese railroad workers, it was presented by the Chinese community of San Francisco and the Chinese Historical Society. So he's there, and at the last minute, just when he was about to go up, the chairperson of the event, Mr. Goodfellow evolving, came up and said, Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Choy, there's no time for you. And that snub, you know, created a movement, especially after John Volpe spoke, gave the speech, saying, Who but Americans could have told through, you know, all the granite of through the Sierras. Who but Americans could have built 10 miles of track in one day. That was the keynote so and Phil Choy was just furious. And there were only five Chinese at that time, 20,000 people. My mother was the only descendant of a Chinese railroad worker there, and she just sat there. And my parents were very polite, you know, and they also, there's just, Phil was furious. He said he wanted to go up and grab the microphone, but, you know, they pulled it off. But, but they, they told me later what it was like, and, and it took, let's say there was quite a movement in Chinatown in those days. You know, there's no cell phones. The news didn't come for that until a couple days when there was an article in the Chronicle called The Forgotten Men of the Golden Spike, and it told the story of how Phil Choy was totally ignored and could not give the dedication speech, give the commemorative speech to Chinese railroad workers, which he had been waiting so long to do, and for the Chinese Historical Society, he felt he had failed our people. So, many, many decades later, in 2019, May 10, I was invited to give the the commencement address. And, you know, I was wearing my mother's dress, Chinese dress, and I, up to the last minute I was so, let's say anxious, maybe a paranoid, that somebody would come up and say, sorry, Miss Yu, there's no time for you. But I saw my name on the program. It was, you know, the great event poster. You know, I was right there. You know, Connie Young Yu, Chinese Historical Society commencement. And then there was a lion dance, and and then, you know, and the Secretary of Transportation was Elaine Chao, you know, of course, she had wonderful speech written for her, you know, commemorating everybody. But I was able to talk about to to give the speech about reclaiming history, and also honoring all the immigrant workers, but particularly mentioning that the Chinese were excluded because of the Chinese Exclusion Law, the anti Chinese movement and written out of history. And this was a moment to reclaim it, but reclaim it for

America, not just, you know, our group. So anyway, so that was a great, how do you say a milestone? And also, I felt it was a mission, accomplished. But of course, right afterwards, you know, you know it was, there was, we had a the Chinese descendants Association had a real, you know, big celebration, you know, luncheon and and judge, Michael Quan stood up, you know, he and he said, I want to read something that I got off of Facebook, or, you know, social media. And he goes, like, you Chinese crybabies, you know, what do you think America owes you everything. You know, why don't you go back to where you came from? That was it. And I just thought, Oh, my God. You know this is a nativist country. You know you this. You know it says it will always be a constant struggle. Be a constant struggle to to show that we're not perpetual aliens. Is so deeply entrenched. Well anyway, in between the first, you know, the 100 year commemoration, the 150th you know, I did a lot of writing and work. And the writing that I've done, it's not always, you know, I wrote a couple of books, a lot of articles. I never was an academician. So I was always, I called myself independent historian. But a real milestone for me was getting involved in, like the first Asian American writers conference, the first Asian American issue of Concerned Asian Acholars. And it's funny, my husband said, two out of three ain't bad you're concerned and you're concerned and you're Asian. But anyway, I was finally able to connect, make the connections between the history that I was reading about Mark Twain and my own family history. And the cover of this is my grandfather's "chak chee," it's a certificate of residence that he was required to carry because of the Geary Act. And it said it's stamped labor. That's my grandfather, and so this was a special issue, and that the editors are Shawn Wong, who's now a professor. He was 23 years old at the time, and a young writer and me. So we which we so it's sort of established that with Asian American Studies, Asian American, the culture, it's the people's history, it's all oral history. It didn't come out of libraries. You know, it, we will put it in the libraries, but we're the ones who have to write it.

Mae Lee 25:03

Can I ask you some questions? About the many things that you've talked about. And so it sounds like, you know, you were saying you were growing up, and your parents conveyed a lot of pride and kind of inculcated that yes in Chinese American family and culture. And then, you know, you went to school at Mills, and then you studied Mark Twain and his writings, you know, in support of Chinese Americans. And then later on, you did your own research on you know, the Transcontinental Tailroad and Chinese Americans. And started writing, I'm curious, like when your parents were telling you you were growing up, did they share? Was there emphasis on being Chinese American, prideful? Did it? Was it linked to stories about racism and discrimination, or not later on, you kind of found the context of that to understand.

