

Danielle Bennett

*"All I wanted was to be a good citizen":
Fred Lau's Chinese Diasporic Experience in 1920s-1950s California*

ABSTRACT: This article explores the Chinese diasporic experience in 1920s-1950s California from the perspective of cultural expectations, individual identity, and familial bonds and obligations. Focusing on the insights provided by the oral history of a Chinese American narrator, Mr. Fred Lau (1911-2005), it argues that Mr. Lau's diasporic experience strengthened his identity-building process, as well as his familial ties in both China and the U.S., and molded him into an American citizen.

KEYWORDS: modern history; China; U.S.; California; Santa Ana, California; diaspora; identity; family; oral history; Fred Lau

Introduction

The general pattern is straightforward: The sojourner who left to try his luck elsewhere was expected to return home for marriage, to spend years of mourning in the native place on the death of either parent, to make all the money he could in as short a time as possible and go back home, and at least return for burial in the native place where his ancestors were buried.¹

The diasporic experience during the era of Chinese exclusion from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in the U.S. has been summarized by one label: sojourner. The quote above, taken from Yucheng Qin's 2016 monograph, *The Cultural Clash: Chinese Traditional Native-Place Sentiment and the Anti-Chinese Movement*, emphasizes the transience of the sojourner's stay abroad and the firm ties to the latter's native place in China. While migratory travel characterized the diasporic experience of many Chinese laborers during the late nineteenth century, the sojourner label fails to define those individuals who did not fit this mold and—instead—established roots in the U.S., experienced multiculturalization, and eventually obtained American citizenship.

This article analyzes the diasporic experience of a Chinese individual in California from the 1920s to the 1950s. How did the diasporic experience form and solidify this individual's personal identity and familial ties in both mainland China and the U.S.? Why did the individual choose to leave China in the first place? Why was return not an option? And to what degree did the larger context of Chinese exclusion shape this individual's diasporic experience? The article follows the diasporic experience of Mr. Fred Lau (1911-2005), the son of a poor farming family, a third-generation Chinese migrant, a veteran of World War II, a small-business owner, and a Chinese American. Born in the rural Guangdong Province of China, Mr. Lau, his father, and his grandfather all set out for California in search of profitable work to financially care for the Lau family in China.² Mr.

¹ Yucheng Qin, *The Cultural Clash: Chinese Traditional Native-Place Sentiment and the Anti-Chinese Movement* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2016), 198 of 7495, Kindle.

² The beginning dates of the Lau men's diasporic travels between China and the U.S. are 1884 for grandfather Lau's journey, 1918 for Mr. Lau's father's journey, and 1927 for the narrator Mr.

Lau pursued a high school education and entrepreneurial opportunities, achieved bilingualism in English and Chinese, registered for service in the U.S. Army, and opened his own grocery stores in Merced and Santa Ana. All these pursuits and milestones were driven by his humble personal aspirations.³

The primary evidence for this article comes from the seventy-four-page transcript of four interviews conducted with Fred Lau in 1983 as part of a joint oral history project sponsored by the Chinese American Council of the Bowers Museum Foundation in Santa Ana and CSU Fullerton's Oral History Program (now the Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History). Like similar joint ethnic oral history projects, this project intended to preserve and highlight Chinese Americans' agricultural, economic, social, and cultural contributions to Orange County. Mr. Lau's oral history is the only one in the project—due to the exodus of the Chinese American Council during a 1985 Santa Ana city council reordering of the Bowers Museum and its volunteer organization.⁴

Throughout the research process, it became clear that scholars of the Chinese diasporic communities tend to focus on only one or two of the three lenses through which this article examines this ethnocultural phenomenon: the particular characteristics of an individual or group's diasporic experience, individual cultural identity, and family bonds.⁵ Scholarship on diasporic migration and cultural identity tends to use diasporic migration as a tie to an ethnic community's identity, which is subject to different economic, political, and personal circumstances. Immigration historians like Adam McKeown frequently contextualize the cultural identities of diasporic and transnational communities within the larger diasporic travel experience.⁶ The sojourner narrative has its roots in scholarship that deals mostly with the era of Chinese exclusion in the U.S. and

Lau's journey. The diasporic experiences of Mr. Lau's father and grandfather are most like the sojourner experience defined by the introductory quote from Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 198 of 7495, Kindle. All three Lau men's diasporic experiences were shaped by the global implications of a U.S. federal law known as the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882, the 1943 repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, and the rise to power by the Chinese Communist Party after the conclusion of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1953. Fred Lau, interview by Marian Parks, 1983, Oral History (OH) 1879, transcript, Chinese American Council Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

³ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 21.

