

Ah Louis and his Family's Legacy at Cal Poly and the Area of San Luis Obispo

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Abstract: This paper examines the history and unique experience of Ah Louis and his children and their effects on making the area of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly more accepting to Chinese and Chinese Americans. The paper will also examine past and current issues of discrimination towards Chinese and Chinese Americans at Cal Poly and in the area of San Luis Obispo in comparison to the state of California. The oldest son of Ah Louis, Young Louis, was incredibly instrumental in creating acceptance at Cal Poly and the community through his founding and work in the Chinese Student Association. The success of the families influence was due to their ability to assimilate to American culture. The increase of immigrant Chinese students that spurred Young Louis to create the Chinese Student Association was due to elite anti-Communist Chinese leaving China for uncertainty in the future.

Ah Louis, an immigrant from Guangdong province of China was one of the most important pioneers in helping develop and grow the city of San Luis Obispo in the late 1800s.¹ According to H.K. Wong, biographer of Ah Louis and the Louis family, in his historical monograph, *Gum Sahn Yun= Gold Mountain Men*, Ah Louis moved to San Luis Obispo in 1870 and became one of the city's most successful businessmen and labor contractors.² Louis, known as the mayor of Chinatown, was the labor contractor of most of the Chinese men who worked connecting the railroads along California.³ Louis is notable for managing the workers that created the passage through the dangerous Cuesta Grade which, according to historian Jim Loveland in a letter to Louis's son, had "Unlock[ed] the blockade to the growth of central coast California."⁴ Louis was a successful businessman and prospered in San Luis Obispo not only among the Chinese community but with the white community during one of the most discriminatory periods for Chinese immigrants along the Pacific Coast. Even though Ah Louis was popular among the community, the Louis family still experienced prejudice and discrimination in San Luis Obispo. Ah Louis and his family's success and acceptance among a largely white community in San Luis Obispo begs the question: what kind of impact did he and his children make on Cal Poly?

This paper's intention is to research the history and unique experience of Ah Louis and his children and how they helped make San Luis Obispo, and more specifically Cal Poly, a more accepting place for Chinese and Chinese Americans throughout the last century. Three of Ah

¹ H.K. Wong, *Gum Shan Yun = Gold Mountain Men* (San Francisco: Bechtel Publications, 1987), 2, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

² Wong, 7.

³ *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 13 March 1930, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 1 1927-1947, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

⁴ Wong, 16.

Louis's eight children attended Cal Poly in the 1920s, but most notably Young Louis, the oldest son of Wong On, helped greatly improve the lives and community for Chinese and Chinese American students at Cal Poly.⁵ Throughout his entire life, Louis worked endlessly to try and improve relations with the university and community on many projects: helping with Poly Royal, working on the Alumni Association, fundraising and creating funds for students, and most significantly creating the Poly Chi club, now known as the Chinese Student Association. Young Louis's gratitude to Cal Poly for his Electrical Engineering education during a discriminatory time impacted him to want to help the university and its students. Young Louis, along with his wife Stella, created the club after noticing a large group of foreign Chinese students coming to Cal Poly for their education. The influx of Chinese students that came from abroad was correlated to anti-Communist elites' reactions to the Communist Revolution in China. Many anti-Communist Chinese left for Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in some instances the United States over fear for their future. The couple wanted to help create a sense of community for Chinese and Chinese American students at Cal Poly and make the transition of leaving home and their families easier. Young Louis and his siblings' success at assimilating to American culture made it easier to combat prejudices that both feared Chinese superiority and denounced the civilization as backwards. The Louis family's acceptance helped their efforts to make the area of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly more accepting to Chinese.

Background on Chinese in U.S. Higher Education

Although the United States had discriminatory policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882, 1888, 1892) with the intentions to keep Chinese from coming abroad, prejudices did

⁵ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 19.

not stop American motivations to allow and promote a small number of Chinese to come to the United States for a Western education in the beginning of the 20th century. Wang's article "Guests from the Open Door: The Reception of Chinese Students into the United States, 1900s—1920s" discusses the contradictory American policies to that of the Open Door policy and encouragement of Chinese education with scholarships such as the Boxer fund for specifically Chinese students from China.⁶ Wang claims that the United States had two motivations in inviting Chinese students. One was that it was an investment in United States commercial interests: if a Chinese student was educated in the U.S. the student would go back to China and promote business with the U.S.⁷ Secondly, there was a strong sense in the U.S. that China needed to be morally reformed to the democratic ideals of the west and that students educated in America would return to China and become leaders who could help alter the Chinese government.⁸ In terms of Chinese motivations for sending students to the west, the Chinese Education Mission introduced in 1871, promoted by Qing official Zhang Zhidong, was to learn the military skills and technology from the West to modernize the Chinese military.⁹