Connie Young Yu 25:52

Yes, yes, about how my parents would link that. Yeah, you know, the the struggles with, you know, their their experiences and their ancestors. Well, they didn't talk about it in the angry, bitter way, but they'd always say, and I always would hear this, that my grandfather came to San Jose at the age of 11 with his uncle as a 11 year old laborer in 1881 one year before the Chinese Exclusion Law. And my father would say, you know, if he waited till he was 12, he wouldn't be able to come, because the Exclusion Law would have been passed and Chinese laborers would not be he came. And because he came before he was even able to get a re entry permit if he go back to China, that's that's how he could bring over my grandmother after he became a merchant. But anyway, the key thing was my father talked about Chinese exclusion and and he would always say, talk about how the Chinese were treated. But

he was never He would say, "yum goong," it's so pathetic. It's so "yum goong," so sorrowful to see what happened to some of these Chinese workers, you know, and what happened to your grandfather. For instance, when my grandfather was in the Market Street, Chinatown, you know, he was, he did a lot of things. He was a, he worked as the 11 year old labor he worked in the store, you know, helping the family, the clan store that he was a houseboy. Later he worked with strawberry growers, picking strawberries. He made bricks. But whenever he would leave Chinatown, the perimeters of Chinatown, you know, he'd be really wary. And he told us one time, he said, When I ran home, back from work, one time, I was chased by a bunch of white kids, you know, ruffians, you know. And he said, and I ran so fast I lost my hat. That's all he said. He didn't say. He wasn't like, Oh, those horrible, you know, blank, blank, blanks, you know. He just said, I lost my hat. And he just it seemed like it was part of being in America. And my father talked about, well, a lot of things, the fact that, why he became a soy sauce manufacturer instead of an engineer, he was an engineer for a company not naming they and they told them, you know, there's a glass ceiling here. You're not going to get very far. We don't hire Chinese permanently. And they just say Chinese, because the Chinese Exclusion Law left such and all the subsequent laws left such a legalized, mandate, you know, don't hire Chinese, don't include Chinese, you know, it's it became, even if they're citizens. So the next thing that I was very involved in after this and meeting wonderful activists, Asian American activists. And this also was the first time I was involved with writing about Asian Americans, because we wrote about, Shawn Wong and I, wrote about the Japanese American concentration camp journal Trek at Topaz. So we did an essay on Japanese Americans, you know. So that's when I and I interviewed my friends who were Japanese Americans for this article. And then the poetry you have, Sam Tagatac, Filipino American, Lawson Inada, Japanese, Shawn Wong, Wing Tek Lum, Chinese, Frank Chin, so but their agenda and their anthology that they put together that the "Aiiiiieeeee!" boys was, was Asian Americans, and so that's when I got into the whole sensibility and made connections.

Mae Lee 30:18

How would you say your sense of identity, if you were to compare to its evolving nature, like before, you know, growing up and before you met these Asian American activists through your through Stanford and through kind of the peace organizing you would do. Well, how would you describe your sense of identity?

Connie Young Yu 30:37

Well, I would feel that their history, other Asians', history is separate from ours, you know, because I was so specialized, I didn't realize until working with them and the laws and the fact that my grandmother was excluded from immigration because and was, you know, on Angel Island for 15 months, initially, because there was a law of 1924 there was really to stop Japanese picture brides. And it said, you know, no aliens ineligible for citizenship will be admitted to United States. So I realized, you know, and also I was okay, I'm wearing this t shirt I was on the - this was something that I couldn't believe would happen to be in an organization, an activist organization, that actually succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. So before that, to show you that I felt a lot of a defeat, I was a McGovern delegate in 1972 because from the peace movement. You know, McGovern was a peace candidate. You know, the other candidate was Nixon, who my father supported because he was a Republican and he was, my father was a, you know, when Nixon ran for Senator, my father was the Chinatown Republican Party chairperson. So, anyway, but my father was, see, my parents were, it's unconditional love. They were

very proud of me being a delegate national. So this was revolutionary. The California delegation was composed of, you know, people 18 years old. You know, Asian Americans. There were only, actually, there were only six Asian Americans in a delegation of over 100 you know. And George Takei was one of them, and, and so, you know, we just banded together and we were accepted in the Chicano delegation. So that's when I got the idea of the solidarity of people of color, and they even called it Third World people. They didn't know what to call us. But so that's when I just saw that we needed a little political clout. Norman Mineta was walking around there. He was mayor of at that time, San Jose, loved meeting Norman, and I met him, you know, he was very inspiring, and I interviewed him about his experience in camp when he was mayor. So but just being involved with changed my whole perception of history. And also I was involved with a Radio Group, KPFA, no, yeah. Also KPFA, where, you know, we had programs on Asian American, you know, activism, and another one started by Chinese for Affirmative Action, in which we formed a group called the Dupont Guy Collective, you know, Dupont Guy meaning Grant Avenue, and we had a weekly program in which I wrote a lot of the scripts on Asian America. So it was part of the movement to have community programs. And so there was a lot going on. It was kind of a, you know, the beginning of organizations. And then

Mae Lee 34:26

Did you feel like you were part of a movement?