⁴ Herman Wong, "New Cultural Foundation: Ethnic Councils Quit Bowers for Irvine," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1987.

⁵ See, for example, Adam McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306-337; Gordon H. Chang, "Not So Simple Life Choices," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017): 551-557; Bernard P. Wong, "Globalization and Localization of the Chinese Diaspora in the USA," in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*, ed. Chee-Beng Tan (first published 2012; New York: Routledge, 2013), 290-309.

⁶ McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas," 306-337; Adam McKeown, "Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 2 (1999): 73-110.

the resulting establishment of Chinatowns. Qin's monograph centers on a Chinese sojourner narrative characterized by a lack of assimilability, frequent travel abroad for economic opportunity, and eventual return to the native place of origin.⁷ As for familial networks and bonds, there is abundant research on which members of a Chinese family were permitted to go abroad to financially support the family back home, as well as how a family maintained power and claim to the businesses and earnings of its entrepreneurial members.⁸ This case study of Mr. Lau's particular diasporic experience draws all three foci together and establishes them as interconnected – rather than isolated – phenomena.

This article's first part (*Diaspora*) focuses on how Mr. Lau's migrant experience both parallels and diverges from the sojourner narrative. The second part (*Identity*) concentrates on the development of Mr. Lau's personal identity throughout his diasporic experience, characterized by civic responsibility, entrepreneurial opportunism, and familial responsibility. The third part (*Family*) demonstrates that familial obligations both in China and the U.S. played the most significant role in shaping Mr. Lau's diasporic experience. Focusing on the more macroscopic aspect of diaspora first lays the groundwork for later shifting the attention to the more microscopic aspects of identity and family. I argue that Mr. Lau's diasporic experience strengthened his own identity differentiation, his familial ties, both in China and in the U.S., and molded him into an American citizen.

I. Diaspora

Although this article views the past microscopically through Mr. Lau's oral history, it is necessary to first define how the term diaspora is used in this section and then address how the macroscopic historical event of Chinese exclusion shaped Mr. Lau's diasporic experience. My definition of diaspora does not refer to the forced geographic displacement of a cohesive ethnic or cultural group but – instead – to the geographic dispersal of individuals who utilize interpersonal connections and transnational networks formed from an established sense of belonging, as individuals within the framework of the Chinese diaspora were not just scattered to the four winds and left without a sense of belonging.⁹

In his first interview, Mr. Lau traces his own diasporic experience back to the circumstances under which his grandfather and father had participated in the greater diaspora.¹⁰ Due to the passage of a U.S. federal law known as the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882, which was made permanent in 1902, there were increased legal restrictions as to which members of Chinese society would be allowed entry to the U.S. and which family members these Chinese migrants would later be

⁷ Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 198 of 7495, Kindle.

⁸ Chang, "Not So Simple Life Choices," 551-557; Xin Chun Li, Ling Chen, Jess H. Chua, Bradley L. Kirkman, Sara Rynes-Weller, and Luis Gomez-Mejia, "Research on Chinese Family Businesses: Perspectives," *Management and Organization Review* 11, no. 4 (2015): 579-597.

⁹ McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas," 311.