In Yelong Han's article, "An Untold Story: American Policy Toward Chinese Students in the United States, 1949-1955" Han discusses American responses to the Cold War and how it affected the influx of students coming to America.¹⁰ After the immediate Sino-Japanese postwar years student numbers reached a historic peak in the United States.¹¹ The Chinese Nationalist

⁶ Wingjia Edward Wang, "Guests from the Open Door: the Reception of Chinese Students into the United States, 1900s-1920s," *The Journal of American-East Relations* 3, no. 1 (1994): 56.

⁷ Wang, 75.

⁸ Wang, 67.

⁹ Wang, 57.

¹⁰ Yelong Han, "An Untold Story: American Policy Toward Chinese Students in the United States, 1949-1955," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no.1 (March 1993): 77.

¹¹ Han, 78.

government sponsored and encouraged students to go to the U.S. and the American government “along with private institutions of higher learning offered Chinese students various kinds of scholarships.”¹² But due to Cold War fears, the United States government created a paradox of inviting students to study their technical degrees but prohibiting them to leave because they feared the educated Chinese students would help the Communist government.¹³ This issue was resolved in 1956 with the reopening to allow Chinese to leave but from 1950 on, students were stuck with limited options.¹⁴ Some reasons for Chinese coming to America for education after World War Two, according to historian Iris Chang, that during the Communist Revolution in China wealthy businessmen and bureaucrats that feared their uncertain future searched for a new destination which, “ma[de] the second major wave of Chinese coming to America was not only anti-Communist elites but their most intellectually capable and scientifically directed children.”¹⁵ This strongly correlates to some of the reasons why Chinese came to Cal Poly and why there was an influx in Chinese students after the Communist Revolution.

Background on Chinese Discrimination in San Luis Obispo and California

Discrimination against Chinese and Chinese Americans, as historian Qingjia Wang explains, took place at all levels of American society; “including government officials, elite intellectuals, and even ordinary laborers,” as they were deemed labor competition and that “no white man could compete against a Chinese.”¹⁶ In Patricia Ochs’s article, “A history of Chinese Labor in San Luis Obispo County and a Comparison of Chinese Relations in this Country with

¹² Han, 78.

¹³ Han, 77.

¹⁴ Han, 77-78.

¹⁵ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: a Narrative History*, (New York: Viking, 2003), ix.

¹⁶ Wang, 71.

the Anti-Chinese Movement in California, 1869-1894,” she examined Californian laborers’ fear of the value of the cheap Chinese labor in the unstable and changing economy of California during the late 19th century.¹⁷ A Chinese willingness to work for lower wages, the poor economy, and California’s need for cheap labor in agriculture caused many workers to revolt against Chinese immigrants.¹⁸ Examples of discrimination are found in Arroyo Grande and San Miguel in the San Luis Obispo County, the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* records of verbal threats to Chinese to leave or to face violence and death.¹⁹ Chinese immigrants also lived separately often in Chinatowns or separate camps arousing more discrimination and prejudice from Americans, who were suspicious of the strange and foreign customs of the seemingly backward Far East.²⁰ The men who immigrated in search of the gold mountains, went alone hoping to make their fortune and return back to their families to live in ease.²¹ Instead they often found hostility from workers and the local communities who wanted to expel them along with the American government changing laws to prohibit entrance of family members they were separated from.²²

In Patricia Ochs’s article, she finds that the San Luis Obispo newspaper, the *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, during the late 1800s condemned violence against Chinese and in court cases promoted justice to be color blind in deciding whether someone was guilty.²³ San Luis Obispo still voted and promoted politicians who were anti-Chinese immigration during the time, but their attitudes towards the already present Chinese demonstrate more acceptance than its

¹⁷ Patricia Mary Ochs, *A History of Chinese Labor in San Luis Obispo County and a Comparison of Chinese Relations in This County with the Anti-Chinese Movement in California, 1869-1894*. (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1966), 3, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

¹⁸ Ochs, 17.

¹⁹ Ochs, 62.

²⁰ Ochs, 8.

²¹ Ochs, 8.

²² Wang, 55.

