After looking into the matter, I have decided that Lee was one of the most influential San Franciscans of the 20th century—but also one of the most elusive, most reserved and subtle in the exercise of this influence.
—Kevin Starr, former California State Librarian

**INRODUCTION**

The Portola Festival of 1909 was a citywide, city-sponsored celebration that filled San Francisco with revelry and spectacle for five days. During the day, buildings adorned with bright red and yellow banners and flags colored the streets; at night, myriad lights illuminated the skyline. All of San Francisco came together for these few days to marvel at the festivities, which included warship displays, nightly fireworks, and auto races. With the shiny new buildings and—for the time being—a jubilant and cohesive population, there was a great sense of hope during this time. The Portola Festival represented a new San Francisco that was ripe and ready for success and economic development after the devastation of the great earthquake and fire of 1906.

The centerpiece and culmination of this festival was the closing act on the last night—the Historic Pageant Parade. In this extravagant nighttime spectacle that chronicled significant events in San Francisco’s history, Chinatown was invited to participate with its own section. San Francisco’s Chinese community enthusiastically accepted this invitation and wasted neither time nor effort in preparing for the parade. And the community delivered; according to a 1909 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “the Chinese more than sustained their reputation for superb pageants” with colorful lanterns, loud gongs, and dragon dances.

Given the decades of discrimination by San Francisco’s White populations and Chinatown’s deeply ingrained, sordid reputation as a ghetto filled with prostitution, gambling, and morally questionable bachelors, the San Francisco Chinese community saw this parade as a singular chance to reshape its image among neighbors and mainstream American society. This festival represented the beginning of the Chinese community’s movement to “clean up” Chinatown. Community leaders believed that improving the image of Chinatown would improve the image of Chinese Americans, ameliorate long-standing discrimination and resentment against the Chinese American community, and allow better assimilation of Chinese people into mainstream American society. With the citywide changes after the 1906 earthquake, the Chinese American population began to assert not only its rightful belonging to the greater San Francisco and American communities, but also its own distinct identity, which was both Chinese and American.

What does the Portola Festival have to do with Chingwah Lee, the subject of this paper? The parade was where eight-year-old, San Francisco–born Chingwah had his first taste of the limelight. Colorfully dressed as the sea king atop one of Chinatown’s floats, young Chingwah participated in the beginning of an era of reshaping Chinese American identities. The mentality embodied by this parade and festival—the hope and burning desire to improve the image of Chinese Americans in the mainstream American imagination through performance—mirrored the very ideals that motivated Chingwah Lee as he led his life through the twentieth century.

Throughout his lifetime, Chingwah was a well-known presence, both within Chinatown and elsewhere in San Francisco. In his many roles—founder and scoutmaster of San Francisco Chinatown’s Boy Scouts Troop 3; cofounder of the first English-language publication written by and for Chinese Americans, the *Chinese Digest*; the man who essentially developed tourism in San Francisco Chinatown; one of the few Chinese American actors who made it in Hollywood; and cofounder of the Chinese Historical Society of America—he left behind legacies that live to this day. The driving force behind Chingwah’s prolific activities was a desire to improve the image of the Chinese American community.

Despite his extraordinary energy and efforts, his extensive work for and dedication to the Chinese American community both inside and outside of Chinatown, there has only been one substantial piece of literature about Chingwah Lee him-
self: six pages dedicated to his accomplishments and contributions in Thomas W. Chinn’s survey of San Francisco Chinatown, Bridging the Pacific.

Why isn’t Chingwah, a popular and well-liked personality in his lifetime, a more prominent presence in the history of San Francisco Chinatown today? My research suggests two answers. First, Chingwah Lee, despite his great public presence, was an elusive character who kept his personal life extremely private. Second, the field of Asian American studies is relatively new, emerging only in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the literature about Asian American history has looked at its communities from the outside and on macroscopic, sociological levels; Asian American scholars have, until recently, largely overlooked the voices of individuals who defined, led, helped, and defended their communities. The academic rigor of these scholars, however, pioneered a new field of American study and provided the fundamental basis upon which we, today, can better and more deeply explore that field.

This essay is a twofold effort to add to the growing literature about Chinese American history. It is a microhistorical biography of one influential, yet historically forgotten, man. It also examines Chinese American identity as a whole through the uncommon lens of a man who actively participated in the continuous redefinition and reshaping of that identity throughout the twentieth century.

After conducting numerous interviews with his family members, friends, and acquaintances; poring over papers and books in hopes of finding even the slightest mention of his name; and digging through a box of old newspaper clippings, letters, and papers that was kept in a forgotten corner of a relative’s basement for decades, I share in this article my research and findings about the life of Chingwah Lee, the Chinese American community as he understood it, and the San Francisco he called home. Although this paper only scratches the surface of Chingwah’s life, I hope his family and friends find that the story I have pieced together at the very least gives Chingwah fair recognition for his inspiring accomplishments. Moreover, I hope this essay compels others to continue developing a deeper historical appreciation of Chingwah Lee and the other individuals who, together, shaped a collective Chinese American experience.