¹⁰ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 1-15.

allowed to bring over. The female members of Mr. Lau's family, such as his mother, his sisters, and his grandmother, were prohibited from accompanying their male family members to the U.S. due to financial and legislative barriers.¹¹ Since Mr. Lau's family was not of a protected classification, the Lau men had to come illegally as laborers—in the grandfather and father Lau's cases—or, in Mr. Lau's own legally dubious case, as a student adopted by a merchant.¹² Thus, the Lau men's initial travels to California were shaped by the gendered and economic policies of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*. Due to their origins in a poor rural province in China, the financial feasibility of sending more members of the Lau family to the U.S. had been limited even before exclusionary legislation. Since the Laus, until 1943, were not financially or legally able to bring female family members to the U.S., only a few of the family's older males were able to travel abroad for work.

Until its repeal in 1943, the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 prevented most members of Mr. Lau's family to pursue a better life in the U.S., as he explains in his first interview:

If my grandfather could have been an American citizen, my family would have moved straight ahead and gone up as far as we could go—just like the airplane. But we were not citizens. That's why it took my family so long and so much struggle to survive; otherwise we would never amount to anything. We'd have stayed in the hole and never come up to see Christ. If my grandfather is a European, my father would have automatically been an American citizen. My grandfather never would be.¹³

Mr. Lau recognized how U.S. immigration policy and ethnic alienation limited his and his family's opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. Until the *Chinese Exclusion Act*'s repeal, there was no practical path to legal permanent residency and naturalization in the U.S. for Mr. Lau or other Chinese in California who harbored similar aspirations.

The impact of ethnic exclusion legislation on the diasporic experience has long been the subject of scholarly discourse. McKeown has argued that the obstacles and opportunities inherent in exclusionary U.S. immigration policy were felt by both men and women as laborers were not allowed to bring their families with them, and, after 1924, protected classes like merchants and students were not permitted to bring their Chinese wives and children.¹⁴ All three generations of Lau men were subjected to these restrictions on familial migration. Scholars have also recognized the other factor that limited greater opportunities for migration, namely, the poverty in China's Guangdong Province. Bernard P. Wong has argued that the movements of the region's menfolk were meant to be temporary fortune-finding excursions to provide more financial stability and increase the quality of

¹¹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 3-4.

¹² Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 19.

¹³ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 7.

¹⁴ McKeown, "Transnational Chinese Families," 74.

life in their native village.¹⁵ Fortunately, in Mr. Lau's case, a family friend was able to adopt him, claim him as a student, and bring him to the U.S. as a favor to both grandfather and father Lau. This legally dubious method of immigration became fairly common after the 1909 San Francisco earthquake and fire had destroyed all immigration and census information, allowing Chinese individuals to come as "paper sons," namely, adopted sons who could then travel to the U.S. legally.¹⁶

During a time of nativist hostility, the desire to adapt to American society for the sake of greater access to opportunity characterized Mr. Lau's early diasporic experience. In his second and fourth interviews, Mr. Lau addresses his pursuit of education. When he first arrived in San Francisco, Mr. Lau was eager and anxious to be able to speak English. In those days, he said, "[I was] not trying to get rich. I wasn't trying to be a councilman or mayor or senator. All I wanted was to be a good citizen and understand what was going on."¹⁷ First attending a Chinese-only grammar school in San Francisco's Chinatown and then attending night school on top of his daytime schooling, Mr. Lau soon became more comfortable conversing in English with other English speakers in Chinatown. When the interviewer, Marian Parks, inquired after the purpose of these schools, whether they were primarily intended to teach the language or, also, to "find the American way" and foster greater integration into American society, Mr. Lau acknowledged that they served as places for both lingual and cultural education, and added: "[I] tried to educate myself in order to merge into American society as an American, and not be limited to Chinatown."¹⁸ Thus Mr. Lau viewed Chinatown as limiting to his personal economic and autonomous aspirations, namely, to start and grow his own businesses.¹⁹

The cultural context of San Francisco's Chinatown and the national context of the U.S. during World War II shaped Mr. Lau's educational and later military experience. During the era of Chinese exclusion, Chinatowns served as ethnocultural havens to preserve Chinese culture and protect Chinese migrants' livelihoods as they were facing discrimination and hostility from white Americans. Chinese adolescents who wished to learn English were allowed to do so in Chinatown's Chinese-only schools. Some of these Chinatown schools also served as Chinese cultural reinforcement.²⁰ Further education could be pursued through the public high school system which allowed for more Americanization.