²³ Ochs 59-60.

neighboring cities and the state of California.²⁴ It is unclear if this acceptance of the already present Chinese in San Luis Obispo was due to the popularity of Ah Louis, but his welcomed presence and prestige in the community helped create more acceptance and sometimes even advantages for his children. One example of an advantage given to the Louis children for their fathers' prominence was when Young Louis met with the draft board during World War I, one of the officers recognized he was Ah Louis's son and exempted him from leaving so that he could stay home and help with his father's seed and bean farms.²⁵ But even Ah Louis's acceptance among the community appears to be correlated to his ability to assimilate and become "Americanized" as alluded to in a 1930 *San Luis Obispo Tribune* article in celebration for his 90th birthday.²⁶ In the article Ah Louis is described as "almost completely Americanized" which further reveals that for acceptance in American society, assimilating to American culture gains respect while any differences in culture cause fear and racism.²⁷

Ah Louis's children, grew up greatly assimilating to American culture in many different ways. In Milton Gordon's monograph *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*, he defines seven factors to examine assimilation: intermarriage, lack of discrimination, change in cultural patterns (such as religious beliefs), structural involvement in society, lack of encounterment of prejudice attitudes, development of identity in new society, and absence of political and value conflict with majority culture.²⁸ While the Louis family did not assimilate according to all of Milton's parameters such as intermarriage and total lack of

²⁴ Ochs, 52.

²⁵ Wong, 56.

²⁶ *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 13 March 1930.

²⁷ *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 13 March 1930.

²⁸ Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life : The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1964), 70.

prejudice and discrimination, the family did many things to accept the “Anglo-Conformity” of the time. For example, Fred and Howard joined a Chinese Christian group and Young got involved with numerous organizations in the community.²⁹ By assimilating the Louis family gained more acceptance and power to influence the community around them to be more receptive of the Chinese community.

In Polly Simpson’s paper, “The Assimilation of the Chinese into the San Luis Obispo Community: Two Case Studies” she interviewed and examined the assimilation of Young Louis.

³⁰ In his interview Young Louis stated that he never saw or experienced any kind of discrimination in his life, even among workers his father employed among the community.³¹ Whether this feeling of complete acceptance was due to his father's reputation protecting him is uncertain, Simpson speculates that his father's status in Chinatown and in the community may have created his sense of non-discrimination in the community.³² Later in the interview when Simpson asked Young whether he considered himself Chinese or Chinese American his contradicting answer over his acceptance of being an American because of his appearance brings doubt to whether he felt completely assimilated and had felt no prejudices and discrimination in his life.³³ In juxtaposition his brother Howard Louis offered an opposing viewpoint of growing up. In an interview for an Alumni Profile of Howard for his alma mater Berkeley International House he recounted being fired from an auto supply store one summer because complaining

²⁹ *Yok Choy Life Newsletter*, 1928, Louis Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

³⁰ Polly Simpson, “The Assimilation of the Chinese into the San Luis Obispo Community: Two Case Studies,” (Unpublished senior thesis, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, 1979), 4.

³¹ Simpson, 8-9.

³² Simpson, 10.

³³ Simpson, 10.

customers threatened his boss that he would lose their business.³⁴ Howard also recounted to historian Dan Krieger that when exploring downtown outside of Chinatown, store owners and residents would yell “Go home, your father wants you!”³⁵

Offering a seemingly contradictory statement, Young Louis in an *Cal Poly Today* article in 1988, contributes his work with helping Cal Poly because “he [could] never finish repaying Cal Poly the favor of enabling a young Chinese to get ahead at a time when public sentiment was largely anti-oriental.”³⁶ Before going to Cal Poly, Young worked as a movie projectionist but when the “talkies,” the first movies with dialogue, came out he knew if anything went wrong and he needed to fix the machines, having a white man’s job in a largely anti-Chinese time he would not get any help due to whites feelings of competition over high-paying jobs.³⁷ This reveals that Cal Poly was seen as a platform that could even the playing fields of discrimination and was a supportive accepting influence to Chinese and Chinese American students in San Luis Obispo.

While Young Louis found Cal Poly to be a helpful platform to gain knowledge to compete against prejudice and discrimination, Cal Poly itself was not immune to discrimination during its early years. In a 1920 *Polygram* editorial piece, Cal Poly student Samuel Wright questioned what to do with the labor issue and whether Asian immigrants should be excluded in California. He stated his opinion that:

³⁴ “Alumni Profile Howard Louis, I-House 1931-1932,” *International House Berkeley California*, December 2000, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 6 2000-2009, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

³⁵ Dan Krieger, “San Luis Obispo’s Chinatown once thrived,” *Tribune*, 9 February 2003, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 6 2000-2009, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

³⁶ January Harris, “Young Louis’ 65-year commitment to the Cal Poly Tradition,” *Cal Poly Today*, Summer 1988, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 4 1980-1988, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

³⁷ January Harris, Summer 1988.