SETTING THE STAGE (1901–19)

In 1877, Kam Chuen Lee, Chingwah’s father, emigrated to San Francisco as a merchant, thus avoiding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He established himself as a reputable doctor of Chinese medicine in Chinatown and in 1887 returned to his hometown to marry Yoke Lum, a wealthy merchant’s daughter. They returned to San Francisco that same year to settle down and start their family. In 1898, Mrs. Lee gave birth to Changwah, their eldest son. Like the eight siblings that would follow, Changwah was born at home. On June 28, 1901, the Lee family welcomed their second child, Chingwah. The younger sons were Edwar, Kingwah, Horace, and Elmer. The three daughters were Agnes, Cora, and Marion.

In 1906, the great earthquake and fire destroyed the city, but from the destruction emerged the promise of refashioning San Francisco and its communities—Chinatown included. However, although the rebuilding and the Portola parade of 1909 offered the Chinese community hope that it could assert more rights for itself, subsequent events were more discouraging. The Chinese community tried its best to take advantage of the seeming shift in attitudes, but the situation more or less remained the same. In 1910, the establishment of the Angel Island Immigration Station institutionalized the stringent policies toward Chinese immigration, and the Chinese community remained basically constrained to the few blocks that made up Chinatown. The area still had a sordid reputation, and few opportunities existed for the youth, such as Chingwah and his brothers. If they ever left Chinatown, they faced taunting and the threat of violence. When asked in his later years what factors contributed to a “distinctive Chinese American culture,” Chingwah himself stated: “One factor which bound the Chinese together in the early days was a certain loneliness. They felt that the people here were not too interested in them, except as a curiosity.”

The reopening of the Chinese Primary School, which was destroyed during the 1906 earthquake, as the Oriental School represented the regression that accompanied apparent progression. Chingwah and all his siblings attended this segregated school for San Francisco’s Chinese, Japanese, and Korean children. This blatant segregation defined Chingwah’s childhood and would shape his lifelong passion for creating a positive image for Chinese Americans. Furthermore, in describing his youth, Chingwah especially criticized the poor quality of education available to the children of San Francisco Chinatown when he was growing up. According to Chingwah, schools in San Francisco were “absolutely segregated” and “so corrupt.” The teachers were “inadequate” and “not well-prepared to teach children.” Chingwah commented that he and the other Chinese children never did any of the homework: “It was so corrupt that none of us worried about it!”

Despite the discrimination and segregation he faced, his unique background as a second-generation Chinese American and as a relatively privileged member of one of the wealthier and more respected families within the Chinatown community planted in young Chingwah a sense of responsibility to the community and an industrious attitude.

His father was a thriving herbalist and a major partner in a firm called Sun Gum Wah. Located at 736 Grant Avenue, the business, according to Chingwah, sold firecrackers and imported Chinese goods, and sales ran “into the tens of thousands of dollars as it approached the start of the new year.” The Lee parents, despite their financial success, did not forget their Chinese roots—they made sure to instill in their children an appreciation for Chinese culture and history.
Chingwah’s father’s “family for generations [had] been eminent art dealers, both in China and America,” and his true interest lay in art objects. He started “dealing with the importation and sale of antique things—porcelain, bronzes and paintings,” and, according to Chingwah, “some of it rubbed off on him.”

Chingwah would follow in his father’s footsteps by becoming a widely recognized Asian art authority in the Bay Area. In the words of Rose K. Gidley, who wrote an article about Chingwah Lee in 1946, “Even though the family was large, there were money and culture, and the Lee family [was] highly respected and liked in San Francisco.”

The Lee parents also developed in all of their children traditional values of family unity and a strong work ethic. With so many children, the elder sons felt especially compelled to work, support themselves, and ease the financial burden on their parents as soon as they were able. Indeed, Chingwah’s parents “were willing to help,” but “when you have five brothers and three sisters, you don’t want your parents to help.”

Despite their relative wealth within the Chinese community, the Lee family still lived in a “crowded place.”

Chingwah began as early as sixth grade to hire himself out as a houseboy to Caucasian families outside of Chinatown, doing domestic work in the morning before he went to school and helping with dinner when he came back from school. Moreover, the elder sons, Changwah, Chingwah, Edwar, and Kingwah, took it upon themselves to take care of their younger siblings, especially after the death of their father in 1924 and their mother in 1931. The Lee children, partly as a result of their parents’ insistence that they always eat meals together, remained tight-knit throughout their lives; even when interviewed by Thomas Chinn in 1973, Chingwah stated: “We hate to leave each other so we all stay around the bay region.”