¹⁵ Wong, "Globalization and Localization," 291; Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 226 of 7495, Kindle.

¹⁶ Roger Daniels, "Chinese Exclusion: Causes and Consequences, 1882-1943," in *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*, ed. Vanessa B. Beasley (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 89-106, here 101.

¹⁷ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 21.

¹⁸ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 25.

¹⁹ This entrepreneurial spark and the cultural contexts surrounding it are discussed below.

²⁰ Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 230.

The national context of the U.S. preparing to enter World War II offered enlistment as an opportunity to Mr. Lau to financially benefit himself and his family. Without the ongoing war preparations, it is doubtful he would have felt the need to enlist; instead, he probably would have grown his own businesses sooner.

Mr. Lau's diasporic experience between 1929 and 1939 contradicts the common sojourner narrative in that he did not necessarily see his future in China: he saw it in the U.S.²¹ Even in the San Francisco Chinatown, Mr. Lau felt the need to live beyond the cultural confines and become a member of American society as an American. His efforts to not limit himself to Chinatown did not stem from a desire to abandon his Chinese identity and background in favor of a wholly American identity but, rather, from a place of individual agency where he had the choice to pursue the best opportunities for himself and his family and occasionally diverge from those cultural norms and expectations to which he was still subjected.²²

As the U.S. became more industrialized during the later nineteenth century and needed more laborers, poor rural Chinese families allowed some of their males to leave their home villages and head to the U.S. to seek economic prosperity in order to financially support their families back in China. In the third interview, Mr. Lau recalls that his family in China showed neither great support nor great opposition to his and his father's travels outside of China to pursue work in the U.S., yet still benefitted financially from their earnings. Mr. Lau accounted for this benign indifference as an amalgamation of generational differences. According to Mr. Lau, his "grandmother didn't really care a lot [...] they [grandmother and grandfather Lau] were alike. She was not progressive either."²³ On the other hand, Mr. Lau's aunt and uncle were more supportive of Mr. Lau's father leaving China for the U.S., and Mr. Lau's father himself was enthusiastically supportive of his son joining him in the U.S.²⁴ With regard to the money Mr. Lau sent back to his family and neighbors, these funds would be used by the recipients to better their lives in China, including, for example, grandmother Lau spending extravagantly on items she wanted, home and property repairs, and purchasing gifts for family members to show familial affection and appreciation.²⁵

This aspect of Mr. Lau's diasporic experience may be attributed to the cultural context into which he had been born. Chinese familial culture expected a son to financially take care of his family and village.²⁶ Another cultural expectation was

²¹ Chang, "Not So Simple Life Choices," 553.

²² Chang, "Not So Simple Life Choices," 552.

²³ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 33-34.

²⁴ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 33-34.

²⁵ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 33, 36.

²⁶ Kuhn, *Chinese among Others*, 204; Erika Lee, "Defying Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants and Their Strategies During the Exclusion Era," in *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas between China and America during the Exclusion Era*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 1-21, here 3.

that the journey to make money abroad would culminate in the son's eventual return to his family and village. While on his fortune-finding journey, a male family member remained culturally obligated to take care of his family back in China. Mr. Lau's experience aligned with this aspect of the sojourner narrative, as he continued to financially support his family members in China. Although he did not return to China to retire and live out the rest of his life, Mr. Lau maintained his familial and cultural connection to China through his financial support. The significance of Mr. Lau's family network both in the U.S. and at home in China cannot be underestimated as it enabled him to gain legal passage to the U.S. and facilitated his search of employment to financially support his family back home.²⁷

II. Identity

According to the oral history transcript, three components of Mr. Lau's identity were shaped by his diasporic experience: his identity as a good citizen, as an avid student and entrepreneur, and as a generous family man developed as he reached different milestones in his life. Thus far, we have seen Mr. Lau's good-citizen identity in the cultural and local context of the Chinese diaspora during his first decade in the U.S. We now revisit this part of Mr. Lau's life to emphasize how his identity as a good citizen changed from when he was a child in China to when he became a young man in the U.S.

