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## “THIS IS YOUR COUNTRY” Three Asian Immigrants Make America Their Own

Eddy Zheng stepped briskly onstage, greeting his young audience with a firm and energetic voice. “How’s the future of America doing?” Zheng yelled. The audience cheered. The occasion was the 21st Annual Asian Pacific Islander Issues Conference, at U.C. Berkeley, and guest speakers included the newly elected Oakland Mayor, Jean Quan, and the supervisor of District Six in San Francisco, Jane Kim. Almost all of the participants were Asian American college or high school students. Afterward, Zheng led a workshop that addressed the growing number of Asian and Pacific Island immigrants who end up in prison. To open the workshop, he read a poem he’d written. Like many of his other poems, this one came from Zheng’s personal own experience as an immigrant in America— having spent almost 20 years behind bars before he finally turned his life around.

Eddy Zheng emigrated to the U.S. from China with his family in early 1980s. His parents bear the hope of providing a better education for the kids. Four years later, he committed armed robbery and was sent to San Quentin. He was only 16. Now he works with troubled youth in the Chinatown area of San Francisco. He encourages young Asian Americans to be more involved in community affairs. “This is your country,” he says. “And you should be proud.”

President Johnson signed the Immigration Act in 1965, leading to a rapid growth in the Asian immigrant population in the U.S.. Between 1971 and 2002, more than seven million people arrived from Vietnam, China, Laos, Thailand, and others. Steeped in their own cultural and political traditions, Asians are generally reluctant to voice their opinions to take action to safeguard their rights. “Immigrants are more concerned about survival, getting a job, economic security,” says Harvey Dong, who teaches Asian American studies at U.C. Berkeley. “In times of crisis, Asian in American have been targeted and scapegoated.” To become fully participating American citizens, they must undergo great personal change.

In recent years, an increasing number of Asian immigrants have become active in community affairs. This is closely related to the efforts of Asian American community leaders, who have committed themselves to helping immigrants deal with both hardships and opportunities they might not have faced in their home countries. This series of stories profiles three such leaders.

Ming Ho arrived in Oakland from Hong Kong in early 1980s. He was born in southern China but smuggled himself into Hong Kong in 1976 to escape from the Cultural Revolution. He was a businessman before he retired in 2003, paying no attention to community affairs. But now he has become a dedicated volunteer in Oakland’s Chinatown, helping with all sorts of issues, small and large.

Torm Nompraseurt fled from Laos in 1975 to avoid political prosecution due to his role in the Laotian Civil War, arriving in Richmond as a war refugee. Having noticed that a lot of Laotian immigrants neither understood their rights nor knew how to stand up for them, he started educating them regarding local social and environmental issues and training them in how to made their voices heard in the local government.

Eddy Zheng, Ming Ho, and Torm Nompraseurt: Three immigrants from very different backgrounds who all ended up serving the Asian community after they settled in the U.S. This series of profiles explore their journeys from Laos and China to the Bay Area, where they created new lives.

## “TO TEACH A HUNDRED STUDENTS”

### Torm Nompraseurt's Childhood Dream Comes True in His New Country

The 65-year-old Laotian man stood before the Richmond City Council, facing ten council members. While dozens of local residents listened in the audience, he trembled, stumbling over words in his native tongue, trying hard to tell his story with the help of a translator. He spoke for only a few minutes, then sat down. This was what Lipo Chanthanasack recalls about his first public speaking experience. Though he's forgotten the issue he was addressing that day—something to do with the Laotian community—he will always remember how he felt. “It was like my first parachuting experiences when I served in the Laotian army,” Chanthanasack says. “I was very nervous.” With practice, Chanthanasack became more confident. Several months later, he could deliver his words almost fluently in front of a large audience, though he still needed the help of a translator.