This notion of taking care of others would stay with Chingwah for the rest of his life as he extended his sense of responsibility beyond his family to the greater Chinese American community.

The early decades of the twentieth century were turbulent for members of the overseas Chinese community, for they faced discrimination from their American neighbors as well as instability in China, where most of their family members still lived. In 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown, and the Nationalists took control of the Chinese government. As a relative of Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary Chinese Nationalist Party leader, Kam Chuen supported the Nationalist cause in China and played a large role in raising money and rallying local support for the cause. Dr. Lee’s status as a community leader surely contributed to the leadership roles that his sons would assume later in their lives; Changwah would become the district army commander for the American Legion in a “certain district of . . . San Francisco that was mainly Caucasian,” and Edwar would play a major role in the Chinese American Christian community as a respected minister.

Chingwah had a restless and industrious way about him, a way of making even dull circumstances entertaining for himself and others. For example, the children of Chinatown saw Chinese school as a burden, and understandably so—in addition to regular English school, most Chinese parents required their children to attend Chinese school in the afternoons and evenings on the weekdays and on Saturdays. Edwar recalled how his qualms about going to these strict Chinese school sessions were somewhat quelled by his big brother Chingwah, who made them into a fun sort of game and social experiment. Chingwah would get other children at Chinese school to do him favors; in return, Chingwah would write them promissory notes, which could be used to redeem a favor from him later. This story, although seemingly insignificant, shows that Chingwah had, from an early age, an optimistic, sociable way about him, as well as the makings of a good businessman.

In 1914, World War I began, and in that same year, Chingwah founded Chinese Boy Scouts Troop 3 with his friends and brothers, who would later be referred to as the “original eight.” Chingwah was the leader of this group, which played in the local Methodist churchyard every day after school, and it seemed only natural to him to write to the Boy Scout headquarters in New York when the group stumbled accidentally upon a Scout guide. Chingwah Lee, even as a child, saw no boundaries to what he could do, despite the stereotypes and discrimination he grew up with. The Boy Scouts would define Chingwah’s childhood and much of his adulthood. The troop took trips, participated in outdoor activities, and had regular meetings at the YMCA. Troop 3 would redefine the boyhood experience in San Francisco Chinatown, for it offered the first outlet for the Chinese American boys and created, for the first time, a sense of cohesion and a common experience in this community.

World War I allowed Chingwah and Troop 3 to become more involved in mainstream American society. In 1915, Chingwah and the rest of Troop 3 served as the guards of honor to President Taft when he visited San Francisco for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Throughout the war years, the troop enthusiastically sold Liberty Bonds, collected tinfoil, participated in parades, and “entertained” over one thousand American soldiers and sailors with sightseeing trips through San Francisco Chinatown. His leadership of Troop 3’s war efforts sowed the seeds to establish Chingwah as a spokesperson for San Francisco’s Chinese American community.

**BECOMING CHINATOWN’S SPOKESPERSON (1919–29)**

World War I ended in 1919, and Chingwah graduated from the Polytechnic High School in December 1920. He became a staff volunteer at the YMCA and the assistant scoutmaster of Troop 3, both creating athletic and cultural opportunities and serving as a role model for the younger boys in the community. Moreover, he founded the Vacation Daily Bible School for Chinatown youth during the summertime and served as its principal.
Chingwah Lee also helped found the Chinese High School Students’ Club and cofounded the Tri-Termly Toots in 1921 with Thomas Chinn, who would remain a good friend throughout his life. The Tri-Termly Toots, although described by Chinn as only a modest “mimeographed affair,” was the official publication of the club and an important milestone in the vocalization of second-generation Chinese American identity. This effort would give Chingwah and Thomas a base off of which to work when they cofounded the Chinese Digest in 1935.

The Chinese High School Students’ Club promoted unity among Chinese high school students across San Francisco through social gatherings and meetings to discuss common issues. This club was one of the first organized movements to address the needs of a growing Chinese American community and voiced a uniquely second-generation identity. Chingwah described it as follows: “The aim was so that people going to different high schools would have a chance to get together and compare notes and point out common problems and things of that sort. And we also had a lot of fun having dances, dinners and other get-togethers.”

In 1923, Chingwah became scoutmaster of Troop 3 and soon afterward enrolled at UC Berkeley. He dabbled in many different fields, including psychology, animal behaviorism, lumbering, agronomy, “Oriental” studies, and Russian, but eventually ended up choosing anthropology as his major: “I don’t know why but when your mind runs that way for a while . . . it runs that way.”