Mr. Lau's conceptualization of a "good citizen" had begun in his native place and traveled with him. The second and fourth interviews provide insight into how his good-citizen concept developed in the course of his diasporic experience. As a child, he had attended school in China to learn the language and Chinese cultural values.²⁸ At that time, he had benefitted from the Chinese education system under Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), which emphasized democratic and republican political ideals in a revised educational curriculum. In 1927, when he arrived in the U.S., Mr. Lau was eager to master English and become a member of American society.²⁹ Meanwhile, he kept his societal commitments in both the U.S. and China. While in the U.S., he worked at the *Shanghai Low* with his father and sent some money home, saving the rest to support his family members in California.³⁰ Earlier in his youth, he had been betrothed to a girl in his home village. In 1935, Mr. Lau returned to China to marry his fiancée, keeping his marital commitment and honoring both the in-law family and his own family.³¹

The cultural context of Mr. Lau's identity played a most significant role in his concept of a good citizen. To him, during childhood and adolescence, the major characteristics of a good citizen had been the pursuit of and investment in

²⁷ Daniels, "Chinese Exclusion," 101.

²⁸ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 16.

²⁹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 25.

³⁰ The *Shanghai Low* was a night club run by a company owned by one of Mr. Lau's uncles.

³¹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 26-28.

education, being able to know what was happening around him by being fluent in the dominant language of his place of residence, and, as an adult, fulfilling his financial and social commitments to his family and village.³² Such characteristics are cross-cultural and can easily be integrated into an individual's multicultural understanding of self and identity and facilitate integration into an adopted culture and society.³³ Mr. Lau's willingness to embrace multiculturalism in the U.S. contributed to his concept of a good citizen in that it allowed him to shift between his two cultural identities with greater ease and comfort.³⁴

In contrast to the sojourner and settler narratives, Mr. Lau's transcultural priorities with regard to education and societal commitments illustrate a multicultural dimension to his overall identity. The sojourner narrative rejects most, if not all, cultural offerings made by a host society, while the settler narrative abandons most, if not all, original cultural values, thus resulting in a purist new identity. The commitments to one's family, one's country of residence, and one's personal value system form the basis of how one identifies oneself as a good citizen.

In his younger years, defined as age fifteen to thirty, Mr. Lau readily identified himself through his pursuit and prioritization of education and entrepreneurial opportunities. His identity as an avid student and entrepreneur are discernible in his second and third interviews. Once he had arrived in the U.S., he immediately attended school to learn English but acknowledged that his level of lingual proficiency remained insufficient to adequately converse with other English speakers. To remedy this, Mr. Lau told his father: "I need to go to night school."³⁵ This evening schooling was added to his daytime schooling and continued for two years after his initial arrival.³⁶ At the time of the interview (1983), Mr. Lau was seventy-two years old and claimed, "even today I am still learning. I want to go on to college, even though I am seventy-two."³⁷

In 1935, after he had married his wife, Mr. Lau was financially prepared to go to college in China and even move to Nanking. However, this was not to be, since the Shanghai Canton Bank closed unexpectedly and lost Mr. Lau's \$10,000 savings toward college.³⁸ It is reasonable to infer that, had Mr. Lau's savings been preserved, he probably would have established himself in China rather than the U.S., much like other Chinese returning from overseas had done historically.

³² Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 198 of 7495, Kindle.

³³ Li Li, "Cultural and Intercultural Functions of Chinese Restaurants in the Mountain West: 'An Insider's Perspective,'" *Western Folklore* 61, no. 3 (2002): 329-346, here 343.

³⁴ Andre A. Pekerti and David C. Thomas, "N-Culturals: Modeling the Multicultural Identity," *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management* 23, no. 1 (2016): 101-127, here 113.

³⁵ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 21.

³⁶ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 22.

³⁷ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 24.

³⁸ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 28.