What brought about the change was systematic training led by Torm Nompraseurt, a leader in the Laotian immigrant community in Richmond who has been helping his neighbors voice their opinions and protect their civil liberties. Like Chanthanasack, many immigrants from Southeast Asia have never participated in a democratic political system. This makes them vulnerable to abuse and neglect. To raise awareness and encourage his fellow Laotians to get involved in community affairs, Nompraseurt invites immigrants to regular house meetings, where he educates them regarding basic rights and local issues. For almost 20 years, he has been dedicated to serving the Laotian community.

Nompraseurt, now 55, was a war refugee who arrived in the U.S. in 1975. He was among the first few Laotians landing in Richmond. Since then, the number of Laotian immigrants in Contra Costa County has grown to about 10,000. Nationwide the population approaches 7 million, with the largest portion living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Most of the new immigrants are refugees from the Laotian Civil War, between the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government, which took place from 1954 to 1975. During that time, the C.I.A. trained approximately 30,000 Laotians to work on behalf of the U.S., or in U.S.-sponsored programs, in its attempt to influence events in the region. Nompraseurt was one of them, a development that was as unlikely as it was fateful.

Born to a farmer's family in a tiny mountain village in northwest Laos, Nompraseurt was the 10th child of 15. Prior to 1960, no education was offered in remote rural areas, so Nompraseurt's father had never gone to school. Determined to follow a different path, Nompraseurt formed a dream when he was little. “In my lifetime, I wanted to teach 100 students to read and write,” he says, referring to local children. But while pursuing his dream he took a detour. At the teacher's college he attended Nompraseurt launched a gardening program in which students grew vegetables that they then sold back to the school. The principal was so impressed by Nompraseurt's leadership and creativity that he recommended him for a program supported by a U.S. foundation that helped Laos develop fish farming, small-scale agriculture, and adult education projects. The organization was

one of many that the U.S. introduced in Laos, which had become an affiliated battlefield of the neighboring Vietnam War.

Not only was Nompraseurt doing good work, his salary was good enough for him to lead a well-off life in Laos. He was only 19 years old. But he never envisioned that his job would take his life to the opposite of the world. In 1975, the U.S.-supported Hmong troops lost to the Communist Party. And all the people working for any U.S. affiliated group in Laos were jeopardized, facing possible retaliation. On May 21, a friend came to notify Nompraseurt that the Communist Party was investigating him, which could put him in grave danger at any minute.

Learning that the border to Thailand was still open, he ran back home and grabbed his wife, lying to her about where they were headed. They make their way to the Mekong River, where they boarded a ship for Thailand, where a refugee camp had been set up. Only ten days later, the Communist Party took over the country and shut down the borders. Nompraseurt thought he would be able to return to his homeland soon afterward. Instead, he and his wife were forced to stay in the camp for three months. When it became clear that Thailand would remain a dangerous place for a long time, they decided to emigrate to the West Coast of the U.S.

Like many other immigrants, Nompraseurt found only low-wage work after he settled in America--busboy, dishwasher, and so on. But that would never satisfy him. He attended night school, read books about Martin Luther King. Meanwhile, he also volunteered as an interpreter, helping Laotian immigrants communicate with government officials. At that time, the early 1980s, as many as 500 Laotian immigrants were arriving every week in Contra Costa County. Overworked, the county social service department offered Nompraseurt a position—processing applications from Laotian. He hesitated, because he was then working in a steel mill, earning a monthly salary of \$1,100. The government position would paid only \$900. After thinking over the two options, Nompraseurt eventually chose social service.

That was when he discovered the language and cultural barriers facing new Laotian immigrants also prevented them from taking advantage of their civil rights. Back in Laos, they would have been punished if they criticized the government, so they tended remain silent regarding problems in their new community in Richmond. This is what Nompraseurt has been striving to change. While working with the social service department, he noticed Laotian immigrants had a hard time communicating in English with the social service officer, for there were only English-speaking windows and all application forms were in English. Nompraseurt went to see his supervisor, demanding a Laotian-speaking window and forms for the new immigrants. After several rounds of meetings and negotiations, Nompraseurt won. Winning his first fight made him determined to devote himself to serving the Laotian community. “I found out who exactly I am,” Nompraseurt says.” When a little child cries, I know that I can stop that child crying. If I don’t do it, it really bothers me.”