Chingwah’s college years were filled with myriad and diverse activities, including chairing the western department of the Chinese Christian Students’ Association; writing creative works, including a short story that was published in a local newspaper; acting in a student-written play called Rejuvenescence; and organizing luncheons and events for students to mingle and learn as a part of the International Club at UC Berkeley. Chingwah also remained a scoutmaster and continued in journalism by creating the Scout Wig-Wag, the official publication for Troop 3. Moreover, as the Chinese YMCA boys’ secretary, Chingwah told stories to and organized athletic and extracurricular events for Chinatown’s young boys. He also continued giving tours of Chinatown and trained his Boy Scouts to give high-quality and informative tours that gave visitors a positive impression of Chinatown and the Chinese American community. In college, Chingwah fed
his ever-curious mind and facilitated a sense of community wherever he went.

In 1924, Chingwah's father passed away, leaving behind his substantial art collection. Although one cannot say for sure, this event could have been an important factor in encouraging Chingwah to begin taking art more seriously. During his college years, Chingwah attended summer sessions about Chinese art at Whittier, Harvard, and the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. In 1928, Chingwah graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in anthropology.

In 1929, Chingwah attended the fifty-sixth annual National Conference of Social Work, held June 26 through July 3 in San Francisco, and gave a talk called “The Second Generation of the Chinese.” This was an important event, for it solidified Chingwah’s role as a spokesperson for the Chinese American community in San Francisco. Chingwah addressed a predominantly White audience, and the speech characterized Chingwah’s approach to representing and defending the Chinese image in the minds of White Americans. He explicitly pointed out the unique position of the “second generation of Chinese Americans” as that of a “mighty conflict of cultures.” Chingwah described the struggles that his American-born peers faced and articulated a second-generation identity that was, uniquely, both Chinese and American.

Chingwah emphasized that, despite the American-born Chinese population’s attachment to its Chinese cultural and “racial” heritage, second-generation Chinese Americans were just like ‘the Americans”: “They study Chinese and speak English, admire Confucius and adore Jesus, like Chinese literature, art and festivals, but dance to American music, motor, hike, and attend theaters as do the Americans.” Using the study of eugenics and the long history of Chinese art and culture as proof, Chingwah went on to explain that the Chinese population in America was “a decided asset” to American society because of its “racial mental prowess” and “great capacity for endurance.”

Chingwah was able to articulate his community’s sentiments to outsiders with a certain charisma and command of public performance. Indeed, Chingwah would find himself exercising those skills as he played the role of cultural mediator throughout the rest of his life.

“MR. CHINATOWN”
(1930–43)

In 1930, he left his position as boys' secretary at the YMCA to establish the Chinese Better Trade and Travel Bureau. Frustrated by the “bunkum which certain guides peddled to the Chinatown tourists” and upset that the guides “missed the art, the life, the customs, the atmosphere,” Chingwah had dreamed about founding such a bureau since childhood. He seized the chance when, impressed by the Boy Scouts’ free tours and unable to provide satisfactory tours of Chinatown without any locals on their staff, a number of sightseeing companies asked Chingwah if he could provide guides: “There was the Pacific Sightseeing Company, for example, that had a few sightseeing buses and that tour was so unsatisfactory that there was frequent demands for refunds. So finally the bus company themselves came to us and asked if we could furnish guides to them.” By 1931, Gray Line Tours had made Chingwah its chief Chinatown tour director.

From the 1930s onward, Chingwah trained “many high school students to give a well-presented tour of Chinatown,” enabling them to present an accurate and positive image of Chinatown to its visitors. In an interview, Chingwah described how taxicab-drivers-turned-guides “would invent weird stories about Chinese doing impossible things—having a war every Saturday night—and so on.” Those tour guides perpetuated common, but untrue, stereotypes of “Chinatown as a corrupt place inhabited by Chinese criminals, gamblers, and opium addicts.” Chingwah made sure
to train his guides to fight those “weird stories” in a very specific way, and over the years, he polished and perfected the message. By the mid-1930s, Chingwah had established himself as “Mr. Chinatown.” Chingwah continued to give Chinatown tours himself until he passed away in 1980 and was responsible for making tourism a positive and valuable asset to the Chinatown community.

In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria, and Japan and China began their intermittent fighting until full-scale war was declared in 1937. Japanese aggression incensed Chingwah and became a main topic in the talks he began to give throughout the 1930s.

In the early 1930s, Chingwah also began setting up art exhibits at small venues, such as Chinatown stores and restaurants, taking his pursuit of art history and appreciation much more seriously. In 1934, he realized his dream of having his own art studio when he bought a place in Cameron Alley, which he renamed Old Chinatown Lane, and started the Chingwah Lee Studio of orientalia.