Ultimately, this financial loss led Mr. Lau to return to the U.S. two years later, and in 1939, Mr. Lau joined the U.S. Army. Prior to his enlistment, Mr. Lau had been unsatisfied with his employment at the *Shanghai Low* and had wanted to start a business of his own:

I was just a young man, twenty-nine years old. I was married. I wanted to look for a business I could handle myself. In China when you are thirty you are independent. At that point you do not want to just be a laborer and work for somebody for all your life. Our family had never had a business of their own in America; they had always worked for someone else.³⁹

Over the course of four decades, Mr. Lau would establish three grocery stores in Santa Ana and one grocery store in Merced, all of which were at one point owned and operated by Mr. Lau himself and then by his family members.⁴⁰

Cultural context played a prominent role in forming Mr. Lau's identity as a student and as a businessman. The internalized pressure of aligning with American society shaped his persistent attitude regarding academics and linguistic proficiency. Reflecting his Chinese cultural context, once he had reached the age of majority, he demonstrated his personal independence.⁴¹ He extended this personal independence to his line of work and subsequently passed this same independence on to his family in California. The decision to stay in the U.S. was not based on a crisis of personal identity but, rather, with practicality in mind, on an optimistic, opportunistic worldview. It was a decision made to provide himself and his family with the most opportunities to thrive.

Notably, during the entrepreneurial phase of his life, Mr. Lau incorporated American and Chinese cultural values and ideals in such a way that it cemented his role as a generous family man who consistently strove to provide for his family members in China and California. His identity as a family man and provider is evident from his statements in the third and fourth interviews. The motivating factor for him to open his own grocery store was his family. Keeping his wife, grandmother, aunt, and the rest of his family in China and in the U.S. in mind as "a responsible man," Mr. Lau pursued the kind of career that allowed him to provide not necessarily a wealthy, but a better life for his family on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.⁴² The Confucian context, which governs Chinese family life to this day, shaped Mr. Lau's family obligations and business ventures. As the oldest child and only son of a father who was still away from his native place, Mr. Lau bore most of the responsibilities to financially provide for his family.⁴³

³⁹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 10, 11, 38.

⁴⁰ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, interviewer's preface.

⁴¹ Clara C. Park, A. Lin Goodwin, and Stacey J. Lee, *Asian American Identities, Families, and Schooling: Research on the Education of Asian and Pacific Americans* (Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2003), 11-12.

⁴² Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 38.

⁴³ Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 273 of 7495, Kindle.

Mr. Lau's identity as a generous provider harmoniously combines Confucian familial loyalty with the American desire to provide both socioeconomic prosperity and advancement to one's family. Readily integrating Chinese and American cultural expectations, Mr. Lau's diasporic experience stands out—both at the time of his arrival and when he reached the age of majority—from two perspectives. The first is the perspective of the older sojourners and their family members, such as Mr. Lau's grandfather, according to which a sojourner's family, home, and future was and would always be in China. The second is the perspective of subsequent younger generations of sojourners, such as Mr. Lau and his father, who became ever more open to pursuing a future and laying down roots in their host country, while retaining much of their original Chinese cultural identity. Mr. Lau kept providing for his family in China while doing the same for his family in the U.S., but he did not keep his immediate family, especially his wife and eventually their sons, in China, since he and his financial roots were now firmly established in the U.S.

III. Family

According to Yucheng Qin, obligations to family and their native place served as near unbreakable and tangible connections for Chinese sojourners.⁴⁴ The external pressures of certain Chinese family values and the internalized desire to preserve familial bonds and fulfill family obligations in China formed the strongest concrete tie to China during Mr. Lau's diasporic experience, stronger than any sentiment with regard to his native place. The notions of diaspora and identity reappear in this third part of the article, but primarily to reinforce the role of family in Mr. Lau's diasporic experience.

After their arrival in the U.S., Mr. Lau and his father became the primary breadwinners for their family members back in China and were responsible for sending remittances to financially support the latter, as well as their village neighbors. In the third and fourth interviews, Mr. Lau provides more details about his financial obligations toward his family back home in China. As we have seen earlier, receiving these remittances improved the lives of Mr. Lau's family in China and showed his filial affection. This was when remittances could still be sent without much interference from the Chinese and American governments. However, after 1952, the sending of remittances, particularly to his mother, became rather impossible for Mr. Lau as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had successfully taken control of the Chinese government and was backing communist North Korea during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. It is to this disruption in the familial support network that we now turn.

