



Bulletin 簡報

CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA MUSEUM Summer 2015 | Vol. 51, No. 2

Family ties to SF Chinatown brought Cecilia Chiang to America "Above & Beyond" honoree at CHSA Gala Saturday, September 19

Born in 1920 in Wuxi, near Shanghai, China, Cecilia Chiang was one of twelve children. The family moved to Beijing a few years later, where she was brought up in a wealthy, well-educated, and privileged family. In the nearly 100 years since, she has lived a remarkable life within the tumultuous history that has been the relationship between China and the US. World War II, the Chinese civil war, the Cold War, Ping Pong diplomacy, and today's ascendancy of China on the world stage . . . She has lived through it all.

Like so many, her family separated in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war, Cecilia ended up in Tokyo, where her husband served as a Chinese diplomat. Concerned about her widowed sister, Sophie in San Francisco (whose husband was the renowned Chinese American historian William Hoy), Cecilia came for a visit to the US and never looked back.

Serendipity led her to a chance meeting with two friends from Tokyo who planned to open a restaurant in the San Francisco. When they backed out, Cecilia was left with a restaurant lease and determination to make a success of it. And though Cecilia never learned to cook in China, she transformed herself into a Chinese food expert. A restaurant legend was born.

Initially, there was little business for The Mandarin, located on Polk Street, which was outside the traditional Chinatown core. It also served a menu that the local community was not familiar with—Szechuan and Hunan dishes as well as other northern Chinese dishes. The Chinese community, which had survived years of exclusion and isolation, was rooted in the traditions and culture of Cantonese Chinese, which Cecilia was unfamiliar with. She was even advised by legendary Chinatown restaurateur Johnny



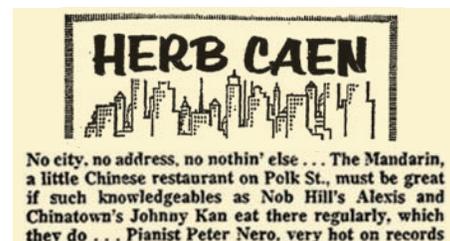
Photo courtesy Cecilia Chiang

Cecilia Chiang at The Mandarin in Ghirardelli Square.

Kan to offer more typical local Chinese food. Fortuitously, the attention of Vic Bergeron of *Trader Vic's* and *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen led to a steady stream of customers.

Once the restaurant on Polk Street got going, there was no stopping Cecilia. She set her sights on a larger, more refined setting in Ghirardelli Square. The new location opened with a bang—a celebration with the SF Opera Guild—with diners in black tie.

And the rest is history. With the success of The Mandarin, Cecilia became a celebrated figure in the field of fine dining. Perhaps most influential in contributing to her legacy were cooking classes she held in her home where other chefs learned about traditional Chinese cooking techniques and were exposed to a wide range of ingredients and tastes. Through these classes and other activities, she made friends



San Francisco Chronicle

Herb Caen's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* suggests that restaurateur Johnny Kan was an early adopter of Cecilia Chiang's cuisine at The Mandarin.

among food industry luminaries, including James Beard, Julia Child, Alice Waters, and Ruth Reichl. Even though she closed her restaurant in 1996, Cecilia continues to share her passion for Chinese food, mentoring young chefs and restaurateurs, making public appearances, and serving as a symbol for the values of quality and excellence in cuisine.

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Work of Giants update: Emerging community of Chinese railroad worker descendants

Just two years ago, the conventional wisdom was that there were no documented stories of Chinese railroad workers. On May 9, 2014, our community celebrated the momentous recognition by the U.S. Department of Labor to induct Chinese Railroad Workers into the Hall of Labor in Washington, D.C. This was the beginning of our “Work of Giants: Chinese Railroad Worker Project.”

“Work of Giants” dedicated to deepening our understanding of this history, is making significant progress. A new travelling exhibit, “The Chinese and Iron Road” was coproduced by CHSA and Stanford University’s Chinese Railroad Workers in North America project for a gathering held on June 6, 2015 at Stanford. Over 50 descendants were among the more than 250 participants. And these descendants represented at least 15 individual railroad workers.

Each descendant family has their own unique story about their ancestor’s journey to America and the challenges faced. Descendants Paulette Liang and Russell Low briefly described their family stories at the event.

Paulette Liang’s great grandfather Lum Ah Chew worked on the Central Pacific Railroad. Her family oral history had always talked about him working as a cook. Ah Chew can be found on the Central Pacific payroll ledgers for August, September and October 1866; he is listed as cook and waiter.