As mentioned above, Chingwah and Thomas Chinn founded the Chinese Digest in 1935. This paper was historically significant because it was the first English-language paper written by Chinese Americans, for Chinese Americans. However, Chingwah and Chinn saw the Chinese Digest as much more than just an informative newsmagazine; they saw it as a vehicle with which second-generation Chinese Americans could reach an English-speaking audience. This was one of the major themes in Chingwah’s life—being a cultural broker between the Chinese and non-Chinese communities.

Starting with its passionate first issue in 1935, the Chinese Digest continued to “record the sociological, political and everyday events” of Chinese Americans until it folded in July 1940. The Digest voiced its generation’s sentiments and established a platform for discussion on a variety of topics, including “News, Sports, Social, Comment, Business, Philosophy, Literature, [and] Travel.” Until Chingwah made it the official organ of the China Cultural Society in 1940, almost every issue of the Digest included the following sections: News about China, which highlighted current events in China; Chinatownia, which covered the latest news in Chinatowns across the country; Editorial, in which the editor voiced his opinion on current issues, especially the Japanese invasion of China; Culture, in which Chingwah wrote about Chinese art, history, culture, and inventions; and Sports, which highlighted Chinese achievements and participation in athletics. During its five years of publication, the Chinese Digest reached readers across the country, including Seattle, Hawai‘i, New Mexico, and the East Coast.

Chingwah contributed at least one article to the Culture section for every single issue, even in 1935 when he was living in Hollywood while filming The Good Earth. He made sure to point out the positive points of Chinese culture and how the Chinese community had in the past, and could in the future, positively contribute to American society. Throughout all of his articles, Chingwah emphasized pride in China and the longevity of its culture, illustrated deep knowledge of the topic, and demonstrated a strong command of written rhetoric. The section encompassed three main series: Ceramic Art, Remember When?, and Chinese Inventions and Discoveries. In Ceramic Art, Chingwah described aspects of ceramic art objects that would be of interest to collectors. He recommended reference books; wrote about historical and anthropological aspects of Chinese art, such as the “evolution of the hollow base and the foot rim”; and gave collectors detailed instructions on how to study “glaze on Chinese ceramics.”

In Chinese Inventions and Discoveries, he closely examined Chinese achievements. Sample articles were “China Had a Board of Public Health 3,000 Years Ago,” “China Had the First Planetarium and Relief Map,” and “The Chinese Were the First to Play Football.” Remember When? recalled the early days of Chinatown, when men wore their hair in queues during the Qing dynasty, when “there used to be an altar in the back part of almost every shop in Chinatown,” or when “young men and women were never seen together on the streets of Chinatown.” Chingwah described Remember When? as a “series of 52 recordings of sociological and cultural changes taking place in Chinatown within a generation.” By contrasting the “old” Chinatown with the “new,” he creatively and directly illustrated, with examples, the shifting nature of the Chinese American population and its identity.

In January 1940, Chingwah took over as the editor of the newsmagazine for its last issue. He turned it into the official organ of the China Cultural Society, which he founded to increase awareness about and appreciation for Chinese culture. Unfortunately, the magazine still eventually folded. Chingwah remarked to Thomas Chinn that the chief reason it stopped publishing was that most of its staff had joined the army after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Despite the short life of the Digest, Chinn “never regretted it,” and Chingwah called it “a great achievement,” for the newspaper “recorded [their] daily lives for that one period.” In addition to providing later generations with this historical record, the Digest effected real improvements in Chinatown. Chinn recalled a time when Chingwah’s editorial resulted in the establishment of a ladies’ hotel in Chinatown: “I particularly remembered a couple of times you wrote the editorials for things that had to do with the community. One of them was . . . the great need for a girls’ or ladies’ hotel. . . . The Gum Moon Residence for Ladies . . . was a direct result of our editorial.” In addition, because the Digest articulated the concerns, frustrations, and achievements of the Chinese in America, the newsmagazine furthered Chingwah’s goals of uniting the Chinese American community and presenting a unified voice to the mainstream American public.

Alongside Chingwah’s journalistic endeavors was his acting career. It started in 1935 when Irving Thalberg, one of the biggest producers in Hollywood, asked for Chingwah’s
Chingwah Lee

help in recruiting Chinese actors for MGM’s *The Good Earth*. Apparently, finding Chinese actors turned out to be much more difficult than either had anticipated, so Paul Muni, the main character in *The Good Earth*, asked Chingwah to audition for a part. Chingwah ended up getting the supporting role of Ching. Chingwah spent most of 1935 and 1936 filming *The Good Earth*, which was released in 1937. The film went on to win two Oscars, and Chingwah’s Hollywood career blossomed. Chingwah was one of the few Chinese American actors of his time, along with Keye Luke and Anna May Wong. In the same year, Chingwah played Yuan in *The Rainbow Pass* and Quan Lin in *Daughter of Shanghai*. With acting, Chingwah harnessed his gift for performance to further his goal of “improving the Chinese image.”