Connie Young Yu 34:28

Oh, totally. We felt very empowered. We felt very powerful. I mean, our group, and Christopher Chow, the first Asian American journalist on a broadcast, you know, in the Bay Area was, was the person who contacted me and got me involved with with this Angel Island movement. And this was what I wanted to talk about, was, I guess, working, you know, being a delegate, and showed me something about politics, you know, and but I just felt that it was just such an uphill battle for Asians and the civil rights movement in this country. But this amazing thing happened, the discovery of the writing on the walls. And it was by a ranger named Alexander Weiss in 1970 who contacted George Araki, professor of Biology at San Francisco State, who who immediately said, There's writing on the wall. There's, you know, and Weiss didn't know if it was, it was Chinese or Japanese. And George Araki remembered his grandmother telling him his her first steps on Angel Island, first steps in America were on Angel Island. And he at that time, they thought that the barracks were going to be demolished. And it was because Alexander Weiss was newly assigned and he was told by a superior, Don't- Forget about that. You know, that building is going to be demolished. You know this? You know we're ready to get rid of it's an old building. You know, it's dilapidated, and it's the site of the old immigration station. There's no other that old immigration station burned years ago, but that building stayed there with the writing, you know, but nobody looked at it until that so George Araki contacted his friend Matt Takahashi, who's a photographer, and George and his family, his wife and three kids, and the photographer, and taken to Angel Island by, you know, a ferry to to look at the barracks, guided by Alexander Weiss, who had permission to do this. And they photographed every inch with the children holding the cables. They photographed every inch of the barracks that had riding. And so here you have photographs, and here you have a professor at San Francisco State, you have students, you have activists. The word spread, and Chris Chow was one of the activists, and he called me, and he said, we've got to do something. And I think we have a plan. We have to form a committee. And so he got a historian, Mark Lai, Phil Choy. I was the only woman on the committee, about 10 of us. And then George Araki and then, but it

was an Asian American, you know. So stop the barracks, because Japanese were detained in that building. But Japanese had gone through as well, and a lot of them were deported and but so how are we going to do this? And Chris Chow says we have to go through the system. We have to contact the Assemblyman for our district, who is John Foran, to write a resolution to create our committee. And it was called first AIISHAC, Asian American, no, Angel Island Immigration Station Citizens Advisory Committee, to write a report to submit, but it stopped the demolition of the barracks. It passed, and when that happened, like I was just like, not only did it pass, I was involved with helping to write the report, which came out in 1976 and the recommendation to the state to restore the building and to have it preserved as a state monument and later a national monument. And if you see it now, there's another building, there's a hospital that is now a museum to immigration, all immigration, of the history of immigration and so and then there's just, it's just a beautiful monument. And then people can go look at the barracks and look at the writing on the wall. And then in 1982 we had the Commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Law at Angel Island. And I was part of that. So it was really, it was to me, the it was the best use of my ability as a writer, and I guess as an advocate, speaker, activist. I felt that this was my role, that this I could do, and the fact that. To be part of a movement, part of this committee, that actually saved this building with the writing on the wall by detainees. And they were activists in writing. They were, you know, when you think about it, they were writing for for people to see their plight. They were writing, expressing the injustice of this and their so anyway, that's, I'm very I would say that's the most exciting and probably the most successful advocacy movement, you know, I've ever been in and it continues because I'm part of the foundation. I mean, I support it, and love to continue telling the descendants' stories, and then the descendants' stories continue to be told. So this was an exhibit at the California History Center, and it's the story of my grandmother, Detained at Liberty's Door. And here I'm using both sides of my family's these stories my mother told me about her mother being detained on Angel Island. So I was it brought back her emotions and her feelings about and the injustice of it all, that she, being American born, could land and her siblings, but her mother, who was born in China, had to stay on the island. And also the fact that there was a law saying a widow loses the status of her husband regard, you know, talk about the injustice of that. And this is part of a and I wrote with Barre Fong a video called Detained at Liberty's Door. So it's a story, it's on a video. So it's very gratifying to be able to use my abilities as an activist and a writer, you know, to to to recover this history and to make a difference, because we feel, what? If people understand this history, if people grasp it and understand why there's anti Asian hate. Why that? You know, of course, this came out during the pandemic. How all you see rallies, you know, with people holding signs saying, you know, stop anti Asian hate. And then somebody had a sign saying Executive Order, 9066, Angel Island, just to show that these were, these were institutionalized racist episodes in American history that have are embedded in our psyche and it and so that's what I keep talking about. That's what, yeah, that's my narrative.