Considering himself an natural fighter against injustice, Nompraseurt says, he’d even mediate between kids fighting when he encountered them in his village

back in Laos. His parents had been worried about him, concerned that his persistence would bring trouble. "I don't really worry if I believe I'm doing something right," Nompraseurt explains. "And I would fight if something's wrong." While he worked at the U.S. foundation in the Laotian city of Houisai, about a hundred Laotian teachers were laid off by the foundation with no compensation. Nompraseurt volunteered to negotiate with the employer, despite the risks to himself. He eventually persuaded the foundation to pay the fired teachers.

In 1993, Nompraseurt joined the Asia Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), an activist group in the Bay Area aiming to help Asian Pacific Islander communities seek environmental and social justice. Two years later, APEN launched the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) and Nompraseurt became its leader. The LOP is a community organizing group that educates and trains the Laotian community in Richmond to stand up and voice their concerns about the well-being of their community.

The first successful campaign the LOP mounted was to force the city to install a multi-lingual warning system. A fire in Chevron in 1999 had caused environmental problems and health hazards, and there was only an English-language warning system, which made the Laotian community vulnerable. Nompraseurt encouraged the community to testify at Richmond City Council meetings. To prepare, the LOP invited people to house meetings before the council meeting and explained to them how they could achieve this goal. They also taught people how to speak succinctly and tell their personal stories in ways that would move the city council.

"I didn't totally understand we had a right. And I didn't know the government could address our needs. Then I learned that at least we have the right to ask for a change," says Thongsown Phuthama, 87, now an active community leader of the LOP and president of Laos Senior Association, in the Bay Area.

The warning system eventually got approved. And the Laotian community realized they could actually influence government policy. Over the past ten years, Nompraseurt and the LOP have also organized campaigns against rent increases, established a South Asian student advisory program at Richmond High School, and halted the expansion of the Chevron oil refinery. Through those campaigns, now the Laotian community is willing to participate in the political process. "Most of our leaders are now sophisticated to talk about the issues and campaign on behalf of the community," Nompraseurt says. "The LOP has about 25 campaign leaders and a couple hundred members."

Nompraseurt's childhood dream-- "to teach 100 students"—has come true in a different way, and in a different country. The biggest achievement, Nompraseurt believes, is to make sure people understand that in a democracy they can fight against injustice. "People said Chevron is too big to fight," Nompraseurt says. "We said no. That was the process we needed to go through. And we won it."

Nicole Valentino, assistant to Richmond's mayor, has known Nompraseurt since 2008, when he led an initiative demanding an environmental of Chevron. "Torm has been playing a unique role to the Laotian community. In the past, Laotian immigrants were not involved in a lot of political issues. They were quiet.

But it has been changing,” Valentino says. “He’s interacting with American way of politics. And he understands the legal system very well. But I would not say he’s a now a typical American activist, for they don’t come from the same culture.”

Although Nompraseurt has been encouraging people to speak up for their rights and to get involved in political causes, he now sometimes is frustrated by the American political system. Sometimes action takes too long and problems remain unsolved, despite all of their efforts. He also cites Chevron as an example of the drawbacks of political involvement. “It took us three years,” he says, “and it’s still going on.” Still a fan of democracy, he adds that “sometimes people in charge of the process make it more complicated.” He says the LOP and the community had to do a lot of research to sue Chevron, while Chevron has hundreds of lawyers. “To me, it’s just a show. But we have to have people take part,” he says. “Because if people don’t get involved, it’ll get worse; if people are involved, you might get something out of it.”

Nompraseurt now works with as a community organizer on an APEN-sponsored project dealing with climate change. He’s running a campaign calling for people to support a law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in California. APEN, together with other 20 organizations, aims to get the law passed by 2013.