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese army attacked Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered World War II. A few months later, Chingwah joined the army and served as an interpreter at the Sixth Army headquarters at the Old Presidio of Monterey. After Pearl Harbor, unfortunately, all the shops in Old Chinatown Lane folded because so many people left to join the war effort.

**SETTING DOWN (1943–80)**

In 1943, Chingwah returned to San Francisco and resumed acting, managing Chinatown’s tourism, and maintaining his studio. After World War II ended in 1945, Chingwah became an appraiser for the U.S. Army Alien Property Custodian Bureau, appraising many valuable Chinese antiques. Chingwah also began to teach at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design in San Francisco. He taught Asian art history courses there for twelve years, until the 1960s.

After World War II, Chingwah married Florence, and they had one daughter, Sandra. The details of this relationship are vague, but Chingwah ended up divorcing Florence in the 1950s.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Chingwah devoted most of his efforts to establishing himself as an Asian art authority in San Francisco. He also starred in a number of television shows; traveled to Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand in 1952; and served as a technical set consultant to and acted in a variety of films, including *China Smith*, *Bloody Alley*, *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, and *Flower Drum Song*.

One can imagine that Chingwah had become quite disillusioned with the Chinese American movement by this time. The *Chinese Digest* had folded, democracy had fallen to Communism with the rise of the People’s Republic of China, and the Korean War had destroyed any hopes of normalization between the United States and China. Still, Chingwah tried his best to improve the image of the Chinese community in America.

In 1951, he starred in *Number Nine Chinatown Lane* with Marjorie Trumbull. In this TV series, Chingwah juxtaposed the stereotypes of the Chinese population with the richness and long heritage of Chinese culture. Chingwah intentionally played off the fears of dark, mysterious, and criminal Chinatown alleyways, contrasting those images with his gentlemanly, knowledgeable, “poised and extremely lucid” personality to dispel the misconceptions about his community.

Chingwah also continued giving tours of Chinatown, doing his best to affect the people he could reach directly. His art studio was always open to the public, and he gained a reputation of being one of the most open and receptive Asian art authorities in San Francisco. He was gentlemanly, kind, and willing to explain things. His studio was quite successful in achieving his aims; Thomas Chinn stated to Chingwah, “I believe that exposure by way of your studio and your own personal explanations and personality has a lot to do with exposing ‘Oriental’ art to the American public.”

Moreover, Chingwah lived his life in ways that defied what people expected of him, or approved. Although he was very proud of his Chinese culture and heritage, he was open-minded about other cultures and entered in the 1960s into...
a long-term relationship with a Caucasian woman named Helen Colcord, who lived in San Mateo and taught classes in Asian decorative art. Although Helen was not generally liked by Chingwah’s friends, and although Chingwah would find himself paying off thousands of dollars of Helen’s debt in the 1970s, they still maintained a decade long relationship.

Because Chingwah was an extremely private man, I could not uncover more about his personal or romantic relationships. However, he was close with his family members. He was especially fond of his niece Lori, especially during the 1970s, when she began attending his Saturday symposiums on art.

These symposiums began in 1966. Chingwah had cofounded the Chinese Culture Center and the Chinese Historical Society of America with Thomas Chinn in 1965, and in 1966, a small group of society members asked if Chingwah would start teaching on Chinese art and culture. Chingwah, of course, agreed to share his knowledge. For over a year, Chingwah met with eight to twelve regulars at his studio every week, and they would then “troop to a local restaurant with him as [their] guest.” These symposiums continued throughout the 1970s, and they were open to whoever wanted to listen in. One regular participant was Hanni Forrester, who, along with her husband, was an avid Asian art collector. Hanni noted that most of the regulars were Caucasians whom the other Asian art specialists had snubbed. Chingwah, Hanni noted, was the only friendly face in this space. She said that he was a “strange man” and often smelled of alcohol, but was always kind and gentlemanly. She noted that although she and her husband knew him for about fifteen years, Chingwah never spoke about himself and was extremely private. Even after Chingwah’s death, the core attendees of the Saturday symposiums carried on as the Asian Art Study Group. For over two years, they met once a month, taking it in turns to host. The hosting couple would pick a subject, and the group would discuss it.

Given the incredible energy that Chingwah had spent trying to improve the image of the Chinese in the American imagination, it makes sense that he would have been disillusioned by seeing stereotypes persist and gangs and violence rise in Chinatown. One can certainly hear disillusionment in his comments on another aspect of his life, the film industry: “If they [give] a good image to the Chinese, it’s accidental. I don’t blame them. . . . [Producers’ and directors’] job is to sell and make money. . . . I haven’t been to a movie in the last two years.”36 He did not blame the actors, however: “Actors are nothing but puppets, dummies. . . . They just do what they’re supposed to do. . . . If you go beyond what the director wants, then you’re in trouble.”37

In the end, Chingwah did not eradicate negative depictions of Chinese people in popular media, but he made the best of his opportunities, audaciously stepping out of the roles expected of Chinese people by both Chinese and White Americans, to further his goal of reshaping the perceptions of the Chinese population in the American imagination.