Karen Wang 42:55

Oh, sorry, yeah. I just wanted to build off of that, like talking about your narrative. It, I guess, like, we're really, we're really curious about when you like, you know, as, like a writer, as someone who's literally been creating this narrative, like, from something that didn't exist before. Is there anything that you think about when you like, tell, like, a story, like, is there are things that you leave out? Are there things that you keep in when you're going through, like, these historical archives? Like, how do you go about crafting a narrative from like these, you know, like, I guess, like historical artifacts.

Connie Young Yu 43:26

I think that the narrative starts with the people, the people. And so I have this is, I forgot to mention, well, the biggest thing that is ongoing talk about, you know, the things I'm continually doing is a story of San Jose's Chinatowns, because that this is an incredible story that happened here, and it was completely - not even forgotten - it was just obliterated. Until the excavation for the building of the Fairmont Hotel. It is urban renewal that has, or you know, what do you call it? Projects like building a hotel that take excavation and an EIR process. And so in the 1980s you know, the the archeologists, wonderful archeologists, uncovered, and that's because they had to, for the EIR process, a complete Chinatown that was burned to the ground in on May 4, 1887 and talking about connections, I grew up knowing about this because my grandfather told me about the you know, how he'd run to the Chinatown was home base, and his home base was burned when. He was a teenager, and that's why he went to San Francisco to work until he was able to come back to a new Chinatown. But that whole story is a story of that happened throughout California. However, it has a very dramatic ending, or continuing continuance. Digging to Chinatown talks about how, you know, the Market Street Chinatown was one of which is where the city hall no which is where the Fairmont Hotel was, was burned by arson. And it's an arson fire. So that's part of the that the the story that I want to to emphasize. So this leads to this, the apology, the apology by the city of San Jose. And this came about because of the the years of history, the years of the archeology, the years of after the Market Street, Chinatown was, you know, the collection, the archeological collections at Stanford University is being studied. So there's all these studies going on about the Chinatown. It's part of history now, and the excavation for this area called the Corp Yard in Japantown. The Corp Yard was the site of Heinlerville, Chinatown. And the struggle to build that Chinatown is is part of the story. It's the heart of the story that I want to tell that, and I'm going to mention this, not only mention it, but present it at the rural Chinatowns conference that that China, that this situation was very unusual, that, and the story I is from, from the people and also archival research. My father always talked about the Chinatown that he was born in, and he also that had a fence around it. And he goes so nobody could get in, no get out. And he, you know, we just knew why, because it's a segregated community. John Heinlen, who, within 10 days of the fire, he was a friend to the Chinese, and my father on tape said Heinlein loved the Chinese. He leased land to the Chinese, and after the arson fire, and the newspapers called it a mysterious fire, the Chinese said it was deliberately set to chase us out. They knew it because there was already an injunction for that condemned Chinatown because they wanted to build a city hall there. So John Heinlen signed a contract within 10 days with the Chinese merchants, 11 Chinese merchants, to build a new Chinatown on his pasture land, which is the site of Japantown now. And this story tells how the struggle it took because the city immediately would not give him a permit and had an injunction against him. There was a home owners association, you know that had a torchlight parade, you know, against John Heinlein to prevent him from, you know, no Chinatown, no more Chinatowns in San Jose. But he stood his ground. He had, fortunately had his son, Goethe Heinlein, was a lawyer from San Francisco, came and went to court and defended his father in the Chinese and and the thing is, what is important to know is the Chinese refused to be driven out. They said, We're going to fight this. We're not going to be driven out. And so this is a little bit different, not a little bit, but it's different from other Chinatowns where the violence just drove the Chinese out and they couldn't come back. There wasn't any benevolent landowner who said, Oh, you know, I'll lease land to you. So I think that because of John Heinlein and because of the Chinese not refusing to believe San Jose stands as one of the communities you know

that has a story of pride, instead of like Tacoma, where it's just so shameful, so hideous, you know that it will never be forgotten. This is so this community. And my father talked about growing up in that wonderful community, going to a school that was integrated, and how that how John Heinlen least landed the Japanese, and he had Japanese friends and and then, because of the Chinese Exclusion law, a Chinatown is a home base for workers. It's and because of the Chinese Exclusion law, and there's no more new workers coming in, the Chinatowns faded. Every store would represent a clan or, you know, they had no more they didn't have business, and they didn't have their their associations and so, and then the they did have, were able to have symbiotic relations with the Japanese, who also would buy from their stores, and also they would print up the lottery tickets for their gambling. You know, they but Chinatown faded. It was demolished in 1931 but the few remaining Chinese, like my parents, like my grandparents and my father and his brother, they moved across the street and to a street that had Japanese and so there were several so that became, to me, the first Asian American community in Santa Clara County, and there are Asians, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese and so. And that existed until and predominantly Japanese until Executive Order, 9066, and so, that's another story.