On a Saturday night last October, Torm Nompraseurt walked into Richmond Memorial Auditorium and greeted everyone he saw with smile. In front of the auditorium, a band was playing Laotian pop songs from the 1960s: “My girl went to the U.S. and she’s not coming back. I hope she doesn’t forget the Laotian sticky rice.” About twenty men and women, all dressed in traditional Laotian costumes and arranged in a circle, performed a traditional dance in the center of the room. This was the annual Laotian Cultural Celebration, and Laotian immigrants had driven from all over the Bay Area to enjoy the gathering. Among them were former royalty family members, activist leaders, pilots, and former CIA agents. Torm Nompraseurt knows every single one of them.

Through his work over the two decades, he has developed a close relationship with all parts of the Laotian community. His schedule is usually packed with family and community events, even on weekends. On a Saturday in March, Nompraseurt attended his niece’s baby shower in the morning, then rushed to participate the annual meeting of Laotian Ethnic Community Association. In the late afternoon, he drove to a community leader’s home, for a traditional healing ceremony joined by the family members and friends who came to pray for the leader’s health. In the evening, Nompraseurt attended another niece’s daughter’s birthday party in Stockton. This was a typical weekend for him. “If the community needs him, he’s always there for them. The community always has events like fundraisings, celebrations. And he’s always be there as a guest. People love to invite him,” says Keri Manyvan, Nompraseurt’s 45-year-old niece who lives in Richmond.

Thirty-five years have passed since Nompraseurt left Laos. He’s never gone back. His parents died in the 1980s, before U.S. war refugees were allowed to return to visit families. Two of his siblings now live in the U.S. while two others are still in Laos. The rest have died. Nompraseurt says that, in the months and years after arriving in America, he greatly missed his family and homeland. Asked if he

still misses it as much, he paused, then said nothing. He plans to visit Laos next year, if his schedule and budget allow.

“THIS IS THE RULE HERE”  
The Many Lives of Ming Ho

Ming Ho stood in the street, arguing in English with a police officer about how to write a report of a theft that happened a half hour earlier. “You should include the fact that the boy had a knife with him. The witnesses saw him drop it,” Ho explained, referring to an African American teenager who had been caught stealing. The police officer shook his head and said he couldn’t add the weapon, because it wasn’t found on the boy. But he agreed to call a Chinese-speaking police officer to come to the scene and help sort out exactly what had happened.

Ho, 65 years old, was not the victim, but a volunteer who has been serving the Oakland Chinatown neighborhood for seven years. It was an afternoon last October when he was walking around the Chinatown, as he does every day. He came across a middle-aged Chinese woman trying with much difficulty to explain to a police officer what had happened to her. A stranger was translating. Ho learned that the victim was a newly arrived immigrant. Her purse had been stolen while she walked across the street. A nearby shop owner had helped her call the police. Everyone was excited to see Ho approach because of his experience communicating with the police and other community officials.

Years ago, however, Ho tended to act very differently. When he found that all four of his car tires stolen when he left it parked outside a manufacture factory, he had no idea about how to report a crime and had to ask his friend to call the police. Now he teaches other Chinese immigrants how to do so when they encounter a crime. He also works on a number of other issues in Oakland’s Chinatown. Even today, Ho remains a little surprised by his new role in the community. For most of his life, all he cared about was making money and providing for his family.

Ming Ho was born in 1954 in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province, in southern China, now known as the world’s manufacturing center. He is the third of nine children and was considered the smartest among them. To help his parents, Ho started working as a mechanic when he was 14. He learned things very fast and worked very hard, which earned him a relatively good salary. The Chinese economy was generally dismal back then, however, so Ho early on started planning to emigrate to Hong Kong, the prosperous metropolitan center about 1,000 miles away, where living conditions were much better and opportunities more plentiful.