Mr. Lau's recollections of how communism affected his mother are quite sad and caused him a great deal of distress during the interview.⁴⁵ He stated:

⁴⁴ Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 273 of 7495, Kindle.

⁴⁵ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 28.

Well, in communism they want the overseas Chinese, landowner or rich people to give up everything. One must give up things that others haven't got. That's the way they do it. They did that to my family too. They considered I was back from the U.S. Army and figured I made good money. Every year I sent back money, so she must have money. She did and they still thought she had more. They said, "You are going to get killed." And they blackmailed her and threatened her to take her to the People's Public Court. The communists of the local village wrote a letter to me that they wanted me to send them money in two weeks, but there was nothing I could do. There was no transportation back there. There was no way to send money directly.⁴⁶

Mr. Lau later discovered that the blackmailers were farmers from the poorest family in his village – people he had been supporting financially.⁴⁷ The collapse of his familial support network, due to its abuse by the communists in his village, ultimately resulted in his mother's suicide in 1952 – done in an effort to protect her son from being financially abused and blackmailed by the CCP.⁴⁸

The global context in which communism complicated and abused transnational familial support networks grimly defined Mr. Lau's ties to his family and native place in China in the 1950s. The betrayal by the poor farmers in his village gave Mr. Lau fewer reasons to maintain ties to his village, while his mother's suicide served as a painful deterrent for him to ever return to his native place. Family usually served as a long-distance connection between a local Chinese village and the migrant abroad, however, the disruption of the transnational familial connection had prevented Mr. Lau from sending money to his mother. With the death of his mother, there was no longer a strong family tie to guarantee a prolonged or even a final return to his native place.

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, Mr. Lau repeatedly returned to China to fulfill familial obligations, to help with the land, to make his family's living situation more comfortable, and to contribute to his village community. In the first and second interviews, Mr. Lau explains why he returned to China in 1935 and 1946. In 1935, he went back to China for two years to fulfill his betrothal commitment and visit his family. During this time, he contributed to his village community and his family's needs: he taught English, formed a social club in the village school, "helped the family with the land and made them more comfortable."⁴⁹ Later, in 1946, Mr. Lau felt the need to notify his sister of her husband's death in Madera, California, and therefore visited her in China.⁵⁰ Both trips met Mr. Lau's cultural obligations in China and helped maintain a good connection with his family there.⁵¹ Still operating within a very close-knit understanding of family dynamics, Mr. Lau chose to honor this part of his cultural

⁴⁶ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 54.

⁴⁷ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 55.

⁴⁸ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 24.

⁴⁹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 28.

⁵⁰ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 17.

⁵¹ Pekerti and Thomas, "N-Culturals," 113; Qin, *Cultural Clash*, 273 of 7495, Kindle.

identity through his sense of responsibility to his family and closest neighbors. The expected return to one's native place to honor one's family and to fulfill community obligations fits both the sojourner narrative and Mr. Lau's diasporic narrative, yet it ultimately does not completely apply to Mr. Lau's experience since he received U.S. citizenship, never retired to China, and was not buried in China.

During his most active entrepreneurial years, between 1939 to 1957, Mr. Lau consistently provided his kin in the U.S. with strong economic opportunities, such as the means to pursue higher education for a well-paying career, or with ownership of or employment opportunities in his grocery stores. Mr. Lau's responses in the third and fourth interviews delve into what his experience was like when he started his own businesses, why he passed ownership and management to his kin, and whether those changes in management were positive or negative for his businesses or his family.