Mae Lee 51:21

How did you start documenting the Chinatowns and writing about Heinlerville, or what that was after the Angel Island work?

Connie Young Yu 51:32

Yes, yes. So probably just a few years after that, or quite a few years it was like a decade, oh, yeah, quite a few. Oh,

Mae Lee 51:40

and you knew this was something historical.

Connie Young Yu 51:43

Well, you know, I lived in the I'm in Santa Clara County, and I was involved with with Asian Americans for Community Involvement, AACI. I was one of the founders in 1973 I became less active, but I joined it because I was an activist at that time, and I was on the Media Committee and worked with textbooks, and I felt that my job with that organization was sort of done. I always supported it. It became communities, wonderful, great, big community service organization. But it, it certainly had all the connections with with Asian Americans, you know, and their needs. And so I always stayed involved. And, in fact, I was involved with the first was a survey research project when the rep, you know, it was that led to a mental health study, Asian, American, Asian, Asian mental health studies. It was for Cambodians, Vietnamese. It was for the refugees. And this report came out in 1983 and I started work on it. I was part of the survey. I was writing up the survey and managing the office, and it was my first that was a very, very revealing, you know, kind of, it really shook me up, you know, to actually hear the interviews of Cambodian refugees, Vietnamese and through translators and and what they call the ethnic Chinese, the boat people. So that that research led to a grant that later became administered by AACI, and that's, you know, so, but it was headed, it was Santa Clara County's mental health study, and the chief investigator was Dr Kenneth Meinhardt. So, and I was just, I worked with Asian American translators. Well, they were immigrants, you know, because and, and then they would, you know, tell me the stories in the survey, and then we just writing up the report and seeing there was a another

wave of Asians coming in with incredible needs, who had suffered so much during the wars and and they were truly refugees. And it was just so it's just realizing that the it continues, you know, our our immigration story continues, and having Asian Americans, you know, in positions where they can, you know, help be or and be, you know, make a difference in a big way, like, you know, AACI and, you know, the administrators and the psychologists and the social workers and but they had to be Asian Americans. It was really, you know, so,

Mae Lee 55:16

How did you, how did you start writing or doing research on the Chinatowns. And how was it receive, initially?

Connie Young Yu 55:24

Oh, initially it was, it was the writing about the Chinatown as soon as the book came out. It was very, very well received. It was welcome, because it documented and that at that time, this organization started the CHCP, the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project. And that was a very major History Park, I mean, where you're actually going to have a museum devoted to this story of the Chinatowns in Santa Clara County. And so the first. It was called the Ng Shing Gung, the Temple of Five Gods. And it's a replica building in History Park. And it has exhibits, and it has a video called Chinatown as home base, which tells a story. It was done by Jessica Yu, my daughter, filmmaker, and she she did it in 1990 when she was still able to interview people who had lived and who grew up in in Heinlerville, and wonderful stories my father had passed on then, but we found his, located, several of his friends who gave interviews who grew up with him. So, so very short film, but it tells, it tells about it begins with the burning of the Chinatown Mark Street and the story of John Heinlen. And she did a lot of research. Jessica and I were actually researching from the same archives that at that time the history San Jose. It was called the San Jose Historical Museum, and the archives were actually there. And so it was just amazing that when I talked to I needed documentation. I needed, you know, I'd love to see a certificate of residence from San Jose. This is my grandfather when he was living in San Francisco, Leslie Masunaga opened a file, and she had a stack of these, and she certificate of residence of Chinese that were forced to have a photo ID because they were Chinese. And she just said, Okay, take your pick for your book. And I was just like, in awe. And then I also found a receipt. And my mother was alive at that time, she could help me. She could read Chinese. The receipt was in a file, and it was a \$1 donation to the Chinese Six Companies to fight the Geary Act, because this shows resistance and and this is what I do want to talk about at this conference, is that the Chinese did not take this, the violence and the repression. You know, you know, without protest that so the Chinese did not register until 1894 all the certificates are 1894 because the Six Companies took the case of the Supreme Court, Fong Yue Ting versus US, and they lost. They were challenging the constitutionality of the Chinese Exclusion Law. So from my father's, my mother's giving me this document, I was able to make connected because I looked at the document, I didn't know about the resistance movement and everything. I just said, you know, and then I was able to understand it and attach a real feeling to this, and then to see so many other certificates that even of children, native born children, had to register. And so, as I said, you know, when I did the research, I had always connected to people. And the one thing about Asian exclusion, there's a paper trail. You can go to NARA and you could see a file on your ancestor who was detained on Angel Island, or her whose ancestor was questioned. It's all there. And then the paper trail of these

documents, that's the only benefit of all this horrific, you know, legislation and anti Asian sensibility, you know.