Ho had applied for family visit visa to Hong Kong as early as 1962, but didn’t seen any progress until 1966, when the Cultural Revolution took place. Launched by Mao Tse-Tung, the revolution lasted ten years and brought political upheaval, including crackdowns on intellectuals who embraced ideologies that differed from Mao’s. One day, Ho watched in horror as soldiers rushed into his



home and dumped his grandfather's large collection of boutique books onto the floor, then destroyed them. His desire to emigrate to Hong Kong became stronger.

Not long afterward, 21-year-old Ho was riding his bike home from work when he saw thousands of young people gathering at a square in the center of the city, yelling and waving sticks at each other. Ho recognized that it was two groups of Red Guards representing different ideologies and that they were about to fight one another. Scared and confused, he ran back home immediately. The next day, when he passed the square, he saw more than 100 bodies hung from the trees. Some were naked. Ho knew it was time to leave. "I never cared about politics," Ho says. "All I wanted was a better living."

On September 23, 1967, Ho left Guangzhou for Shenzhen, a coastal city that faces Hong Kong across the Shenzhen River. Swimming across the river was the most effective way to steal into Hong Kong in the 1960s. He had two partners. One was a young student among the 17 million students during the Cultural Revolution who were forced to move from urban cities to rural villages, where they worked on collective farms. The other was a middle-aged man who had once lived abroad and whose overseas connections put him at risk. To reach the Shenzhen River, the team had to walk through a mountainous area. The dangers were great. If captured by soldiers, they would be killed and thrown into the river. Ho had seen many bodies drifting in the river. So the three walked only at night. After seven days and nights, Ho and his partners finally reached the river. To avoid being seen by armed soldiers guarding the water, Ho and his two friends drifted quietly instead of swimming vigorously, which would have made noise. The river was only 200 yards wide but it took them seven hours to reach the other side. When Ho arrived in Hong Kong, all he had was a pair of swimming trunks and a little cash.

No stranger to hard work, Ho quickly began building a new life. He first got a job as a longshoreman. Then he moved to a clothing factory, where he fixed sewing machines. During the next 15 years, Ho worked for two more clothing factories, learning everything about the industry. Eventually he started his own company. And there he might have stayed, an increasingly successful businessman in the thriving economy of Hong Kong, were it not for a chance encounter that would alter his life profoundly.

At a clothing industry fair in 1980, Ho met a Jewish businessman who was amazed by the fine sewing machines Ho displayed and his masterly skill fixing them. He asked Ho whether he'd be interested in moving to Oakland, California, to work at his sewing machine company. It was a hard decision. Ho agreed, but only after he was assured that he could bring his family with him. His family in southern China had been expecting Ho to help them emigrate to Hong Kong. Immigration based on kinship was not allowed there, however. Because an immigrant in the U.S., on the other hand, would make it easy for him to help his family emigrate there, Ho decided to move, to give up everything he had accomplished, leaving behind the comfortable life he had built in Hong Kong.

In 1982, Ho left for the U.S. Once again, he was determined to succeed. After only three years, he was able to start his own company in Oakland, selling sewing machines to clothing factories in the Bay Area and other parts of the country. His business flourished.

In the early years, according to Ho, about 1,700 clothing factories operated in the Bay Area. But globalization changed the manufacturing landscape. Factories started moving overseas, to places where labor was cheaper, including, ironically, Guangdong, Ho's hometown. Gradually, Ho's business shrank to less than 100 now. By 2003, with only a 100 or so clothing factories still running, Ho was selling very few sewing machines. Ho decided to retire.

Ho wanted to stay busy. So he took classes at the community college. He tried a wide range of courses, including cooking, baking, and basic computer skills. But one course in particular changed his life. Called "Citizen Academy," it was taught in Cantonese, a first for the school, which prior to that time had relied on English and Spanish. During the four-month-long course, Oakland government officials described how various city departments operated. One of the instructors was Carl Chan, chairman of the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) in Oakland's Chinatown, who was serving as a consultant to the government. After Ho finished the course, he joined the campaign led by Chan against a proposed rates increase at a parking lot near Chinatown. He attended council meetings, attended a rally, and helped motivate other residents to take action. The campaign succeeded. Ho's new career—as a volunteer social activist—had begun. "I realized then," Ho says, "you could really bring changes to the community."