Until 1978, Chingwah had never been able to travel to mainland China because of Cold War tensions. He traveled to China for the first and last time in 1978 as a result of improved U.S.–China relations, which were normalized in 1979. Through a contact of his sister Cora, Chingwah traveled with twenty-four other Americans across all of China. Lori, his niece, was also on this trip. She described how excited her uncle was throughout the whole trip and how he commanded respect with his extensive knowledge of Chinese
TOUR BY S.F.'S 'MR. CHINATOWN'

90-Minute March Teaches Chinese Culture to Children

BY CHARLES HILLINGER
Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — The third graders followed closely as "Mr. Chinatown" led them up the Alley of Painted Balconies.

"This is so much like a street in Hong Kong," said Chingwah Lee, "it is hard to tell the difference."

He waved his arms and brought the group to a halt in front of the Chinese Times Building.

"This is one of four daily Chinese language papers published in San Francisco," explained Lee, squinting through his glasses as he read the front page displayed in the window.

His head bobbed up and down as he followed the columns of Chinese characters that run vertically instead of horizontally.

"We Chinese find it easier to nod up and down like this than to wiggle our heads back and forth like other people when they read," Lee told the children.

'Mr. Chinatown'

Chingwah Lee, 73, lifelong resident of San Francisco, has been taking children on daily hour-and-half walks through the heart of Chinatown for 30 years.

He is one of San Francisco's leading art appraisers, owner of one of the finest Chinese art studios in the western world.

Lee has appeared as an actor over the years in a number of movies—films like "Good Earth," "Flower Drum Song," "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo" and the "Charlie Chan" series.

To San Francisco's 60,000 Chinese residents, Chingwah Lee is "Mr. Chinatown."

He leads 50 to 75 boys and girls through the alleys and streets of Chinatown every morning from 10:30 to noon to give the children a better understanding of Chinese customs and culture.

Chingwah Lee is so popular schools make reservations up to a year in advance to walk through Chinatown with him.

School Outing

On this walk, "Mr. Chinatown" was accompanied by 50 third graders and their teachers from Valhalla Elementary School in Pleasant Hill, across the Bay in Contra Costa County.

Lee begins his walk at Portsmouth Square, cradle of San Francisco, beside a monument to author Robert Louis Stevenson.

"Stevenson spent hours in this park talking to seafaring adventurers," Lee told the children. "He

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art and culture. He spoke with everyone he could about art and enjoyed the trip thoroughly.

Only two years after this trip, Chingwah passed away in 1980 at the house of Elmer and his wife, Jean, with whom he had spent New Year’s Day.

THE LEGACY (1980s–PRESENT)

Eulogies for Chingwah and statements of memory in several newspapers demonstrate his impact and presence in Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco. Chingwah’s “personality” was characterized as that of a charismatic yet generous, kind yet mysterious, scholar. In my interviews with those who knew Chingwah, none failed to point out his kindness and generosity—he was always accommodating to any visitors who walked into his studio, readily taking items out of the glass cases to show them. His collection was worth a large amount of money—when it was auctioned off at Sotheby’s in Los Angeles after his death, “it sold for over a million dollars!” Although Chingwah sold other people’s art objects and kept them on consignment, his own art objects were generally not for sale.

Chingwah’s legacy lives on. After his death, UC Berkeley set up the Chingwah Lee Scholarship for students studying Chinese culture and art, and Troop 3 formed a memorial fund to perpetuate the memory of Chingwah.

Even today, we can see direct evidence of Chingwah’s impact on Chinatown and American society. A number of English-language magazines and newspapers serve the second-generation Asian American population, and Chingwah’s involvement in the pioneering Chinese Digest set the stage for them. The Boy Scouts’ San Francisco Bay Area Council, which Chingwah helped initiate, today serves San Francisco and Alameda counties and supports more than three hundred local packs, troops, teams, and crews. The Asian Art Museum, whose founders were influenced by Chingwah’s work in promoting Chinese and Far Eastern culture and art, presently “is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art.”

The museum offers many programs that “explore the art and cultures represented in the museum’s collection and special exhibitions” for the benefit of visitors and the Bay Area community.

The Chinese Historical Society of America continues to support research in Chinese American history and to put on educational programs and exhibits for the Chinatown community and beyond. The Chinese Culture Center, a twenty-thousand-square-foot facility with an auditorium, gallery, bookstore, classroom, and offices located between Chinatown and the Financial District, continues today to “foster the understanding and appreciation of Chinese and Chinese American art, history, and culture in the United States.” A good deal of San Francisco Chinatown’s economy today relies on its tourist appeal—Chingwah, again, was instrumental in claiming Chinatown’s tourism for the benefit of its local community.