As we have seen earlier, Mr. Lau did not enjoy working at the *Shanghai Low*, even though the business was owned by members of his family, so, when he was entering his thirties, he took a job as an employee in a grocery store in Marysville (north of Sacramento, California) for the sole purpose of gaining experience in the grocery store business.⁵² In 1939, he and his cousin began to "just go out and look around [...] from one little town to another, on the bus, just staying for a few hours."⁵³ Finally, in 1941, Mr. Lau opened his first grocery store in Dinuba (southeast of Fresno, California). This grocery store was to be owned through a mutual partnership by Mr. Lau, his two cousins, and his uncle, and the four of them were to be working and operating it together.⁵⁴ When Mr. Lau deployed for his military service in 1942, the store was profitable, and he left it in the care of his business partners. However, in 1943, the store's profitability took a hit when it was fined by the Health Department due to the cousins and uncle not caring for its upkeep.⁵⁵ After returning from the service, Mr. Lau gave complete ownership of the store to his cousins and uncle to provide them with a financial asset to support themselves, while freeing himself from poor business partners who had not taken care of the business as well as he would have liked.⁵⁶

In the late 1940s, after his wife and two sons had arrived in California, Mr. Lau took them to live in Santa Ana, and he soon opened new grocery stores in Orange County. His grocery stores were doing very well, and by the 1960s and 1970s, he considered turning their management over to his (now three) sons.⁵⁷ Initially, he allowed one son to try and manage a store on his own, gradually giving him more responsibilities, but this son made business decisions that Mr. Lau did not like.

⁵² Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 39.

⁵³ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 39.

⁵⁴ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 40.

⁵⁵ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 41-42.

⁵⁶ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 46.

⁵⁷ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 67.

According to Mr. Lau, he tried "to remodel the store and wanted to close up all of the windows in the front of the store. They [Mr. Lau's sons] also hired some young box boys who were not as careful as an older person."⁵⁸ Mr. Lau criticized his son's recklessness with regard to keeping the store and the workers safe and secure, arguing, "you never know if there might be somebody out there watching."⁵⁹ The limited visibility due to the closed-up storefront windows and the box boys' tendency to leave the back door open when tossing the garbage increased the likelihood of an armed robbery. Sadly, the latter did happen in 1977, and during this robbery Mrs. Lau was shot and killed by one of four shotgun-wielding robbers who held her, two of her sons, and the box boys at gunpoint in a walk-in freezer.⁶⁰

Although Mr. Lau's devotion to his family's well-being and financial prosperity was all in good faith—and trust in one's family is expected in the Chinese cultural context, it was only "rewarded" by his own family's irresponsible actions.⁶¹ The family-dominated management structures in Mr. Lau's grocery stores facilitated the supporting of family members in California, yet the poor business decisions made by these same family members ultimately led to lost profits, a fine by the Health Department in 1943, and his wife's murder during a store robbery in 1977.

Conclusion

Throughout his life in China and the U.S., Mr. Lau consistently exhibited a commitment to his family's needs, and he shaped his personal identity through his diasporic experience and cultural integration. Unlike sojourners and settlers, Mr. Lau appreciated both cultural landscapes and aspired to be both Chinese and American. In his decisions, Mr. Lau kept his own and his family's needs at the forefront of his mind and acted to help and honor his family.

After navigating Mr. Lau's diasporic experience, it is evident that there are further opportunities for research. Some future topics of study could focus on how migrants' personal experiences with spatial displacement shape their identities over the course of their lives; how the personal recollections of migrant experiences change when collected in a series of oral histories over time; and how American exceptionalism spurs negative cultural adaptations in immigrant families, both intact and separated. Efforts to collect ethnocultural oral histories should be redoubled to provide a more complete historical narrative that resists being dominated by nationalistic hegemony. Given Mr. Lau's example of familial care, adaptive multiculturalism, and optimism for the future in the face of exclusion and adversity, there is hope that Americans can still choose to pursue a

⁵⁸ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 67.

⁵⁹ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 67.

⁶⁰ Lau, OH 1879, transcript, 67.

⁶¹ Chun Li, Chen, Chua, Kirkman, Rynes-Weller, and Gomez-Mejia, "Research on Chinese Family Businesses," 586-587.

societal outlook that is more optimistic and that celebrates our differences in culture and background without touting ethnic, cultural, ideological, or nationalistic supremacy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Danielle Bennett of San Clemente, California, earned her B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2021). Her article printed above originated in a senior research seminar offered by CSUF's History Department.*