Afterward, Carl Chan organized numerous other events, inviting his former students. Ho showed up every time. "Ho was the only one who never said no," Chan says. "He has been a great help to Oakland Chinatown." Chan had immigrated to the U.S. when he was a boy, and he had seen many Chinese people treated unjustly, due largely to their timidity. He decided he would try to change things, and that he would try to persuade others to join him. "We have lots of problems in Chinatown. Many Chinese are afraid of the possible consequence of guarding their rights, and many just don't know how to handle it," Chan explains. "Being a citizen in the U.S., participation is better than none."

For the past seven years, Ho has been a volunteer, spending almost every day in Chinatown neighborhood and coordinating all sorts of issues. "He's a volunteer manic. We call him Chinatown's vice mayor," Lulu Lee, a volunteer with NCPC, says. A middle-aged woman who immigrated from southern China 22 years ago, Lee started volunteering in 2009, after taking a course about the public security system taught by the Oakland police department. That's where she met Ho. "He's very enthusiastic about community affairs," Lee says. She comes to the NCPC in Chinatown about twice a week, helping keep records and answering questions from local residents.

Of the ten volunteers in the Chinatown NCPC, Ho has served the longest. His activities run the gamut, from safeguarding the community's security during riots to organizing protest campaigns to fundraising, along with many others. Since the majority of the Chinatown residents are senior citizens who seldom use email, Ho often walks from shop by shop to inform people of upcoming meetings or campaigns.

On a Saturday at the end of October, a blackout struck Chinatown and lasted for six hours. Some restaurants had to cancel large numbers of reservations. Ho

spent two and a half days walking around the neighborhood, helping shop owners fill out forms requesting compensation from PG&E for losses caused by the blackout. He distributed more than 50 forms, explaining how the form works and how to prepare evidence. Having worked in the neighborhood for decades, Ho is very familiar with the businesses there. "In Chinatown there are 48 restaurants and 18 supermarkets," Ho says, smiling, his complexion ruddy. "I wanted to help them get their loss covered."

But not all of Ho's experiences have been pleasant, however. Sometimes people don't want to cooperate, asking Ho not to bother them or interfere in their affairs. "They don't understand what we are doing," Ho says. "Sometimes I asked myself 'Why am I doing this?' They don't pay me and I used to charge \$55 an hour for fixing sewing machines. But most of the residents thank me, and that's where I got my sense of accomplishment."

Although Ho knew nothing about how city government works and what rights he's entitled to before he took the "Citizen Academy" class in 2003, now he's an expert, especially when it comes to crimes. Because of the language barrier, new immigrants find it difficult to communicate with law enforcement officials when they are victimized by criminals. Chinese are especially reluctant to deal with police. To them, that means nothing but trouble. Ho used to have the same concern, too. Last year, he took another course offered by the police department and taught in Cantonese. The subject was how the entire police system operates. Ho learned that the portion of a security force assigned to a certain area is based on the crime rate. If victims don't report robberies and other violations, there might never be any improvement on the security. That realization convinced Ho that he should encourage everyone in Chinatown to contact the police anytime a crime takes place. "When I got stolen from before, I'd think it was bad luck, but now I'd report it to police," Ho says. "This is the rule here and you have to follow it."

"It's a learning experience and all immigrants have to go through this," says Carl Chan, who immigrated from Hong Kong about 30 years ago. "For new immigrants, the top priority is to make a living. They don't have time to take part in other things. So it's good that we have volunteers like Ming Ho to help the community."