Through performance, teaching, writing, and general openness, Chingwah broke down barriers that hindered exchange and cooperation, whether between cultures or within communities. Although the face of Chinese America has changed since Chingwah’s time, his fight against discrimination, for a unified Chinese American community, and for an appreciation of cultural heritage, art, and history can continue to inspire and inform our actions today, when Americans continue to grapple with racial strife and minority groups still combat stereotypes in the press and popular media.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Over the course of writing my undergraduate honors thesis in history during my senior year at Stanford University from spring 2009 to spring 2010, I contacted a number of Chingwah’s family members, friends, and acquaintances in hopes of gleaning information about the man. Without them and their kindness toward me, a complete stranger, none of my research would have been possible. I am truly, deeply grateful to everyone—librarians, historians, both Chingwah’s and my own friends and family—who helped me along the way, whether with their recollections of Chingwah or with their help with finding more documents and sources.

Chingwah’s nephew, Chester Lee, and his friend, Carol Soo, in March 2010 not only gave me a hearty meal but also provided me with a box of primary sources that served as the main basis for my research. Chester is the son of Chingwah’s eldest brother, Changwah. The collection that Carol and Chester handed over to me is an extremely rich and historically valuable one that is now housed at the Green Library Archives at Stanford University. It contains some of Chingwah’s personal papers, a manual that he wrote for training his Chinatown tour guides, myriad newspaper clippings, and some personal correspondence. Without this collection, my story on Chingwah Lee would be far less complete. More importantly, the collection is now available to all students and scholars who would like to access it. Thank you so much for your generosity, Carol and Chester.

In addition, I owe special, special thanks to the following people, who are roughly listed in chronological order of when I met them:

• My advisor, Professor Gordon Chang, who encouraged me to pursue this topic and persist even when sources seemed thin
• My secondary advisor, Professor Allyson Hobbs, who pushed my thinking to the next level
• Sue Lee from the Chinese Historical Society of America for welcoming me and helping me get access to the society’s archives
• Phil Choy from the Chinese Historical Society of America for sharing with me his deep knowledge of Asian American history, which was necessary for contextualizing Chingwah’s actions and ideologies
• Professor Judy Yung from UC Santa Cruz, who introduced me to Curtiss Chan, Cora’s son, the first family member I interviewed about Chingwah back in May 2009
• Curtiss, who provided me with invaluable insight into how he perceived his Uncle Ching and helped introduce me to his sister Lori and his relative Jackie Sue
• Lori, who agreed to speak with me for multiple hours and even had me over to her house to learn more about her Uncle Ching and look at his old scrapbook from his youth. The scrapbook provided critical information about Chingwah’s activities and interests when he was younger. Moreover, Lori’s close relationship with her uncle and her willingness to share those cherished memories allowed me a glimpse into Chingwah’s life from a more personal perspective.
• Jackie Sue, who gave me various photographs of the Lee family, provided lively discussion and encouragement, and shared her knowledge of the family. Jackie was married to Chingwah’s late nephew, Frank Sue, and was the Lee family historian. Jackie also introduced me to Carol Soo and Chester Lee.
• Hanni Forester, who invited me to a delicious meal, showed me her beautiful art collection, and shared her memories of Chingwah, the Asian art connoisseur, with me
• Wylie Wong, who provided me with his insight on the Asian art community in San Francisco and Chingwah’s influential role in that community

NOTES
3. Interview by Phil Choy, July 30, 1970, tape recording, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
4. Interview by Nee and de Bary, 5.
6. Interview by Chinn, 3.
8. Interview by Chinn, 4.
9. Interview by Choy.
10. Interview by Chinn, 4.
11. Interview by Chinn, 3.
13. Interview by Chinn, 5.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 196.
18. Gidley, “This Is Chingwah Lee.”
19. Interview by Chinn, 10.
20. Ibid.
22. See “Chinatown Tour Manual,” Chingwah Lee Papers, for a firsthand look at Chingwah’s philosophy about tourism and his requirements for Chinatown tour guides.
23. Chinese Digest 2, no. 1 (January 3, 1936), Daniel E. Koshland San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.
24. Ibid.
28. Chinese Digest 2, no. 2 (January 10, 1936): 6; Chinese Digest 2, no. 3 (January 17, 1936): 8; Chinese Digest 2, no. 7 (February 14, 1936): 9.
30. Exact reasons for the closing of the Digest at this point remain unknown.
31. Interview by Chinn, 14.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 13.
35. Interview by Chinn.
36. Interview by Choy.
37. Ibid.

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Pardee Lowe Papers, 1915–96. Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California.


