

A GM Relationship is Born

Young began working with General Motors in 1983 on a consulting basis. One of her first accomplishments was the initiation of a roadside assistance program and a toll-free hotline for Cadillac owners, two programs meant to restore the air of exclusivity to Cadillac buyers as the historic quality of the cars diminished along with their size and distinctiveness of design. In 1988 Young was hired full-time by GM chairman Roger Smith. Since then Young has concentrated her efforts on enhancing the giant company's responsiveness to consumers, an acknowledged flaw in the past.

In 1990 Young initiated a marketing campaign with the tagline "Putting Quality on the Road," her first corporation-wide campaign, and it was a risky one. As *Business Week* said, "The new ads have an unmistakable implication: That for years GM's cars fell short of its customers' expectations." In addition to convincing consumers that GM was back from the crisis days of the late 1970s and early 1980s when by anyone's standards the entire American auto industry fell far behind its foreign competitors, Young's campaign was meant to reinvigorate the GM workforce. She told *Business Week*, "A lot of this job is what I call persistent evangelism."

Another project of Young's at GM has been to establish distinctiveness among the automaker's five divisions, working less on selling than on creating brand recognition and loyalty with consumers, Young's specialty. The marketing image she laid out for each of the divisions, as reported in *Business Week*, attempts to lock in the mind of the car-buying consumer specific images or ideas with each of the division's names. A Buick, for example, is the "Premium American motorcar": a Cadillac, "The standard of luxury worldwide"; a Chevrolet, "More than the customer expects"; an Oldsmobile, "Innovative technology"; and Pontiac, "Performance-oriented [automobiles] for young people."

Corporate and Community Leadership

Young has earned a reputation at GM as a furious and demanding worker. Although she has a powerful position, she works out of a fairly small and simple office a few doors from that of the chairman and employs only one assistant. In addition to her work at GM, Young sits on the board of directors of Bell Atlantic and the Promus Companies. She also served for twelve years as a consultant director for the Dayton Hudson Corporation and in 1980 served as a vice-chairman of the nominating committee for the New York Stock Exchange.

Young is also involved in several community service and cultural organizations. She is chairman of the Committee of 100, a national Chinese American leadership resource and is a founding member of the Committee of 200, an international organization of leading businesswomen. She also serves on the national board of directors of Junior Achievement and is trustee of Wellesley College and

member of the board of directors of the associates of the Harvard Business School, Wellesley's brother school. She was awarded an honorary doctorate of letters from Russell Sage College and in 1986 was given the Wellesley College Alumna Achievement Award.

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—Sketch by Jim Henry

Connie Young Yu

(1941-)

Writer

"One of the best introductions I have been given was at a meeting at the Chinese Historical Society. The person said, 'Connie only writes for a purpose,'" explained Connie Young Yu to Terry Hong. "Boy, did he get that right. I write when I feel there is a cause. . . . And sometimes I feel guilty because writers are always supposed to keep writing. . . . but unless I feel the need, the commitment, it doesn't happen."

The author of countless articles and two books (*Profiles in Excellence: Peninsula Chinese Americans and Chinatown San Jose, U.S.A.*) that focus predominantly on Chinese Americans, Yu has established herself as a writer with a historical cause. "When I started writing," she continued, "it was for a purpose. I needed to establish Chinese America, to put our history back in its place in American history." Through articles, essays, lectures, and community activities, Yu has devoted her energies for more than a quarter of a century in rediscovering a history of Chinese and Asian America that has, for the most part, been forgotten, overlooked, and even hidden.

Born on June 19, 1941, in Los Angeles, California, Connie Young Yu lived in nearby Whittier for the first six years of her life. When she was six months old, her father left the family to fight in World War II for three and a half years. "Even though I was too young to remember my father's actual leaving, I still have a very strong sense of

World War II. I was about four when he came back. During the time he was gone, I always felt a sense of patriotism, of pride in being American," she recalled.

In 1947, Yu's family moved to San Francisco's Chinatown where her father became a soy sauce manufacturer. "Most of the people who lived in Chinatown were involved professionally with Chinatown," she explained. The family later moved to the Richmond district of San Francisco: "We were one of the first Chinese families there and we were the very first on our block. There was lots of prejudice in those days and because of the discrimination, my father had to have an army buddy buy our house and then he bought it from the friend. It was that way for a lot of Chinese American families," Yu remembered.

The Extended Family

Yu grew up surrounded by Chinese Americans of various generations. In addition to grandparents who lived with the family for many years, the Young house also provided a home base for many older Chinese American bachelors who did not have families of their own as a direct result of the limits against Chinese immigration into the United States. "So many old men were always coming to the house," explained Yu. "I was always aware of the several generations and I felt very fortunate to have experienced that. . . . I thought that's the way it was supposed to be, to always have all those generations living together."

Through the influence of Yu's grandparents and the "adopted" old-timers, Yu grew up "with a very strong sense of being Chinese." Both her grandparents and parents were active in the Chinatown community's reform movements of the 1940s and 1950s, especially in improving the quality of life in Chinatown and the creation of low-cost housing. "My father and mother were always going to different kinds of meetings in Chinatown," she recalled.

Yu attended public schools in San Francisco, then enrolled at Mills College in 1959. During her senior year in a seminar about Mark Twain, she was encouraged by the professor to write the final paper on Mark Twain and his dealings with the Chinese. "Very few people were writing about Chinese Americans in 1963," Yu recalled. "I didn't know if I would find much material. I've learned since then that there are a lot of available sources about the Chinese on the West Coast. . . . The hard part is to know where to look. You really have to just ask around."