The Japs live very simply, therefore can work far more cheaply than can those of the Aryan race; they raise large families who buy up American land. The Japanese meet the demand for cheap labor in the United States if the demand for cheap labor is such that the Japs can be permitted why not open the doors to the Chinese? They are certainly as desirable as the Japanese.³⁸

This quote, although not directly showing anti-Chinese sentiment in the student body of Cal Poly, reveals that there were issues of race, differing viewpoints in the community over exclusion, and racial stereotypes and prejudices at Cal Poly. Although Cal Poly offered alleviation to some forms of discrimination through the power of education as Young Louis felt, an article from the 1916 edition of the *Polygram*, making a stereotypical joke of Chinese as washers and mocking their names provides further evidence that Cal Poly had prejudice viewpoints on campus.³⁹

Young Louis's gratitude for Cal Poly's acceptance encouraged him to create funds in support of the Electrical Engineering program. Young helped create a student loan fund in honor of one of the Electrical Engineering professors, Dr. J. W. Wilder.⁴⁰ In 1986 the couple also created the Young and Stella Louis Endowment Fund where they invested \$10,000 to the Electronic and Electrical Engineering Department.⁴¹ Along with this, Young and his wife Stella helped start and keep the Poly Royals going for the first forty years but, it was in the 1950s when Young and Stella Louis noticed an increasing influx of Chinese immigrant students prompting them to create the Poly Chi club.⁴²

³⁸Samuel Wright, "The Assembly of April 14," *The Polygram*, April 21, 1920.

³⁹*Polygram*, September 1916, 3.

⁴⁰"Young Louis Honored," *Mustang Daily*, 24 April 1970, 4.

⁴¹January Harris, Summer 1988.

⁴²Jamie Borasi, "Local hero, Stella Louis missed by community," *Mustang Daily*, 23 October 1996.

Some of these Chinese students information is recorded in James Tsai-Ying Fu's article, "A study of Academic Performance of Chinese Students in California Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo California." Fu examines the academic performances of graduated and current Chinese students from 1957-1961, which totaled to fifty-nine students.⁴³ These were not the only Chinese students recorded attending Cal Poly. There was a married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Tsei Suan Hu, who were sent by the Chinese government in 1947,⁴⁴ as well as Chai-Mos Asise, a horticulture manufacturing instructor originally from Foochow Union High School in Foochow, China.⁴⁵ Asise heard of the school by reading article, "Take a Cow to College," by Frank J. Taylor in a Chinese issue of *Reader's Digest* and was attracted to the practical learning aspect of Cal Poly.⁴⁶

In Fu's article, Chinese students came from three parts of China that he separately notes, mainland China (which at the time was Communist China), Hong Kong, and Formosa (Taiwan).⁴⁷ The vast majority of the students came from Hong Kong, a total of 52 out of 58, with five students from mainland China and one from Taiwan.⁴⁸ This correlates to Iris Chang's point that a majority of the students traveling abroad were anti-communist elites since Taiwan and Hong Kong were main destinations that anti-communist Chinese moved to.

In Fu's study he also examined some of the reasons Chinese students decided to come to Cal Poly. In Fu's interviews of Chinese students, given reasons for choosing Cal Poly were

⁴³ James Tsai-Ying Fu, "A Study of Academic Performance of Chinese Students in California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, California," 1962, 50, (Unpublished senior project), California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

⁴⁴ Donald Merchant, "Poly View Trailers Have Few Openings," *El Mustang*, 19 December 1927.

⁴⁵ "Digest Story Inspires Chinese Student to 'Learn By Doing'," *El Mustang*, 21 October 1949.

⁴⁶ "Digest Story Inspires Chinese Student."

⁴⁷ Fu, 1.

⁴⁸ Fu, 50-52.

generally lower tuition and housing costs, “good curriculum in engineering and agriculture”, close proximity to San Francisco and Los Angeles, Cal Poly’s large group of Chinese students on campus, excellent buildings and facilities, and its learn by doing philosophy.⁴⁹ Most of the 59 students were in engineering and the agriculture programs, with very few exceptions in the Liberal Arts.⁵⁰ Iris Chang’s point that students coming abroad were “scientifically directed,” supports the idea that the students coming to Cal Poly were most likely part of this anti-communist elite category.