Karen Wang 55:44

What do you think is the significance of finding this, like, historical resistance, like, what do you think the consequences of that are like? Why is that important?

Connie Young Yu 1:00:10

The importance of finding the, you know, incidents of resistance and documentation of resistance is incredibly important because it gives humanity to the people. It gives their dignity and their their it tells a story of their character the Chinese. And this is from fairly recent research. You know, the Stanford Chinese Railroad Workers Project, started by Gordon Chang and Shelley Fishkin. They documented incidents of many incidents on the railroad, but of the strike, the Chinese struck for better wages, better conditions, eight hours a day. They lost. But they did it, and they took risks to do it, and it's just incredibly I mean, I just said, How brave, and they also felt they had a chance, and they they did win some concessions later, but the fact that they struck, you know, it also was their dignity, and also it showed some unity. There was a lot of solidarity with this movement. I mean, how can you get people, thousands of people, not to register and risk jail, but say, we will take it to court, you know? And then they and then, when they failed, there was such a rush to register in 1894 so, yeah, and, and I wanted to hear from my father. I wanted to hear how my grandfather was a community leader. He was a, you know, every store was, you know, headquarters for a clan. That's where the workers from that district would come and get their mail. And so my grandfather was, he was a leader of the, you know, the group, but also he was a follower of Sun Yat Sen, the revolutionary leader. And that, I wanted to tell that story, because it shows that the Chinese had political leanings, and they did. They did believe in the principles of democracy and the Three Principles of the People, for the people, by the people. That was the slogan of Sun Yat Sen too. And he succeeded. His revolution succeeded, and he was in Denver raising funds in 1911 when the war was there. But you know, my grandfather had kept a lot of records, and some of them his papers. My grand my father, donated to the Hoover Institute. My father graduated from Stanford. He was always very, very proud of defending Stanford for hiring so many Chinese because he said he gave them jobs, and true and a foothold in America. So it was just in fact that's probably the most exciting thing, when I found there were strikes in the wine country of Chinese workers, they were united. They just and most of the time they failed, but they made a stand, and it for the Big Four when the Chinese struck. And what was it in? You know, after they got through the Sierras, it struck fear in their hearts, because they didn't want to lose their labor force. And Crocker just said, Well, I'll handle them, and I'll stop the butchers from butchering meat, and they'll, we'll starve them out. And so they had to, but he was shaken up, and they did make some concessions later, according to the studies, you know, that they didn't want to admit it, but, and also, you know, showing that that the Chinese kept their customs and they the temple meant so much of them, and they would have their parades, and they'd just be out there. And there's a picture of the parade, the famous parade of Da Jiu, the Feast of the Hungry ghost. The Chinese are marching outside the fence, you know, they're showing the community, you know, this is our solemn festival, they were getting respect. And actually, when Sun Yat Sen succeeded in establishing the Republic, the Republic of China, in 1911 US government was a lot more respectful of. The Chinese and that that did come down locally to and the Chinatown in San Jose was considered a place that people can go and look at festivities. They didn't go to shop, but they

go the Chinese are having the Chinese festival. And the cover of my book shows is from a newspaper article of my grandmother and my father as a little boy with the Chinese flag and my uncle with the American flag. So and every parade had a Chinese flag of the temple, but in front was the American flag. So there was that, that sense of of really trying to establish we are an American community that's Chinese. So and the legacy that I'll be talking about and working with JAMsj, Japanese American Museum in San Jose is is tours and exhibits to show what this community of Japantown, which is called Japantown, it really is, what it stands for and the history behind it, and how it has become this community for all peoples, but the roots are an Asian American community that came out of struggle, Out of prejudice. I mean, when I interviewed Dr Ishikawa. Ishikawa, he was one of the oldest residents of Japantown, born in the in one of the buildings that's Nisei, you know, community center. No, no, it's a Issei, anyway, on Fifth Street. So I talked to him about, you know, growing up in Chinatown, in Japantown. And he said, you know, we came here. The Japanese came here because the Chinese were here, and he was saying, There's nowhere else that would take us in. We could. There was nowhere else to go. We came here and we we were able to to have a community, and we were able to live together. And he said there was a mailman named Frank Brown, and my father talked about him a lot. He would, he was a mailman for the two communities. He would go from Chinatown to Japantown and, and my father said he spoke a few words of Chinese and, and he was very, very nice to to all of the residents. And Dr Ishikawa said that, oh, we really missed him when, when he retired and and my mother would always give him gifts, because he would be the one of the two white witnesses that was required to testify, you know, for for the residency or the citizenship or the birth certificate, for for the residents of Japantown and Chinatown. And I always wonder how he got the mail delivered on time, because he, you know, so busy. So Dr Ishikawa said that there were no he didn't have a birth certificate. And so the mailman testified, you know that that he did, he always saw the family here, and you know that that kind of thing so and I have a going to the archives. There are a lot of merchant documents, and my grandfather was able to become a merchant in a change of status. And they would two white witnesses. One was Frank Brown, you know, Is he really a merchant? Is he always at this store? And you know, have you ever seen him working in the fields? And then the other one was Charlie Senkle, who was a night watchman for Heinlerville. The Chinese had to hire a night watchman. And then my father said the gates were never closed in his lifetime. So they were locked in the beginning, you know, when Heinlein, you know, built it, because he was afraid that, while he was building it, having it built. He was afraid that people and he had barbed wire on the this is, according to the newspapers, on top of the fence, because he was afraid that people would come over and burn down this Chinatown. Because there were so many threats. He was threatened. You know, the Chinese were threatened while during building so. Yeah, it took a lot of courage and a lot of faith to stay and then over the years, they overcame. They were accepted, and the Japan town was accepted, also, until Executive Order 9066,