In 1994, Russell Low’s great uncle Kim Hong talked at length about his railroad worker father Hung Lai Woh and uncle who worked on the Central Pacific Railroad, including the fact that his uncle lost an eye in a blasting accident while working



Russell Low/Hung Lai Woh Descendant



Paulette Liang/Lum Ah Chew Descendant

CHSA Collection; videos produced by Rick Quan

Russell Low and Paulette Liang are two descendants who have shared their family’s connection to the Transcontinental Railroad.

on the snow sheds in the Sierras. His account spurred the family to delve more deeply into their railroad ancestor’s story.

Through oral histories and painstaking research, a handful of descendant families have now been identified through primary sources (Central Pacific Railroad payroll ledgers, census records, immigration documents).

These Chinese railroad workers include Chin Lin Sou, Jim King, Hung Lai Woh, Lim Lip Hong, Lee Wong Sang, and Lum Ah Chew.

CHSA is proud to be part of reframing the Chinese American narrative, telling our own stories, in our own words. As we approach the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 2019, our goals include: identifying railroad descendant families, creating a descendant family registry, capturing descendant

stories through oral history interviews, and sharing stories through exhibitions, publications and video. If you are a railroad descendant we want to hear from you. We have set up an online registry at chsa.org/work-of-giants (to respect your privacy, your information will not be shared with others).

OUR STORY IS GETTING OUT!

Recently, Stanford University Professor Gordon Chang, CHSA Executive Director Sue Lee and railroad descendants Russell Low and Connie Young Yu participated in KQED’s Forum radio broadcast with Michael Krasny. Listen to the one hour program, plus view other press coverage and “Work of Giants” projects at chsa.org/work-of-giants

Remembering Sarah Choy



Photos courtesy Choy Family

Sarah Choy and her lifelong friends.

We said goodbye to our dear friend Sarah Choy, who passed away on June 19, 2015. A memorial was held at the True Sunshine Episcopal Church on Mason Street in San Francisco. Sarah is survived by historian/architect and CHSA Board Emeritus Philip P. Choy, their children Randy, Brian, and Stephanie, and many grandchildren.

Along with her husband Phil, Sarah served as an exemplary steward of the Chinese Historical Society of America.

At times, they involved their entire family in projects to bolster CHSA's exhibitions, programs and fundraising events. Sarah's own ties to the building came from her involvement with the Chinese YWCA from the time she was a young girl. She was a Girl Reserve, volunteered, and was eventually hired as YWCA staff in the 1940s. She spoke fondly of those early years, and she felt strongly that her sense of community stewardship stemmed from that exposure to

the greater San Francisco community. Until recently, Sarah volunteered every Wednesday afternoon and welcomed CHSA museum visitors with a bright smile and shared her memories of living in the Chinese community.

Community and deep relationships were emphasized by lifelong friend Emma Louie at the memorial, "One thing will never change, and that is our love for Sarah and our memories of this sweet lady."

We gratefully acknowledge the following donors who have contributed to CHSA in memory of Sarah Choy:

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The *CHSA Bulletin* is published multiple times throughout the year. To contribute articles about Chinese American community and historical news and events, please submit articles to info@chsa.org.

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Bulletin
 CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA MUSEUM



Above & Beyond Chinatown
 AN "ONLY IN SF" ON THE STREET & IN THE MUSEUM FESTIVAL OF FOOD & FUN
 September 19, 2015 4–8pm
 at CHSA Museum
 965 CLAY STREET, SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108




The Chinese Historical Society of America **invites you to participate as a Community Sponsor for our 2015 Above and Beyond Chinatown Gala!** For a \$1000 gift, we will acknowledge your generous support in our Legacy Gallery Digital Donor Display and provide you two tickets to the Gala. Other sponsorship levels and packages are available.

Featuring:

- Gourmet food from Palio d'Asti, Asia SF, Butterfly, MYChina, Crystal Jade, 25 Lusk, & Original Joes (partial list)
- Fine wines provided by Zinfandel Advocates & Producers
- Music and entertainment will take place inside-and-out CHSA's landmark museum, designed by Julia Morgan
- A festive live auction, led by Liam Mayclem, will take place along with a special award for Cecilia Chiang at 6pm



Honoring Cecilia Chiang

Still going strong at 95, Cecilia Chiang is known internationally for bringing authentic, high-quality cuisine to America and was recently featured in the PBS TV documentary *Soul of a Banquet*.



Hosted by Liam Mayclem

Host of CBS 5's "Eye on the Bay" & KCBS' "Foodie Chap"

Visit chsa.org/event/above-beyond-chinatown for Gala event info, ticket purchases, and sponsorships. Questions? Call (415) 391-1188, email info@chsa.org. All contributions are tax deductible (Federal tax ID #94-67122446). Thank you for your continued support!