After graduating with a degree in English, Yu married Dr. John Kou-Ping Yu (currently chief of oncology at Kaiser Permanente in Santa Clara, California) almost immediately out of college, spent three years in New York City, and had three children close together. "I was so busy raising children that I had no time to write," she said. When Yu returned in 1967 to the San Francisco Bay area with her growing family, she became more involved in researching Chinese American history. "In California, there is more interest in Chinese America. There was a



Connie Young Yu

historical society where I could start my work," she explained. Yu began to write short articles for Asian American publications and eventually received local recognition when her full-page article, "The Unsung Heroes of the Golden Spikes," appeared in the May 10, 1969 Sunday edition of the *San Francisco Examiner*. The focus of the article was about the Chinese railroad workers, a subject familiar to Yu because her own great-grandfather had worked on the transcontinental railroad. Yu had found her niche giving new voice to the Chinese American history that had too long been omitted from America's history books. "That's when it all started," Yu recalled. "That's how I became a historical writer. I never had any formal training. It was all my own work."

Activism

During the 1960s and 1970s, Yu became heavily involved with the anti-war movement, the social change movement, and the ethnic studies movement. "All the movements were related. If you belonged to one, you would eventually meet the people involved with the others," she remarked. In 1973, Yu helped found Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI), an organization whose purpose was "to make social changes and social justices for Asian Pacific Americans a reality." From a group of twelve community leaders, AACI today has a staff of more than fifty professionals, a budget of almost \$5 million and a 100,000-square foot facility in San Jose. In October 1993, in celebration of AACI's Twentieth

anniversary, the group honored Yu, together with Congresswoman Norman Mineta (a Democrat from California), with the Freedom Award.

Yu did not limit her community activism to only Chinese American causes, but joined peace groups and women's groups as well. "I got very side tracked from writing with my activism for awhile," she recalled. It was that activism, however, that fueled Yu's writing. "From the activism, I saw the need for Asian American resources, the need to write about Asian American history and issues." From her foundation of Chinese American historical works, Yu began to branch out to write about Japanese Americans interned during World War II, about new waves of Vietnamese refugees, and the latest issues of Asian immigration into the United States. "It's not a contest of who suffered more," Yu remarked. "What is most important is that the injustices, travails, and hardships experienced by all Asian Americans helped define who we are today. That's our history, the history that defines us as America and Americans. That history is what helps us define ourselves."

In order to preserve Chinese American history, Yu has written two books. Published in 1986 by the Stanford Area Chinese Club, is *Profiles in Excellence: Peninsula Chinese Americans*, a collection of biographies of thirty-seven notable Chinese Americans who are role models for the Asian American community. "When I was writing these short biographies, I learned a lot from each of these people about their direct experiences with immigration laws, discrimination, etc.," Yu said. Her second book, *Chinatown San Jose, U.S.A.*, published in 1991, was commissioned by the San Jose Historical Museum Association to tell the story of a little-remembered Chinatown that was once located in San Jose, California. "My father was born in San Jose's Chinatown . . . and my grandfather was a Chinatown shopkeeper, so I heard many stories when I was growing up," said Yu. Following the 1887 arson fire that drove Chinese Americans away from the original San Jose Chinatown, a new Chinatown was established on a plot of land leased from a John Heinlen, a German American willing to allow Chinese Americans to settle on his land. The area came to be known as Heinlenville and would remain San Jose's Chinatown until the 1930s. The first structure to be built on the site was the Ng Shing Gung Temple which was recently restored and today houses the San Jose Historical Museum. Understandably, Yu feels a unique affinity with the museum: "So many of the artifacts in the museum are from my family, especially from my grandparents and parents," she explained.

The Sporting Life

In addition to Yu's growing historical credits, she is also recognized as a teacher, not only of Chinese American history, but of the art of fencing. Yu recalled: "I started fencing after the antiwar movement. It was a time to do some deep thinking, to regroup. I decided I needed exercise, tried fencing and really liked it. I got my children inter-

ested in it and they proved to be very good at it, with all three of them going on to national championships. So I got more involved, did some competing myself and now I teach several days a week. . . . Fencing is more than just a sport. It's really an attitude. I think sports can teach you a lot about life."

For four years, Yu taught fencing in San Francisco's Chinatown. "It was very exciting to go into the Chinatown 'Y each week and teach." Currently, Yu is teaching locally in San Jose and Palo Alto and manages The Fencing Center at San Jose as a volunteer. "That's my community service."

While Yu continues to write, she admitted, "It's the fencing that keeps me in contact with people. Writing can be so isolating." Although she is better known as a historical writer, Yu has also returned to her first writing interest—fiction. In addition to short pieces and poetry, Yu has two works in progress: one, a historical novel about four generations of Chinese Americans, and the other a coming-of-age novel about a young ethnic-Chinese girl originally from Vietnam now living in the United States. She admits that writing fiction is very different from writing historical pieces: "With research, you've found something that adds to the pool of resources and people always need that. You always know that someone will publish that research, whether it's a museum or a community group. Writing about history is a community service, whereas writing fiction is a money-making thing. . . . Writing about history fills a need; with fiction, it's a business and . . . often it's difficult to get published." In spite of any difficulties Yu might be facing, she remains determined to keep writing both historical articles as well as fiction. "In writing fiction," she continued, "I hope that I can convey a sense of humanity in a non-dogmatic way."

History, however, remains Yu's focus for writing. "It's very, very exciting how, in the span of just three decades, the concept of an Asian American consciousness has gone from zero to the American lexicon. That shows how history changes. People need to realize and understand what is happening. That's why history is so important," she emphasized.

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—Sketch by Terry Hong