Mae Lee 1:10:20

To what extent do you feel like these stories have reached even the area of people here, either children in schools around here, or residents, who knows how widespread

Karen Wang 1:10:31

I'm curious why you think, or you said, that this might not have a lasting impact, or such a struggle to have a lasting impact, like, What do you mean by that? Who knows about. Well, I think that everybody,

well, nationally, San Jose, at that time, the 10th largest city in the United States, officially apologized for injustices to Chinese, you know, historic injustices. And so Gerrye Wong and I were called to Raul Peralez's office to discuss having an apology at an event and being a historian. You know, they talked about how we going to write the resolution. You know, I end up writing the like, oh, there are 12 whereas clauses. Oh, there are so many, whereas clauses. And it starts with, you know, the early anti Chinese movement, and the fact that an anti Chinese convention was held in San Jose, and then the burning of the Chinatown, and then continue ordinances against it. Just go on and on and on and on and then, and then the the struggle to build the Chinatown and and then so the resolution ends with be it therefore resolve that we move forward for justice for all so. But it was exciting to be part of that. And that was part of my again, one of the things that I very, very excited to be able to do that would make a difference, I think, because the resolution was passed by the council was september 2021 and and then the next day, we had a big ceremony right at the near the Market Street areas. It's right in front of the museum that with the in front of the palms, you know, beautiful area, and there's a lion dance and big audience canopy. And it was just a very joyful to me, it was the, it was like a an act of grace to have a resolution and everybody great publicity. It was on CNN. They did several reports on it, local news, but nationally. And so I felt that, you know, it's very hard to have any lasting impact. But we felt that locally, you know, for our city, we felt we did it. We did it. It's done we established this and and then I gave each you know, so there were several speakers. Gerrye spoke, Evan Low, you know, Otto Lee. And then I spoke also, and I gave the story. So mine was the history of why this, you know, starting with Market Street Chinatown and my whole family, and it's important. But I also announced that there will be, there will be a park at the site of the Chinatown, and it would be called Heinlerville Park, you know, so and and in the park. So here's, here's what I feel. I don't feel really done, but this is as much as I can do on the at the site. You know Tamika Ross, incredible graphic designer and historian, activist historian, and she did the design for the history wall and the medallions, and I did the text. And the text is written in stone, the history of this site, beginning with a land acknowledgement, and then Chinese workers in the fields. Then goes on and on and covers the Filipino community, and then the Japanese coming back to rebuild, and then ending with the apology.

Connie Young Yu 1:12:46

Well, I mean, look at the. Politics in our country, I feel that there's a because the lasting impact has to be national. You know, we California's, well, I would say our area is pretty liberated and liberal, you know, and and understands it because of our population. Look at our demographics. But you go to another area, say, you know, in the Arkansas or some, you know, where I know, some people recently, Asians, have been told to go back to where they came from. So I feel that the understand and also the resistance of the Republicans and the far the white supremacy movement, which is always there. It's always there. It's always there, you know, the attack on the Capitol, and the fact that it could happen again, and the fact that we have a candidate that Trump's not never going to back down on, and in fact, go continuing, just as you know a convicted felon, and the fact that he's embraced by the Republican Party, embracing the racism, the pushback, of Roe Wade versus Roe, and any changes in the curriculum of schools? Remember, they said we don't want, we want the real history of America to be taught the real history of the white history. So I just feel we're on a cusp of something, you know, it's very scary. It's a very scary time

Mae Lee 1:16:37

For all the work that you've done in kind of promoting people understanding. You know these counter narratives of historical counter narratives that you're you've done. What do you think happens when people don't know this history? You know the history of what you're talking about in terms of Chinese exclusion, Chinese immigration, pan Asian solidarity, Asian American movement. You know incarceration during World War Two all. What do you think happens when people don't know this history?