While none of the students interviewed by Fu stated their intentions to coming to the United States and Cal Poly were correlated to trying to leave the uncertain future of Communist China, an 1961 opinion piece in the Cal Poly student newspaper, the *El Mustang*, provides evidence that some of these students were anti-Communist.⁵¹ Reporter Neil Norum asked students from abroad whether Red China should be allowed into the United Nations.⁵² One of the students he interviewed was Gus Wu, a Mechanical Engineering major from Hong Kong, who argued that until Red China represents the people’s opinions, they should not be allowed into the United Nations.⁵³ This opposition to Communist China further provides evidence that the Chinese students coming from abroad were anti-communist elites who were scientifically geared and left in order to flee what they perceived was uncertainty in China.

The larger immigration of Chinese to Cal Poly correlating to fear of the Communist Chinese government was what spurred Young and Stella Louis to create the Poly Chi club in the early 1950s. Their goal was “to make them feel as though they are welcome into the area and not

⁴⁹ Fu, 2-3.

⁵⁰ Fu, 47.

⁵¹ Neil Norum, “Roving Reporter,” *El Mustang*, 24 October 1961.

⁵² Norum.

⁵³ Norum.

to feel backwards” further proving the Young Louis helped make Cal Poly along with the area of San Luis Obispo more accepting of Chinese.⁵⁴ Louis tried to help the students break their fear and help them learn the language, but also wanted to connect Chinese and Chinese American students at Cal Poly.⁵⁵ The close relationship and help that Young and Stella gave to the Chinese students earned them the nickname “Mom and Pop.”⁵⁶ It wasn’t until students no longer could fit into their home that the club became officially registered with ASI as an official Cal Poly club. A *Mustang Daily* article written in 1996, states the CSA upheld its charter and goals to interact and create a community for Chinese on campus.⁵⁷ One student said “It made me very aware of my culture,” promoting the idea that Young Louis succeeded at making the area more accepting.⁵⁸ The article also invited Cal Poly and the community of San Luis Obispo to its New Year celebration that would use skits to “touch on everything from Chinese stereotypes, to the Tiananmen Square protest in Beijing” which helps promote acceptance and the breaking down of prejudices and discrimination in the community.⁵⁹

The Chinese Student Association invitation to the community to participate in its Chinese New Year celebration every year is a testimony to Young Louis’ goal of promoting a closer relationships with the college and Chinese community among the city of San Luis Obispo. When the city of San Luis Obispo decided to level Chinatown to put in new parking structures and shopping centers without any recognition for its historic background, Howard Louis advocated

⁵⁴ Simpson, 8.

⁵⁵ Simpson, 8.

⁵⁶ Dorie Bentley, “Young and Stella historically happy,” *Telegram Tribune*, 14 February 1985, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 4 1980-1988, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

⁵⁷ Mark Armstrong, “Chinese New Year rings in at Cal Poly,” *Mustang Daily*, 21 February 1996.

⁵⁸ Armstrong.

⁵⁹ Armstrong.

and spoke out against the city.⁶⁰ His efforts along with other community members helped change the city of San Luis Obispo's mind to change the mural that was going to be on the parking garage next to the historic Ah Louis store from a copper palm tree to Chinese characters reflecting love and double joy with images of Chinese building the railroads within. In a *Telegram-Tribune* article by historian Dan Krieger, he discusses Howard Louis' fight "with powerful forces in the city who wished to eradicate all traces of Chinese presence" showing the still current and present anti-Chinese sentiment that still exists in San Luis Obispo today.⁶¹

The Louis family, through successfully assimilating to American culture, was able to help use their influence to make Cal Poly and the area of San Luis Obispo a more accepting place for Chinese and Chinese Americans. While Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo have and still currently show traces of anti-Chinese sentiment, Young and Stella Louis's founding of the Poly Chi club due to the influx of anti-communist Chinese leaving China, has helped Chinese and Chinese American students at Cal Poly create a sense of community and acceptance. The Chinese Cultural Association New Year's Banquet also has created dialogue throughout the community to help make it more accepting and break down prejudices and stereotypes which efforts still go on today.

⁶⁰ Howard Wong Louis, "Letter to the editor: City's ethnic heritage deserves lasting display," *Telegram Tribune*, 15 November 1990, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 5 1990-1999, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

⁶¹ Dan Krieger, "A wondrous place in which to grow up," *Telegram Tribune*, 13 September 1997, Louis Family Papers Series 5 Clipping Files, Box 8, Folder 5 1990-1999, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, CA.

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