Connie Young Yu 1:17:03

When people do not know the history of the struggles and the of Asian Americans? I feel it's the end of democracy. I think that it's the end of democracy because you it's rejecting a people. It's rejecting any, any progress that we've made. It's the ignorance would be well, you know, again, it goes back to institutionalizing racism. I think that we're rolling back, you know. I mean, look at the leg like, you know, what somebody said a legislator, if you can take away Roe versus Wade, take away anything, anything you know, anything, all of it. I mean Brown versus education. You know, not, okay, it's mainly in, in establishing our narrative that's accepted. You know, that's why stories are so important. You know, what is so amazing is only a few years ago was it known to the public about the Tulsa massacre, where a whole large African American community was devastated, eradicated, bombed upon in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and that they start interviewing the very, very elderly few survivors. And they said, you know, we tried to tell our stories that, you know, we must tell our stories. And how long has it taken? So anyway, I think that we keep doing it, we keep doing it, and we're hoping for the best. Election will make a difference. It will make a difference if, if it goes if, if Biden wins.

Mae Lee 1:19:20

I have a question, kind of a last question, yeah, have anything else?

Karen Wang 1:19:23

Um, I guess I kind of have a question that maybe I can just like, say which was, and maybe this is, like, actually in conversation with their last interview, Tom Izu and Susan Hayase, one of their narratives that they kind of pushed was to quote, unquote prevent the Japanese American community from shifting to the right. And you mentioned also that there's a sense of like, you know, like, like, you know, maybe like Republicans pushing a certain narrative that like goes against what you're trying to show my question is you also mentioned that your father was Republican. Yes, I was wondering, like, how do you reconcile all these

Connie Young Yu 1:20:02

He was a different Republican, and when it came to voting for Reagan, he couldn't do it. He voted for Anderson. He couldn't do it, so he voted for independent. In other words, the Republicans of the past are different. And the reason why a lot of them, people in the old days became Republicans. It was the party of Lincoln, and they felt, my father always felt they were better, nicer toward Chinese, you know, there because of the Democrats at that time. You know, the People's, you know, sort of the populous, you know. So no, I can reconcile that. I think that it'd be just incredible for if there was a contingent of Republicans that are Asian, you know, advocating for Trump. I mean, I'd be, yeah, I don't, I think they'd be have to be very quiet, you know, just like I think that they I think that we have being here, we have a responsibility, being in Santa Clara County, being, you know, having the opportunity to do what you're

doing. You know, it's a huge responsibility, and we have to work really hard. We have to take it seriously. You do, of course. And I think that we have to just go to the max on this, you know, no holds barred. Tell the story.

Mae Lee 1:21:38

Maybe just to close a question for you, which is looking back at all the efforts you've been involved with in and all the historical moments, and I guess, a lot of strategizing too, and a lot of energy put in, what are some of the major lessons that you have learned as an activist?

Connie Young Yu 1:21:57

As an activist, get as many allies as you can, and you have to have to, this is what the hard? Well, it's been very good. And because I think, you know, we're having Asian Americans in office, I think AACI started to try to get people on boards, to try to, you know, to change things. So I think that the lessons learned, where you have to, you have to be part of the political system. You have to be part of the community. You cannot be outside without following through. And the only way to follow through is through, you know, participation, through legislation. You know, though, and I like they say, the voting, the voting, ballot box, did not stop the Vietnam War, but the demonstrations did. So you still have to have the activism, the activism that is so and the sacrifice of people like the Vietnamese American writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen, you know, he's standing shoulder to shoulder with students. He's a faculty member, you know, and he demonstrated when he was a student at UC, Berkeley, and here he is as a professor at USC, standing with students who might very well get arrested and he with them, but I just think, you know, it's a, it's a real that was very inspiring to me, and it's unfortunate you have to do that. You know, you have to take risk. So you have to have everything, everything, because people, I mean, if it weren't for you, think there'd be a ceasefire agreement, even if the students didn't protest and the community, communities everywhere did not protest. So anyway, thank you, everyone. Fight. I know on solidarity forever. Thank you.

Karen Wang 1:23:58

Thank you so much. Thank you so

Mae Lee 1:24:01

much. Yeah, thanks. That was great.

Connie Young Yu 1:24:05

Great. Yeah.