Ho also encouraged other immigrants to do volunteer work. Sue Wu, 33, is one of them. She met Ming Ho at a course offered by the police department with Oakland government two years ago, and now is a regular to the NCPC, helping out on various affairs. She moved to the U.S. when she was 12, and now works with the social welfare department in Richmond, north of Oakland. "Ho is very enthusiastic and always willing to help," Wu says. "He inspired me that life is not all about making money, but also contributing to the community." Wu has seen a great change in Chinese immigrants' attitude toward political participation since she moved to the U.S. "Chinese are generally considered quiet," she says. "But now they are speaking up for their rights."

After Ho became a U.S. citizen, in 1988, he helped his mother and six of his siblings immigrate. They all live in the Bay Area. One of his brothers frequently flies to China for business purposes, since China now ranks as the second largest economy

in the world. Ho says he never envisioned China becoming so prosperous. His hometown, Guangzhou, has become the country's third biggest city, with 14 million people, and that's largely due to the manufacturing industry that boomed after Ho left for Hong Kong, then the States.

Ho lives with his wife, who works for the education department with Oakland Unified School District. He has a son and two daughters. One is a doctor, one a lawyer, and the other is an engineer, which makes Ho very satisfied. "Sometimes I feel so fortunate," Ho says. "And I want to serve the community in return." Ho plans to travel with his wife after she retires. "I can't do the volunteer work forever. There's going to be such a day when I'm too old to walk. I hope we can cultivate some young people to continue my work." Ho's family has supported him, but he doesn't always tell them what he's doing. When the situation is potentially risky, like safeguarding the residents Chinatown during angry protests, he says little, concerned that they would stop him from getting involved.

Ho is now working on a campaign against a proposed state law that would ban the possession and distribution of shark fins. According to Ho, the bill would damage local Chinese restaurants, where serve shark fin soup is served as a much-prized delicacy. And the Chinatown community is launching a campaign attempting to kill the bill. In mid-April, Ho and 200 other Chinese immigrants went to Sacramento to lobby against the legislation. They blocked the offices of 80 congressmen, arguing that the bill would have negative consequences in Chinatown. During his first years in the U.S., Ho saw Chinese immigrants being harmed because they didn't take action. He doesn't want that to happen again.

“A BAD THING HAS TURNED INTO A GOOD THING”  
The Transformation of Eddy Zheng

Eddy Zheng stepped up to the stage at a vigorous pace. He greeted the young audience with his firm and energetic voice. “How’s the future of America doing?” he asked. The audience applauded. During the next 15 minutes, Zheng read three poems he wrote. The audience of 300 followed his rhythm, snapping their fingers as a way to show their support. This took place on March 12th, at the 21st Annual Asian Pacific Islander Issues Conference, at the MLK Student Union, U.C. Berkeley. The guest speakers included the newly elected Oakland Mayor Jean Quan and the supervisor of District Six in San Francisco, Jane Kim. Almost all the participants were Asian American college or high school students.

After the reading, Zheng held a workshop on the marginalization of Asian and Pacific Islanders incarcerated in the Prison Industry Complex, and on raising awareness about creating a safer community. About 100 kids showed up. Zheng read another poem. All the poems concerned his unusual background: he had spent almost 20 years in prison before turning his life around.

Zheng is very popular. A couple of people asked if they could take pictures with him. Many kids inquired about volunteering in the prison programs. William Chiang, a U.C. Berkeley student who attended Zheng’s workshop says, “I think Eddy’s great. His personal story is amazing.”

Looking at Eddy Zheng today, it’s hard to imagine who he’d been before. This medium-built 41-year-old man, with inch-long short hair, looks confident, upbeat, nonthreatening. But on the back of his left hand is a telltale sign--a tattoo of the Chinese character for “tiger.” It was the year of tiger when Zheng was first sent to jail. He asked his cellmate to inscribe something that would always make him remember that day. “Prison shaped who I am now,” he says proudly. Zheng believes he’s the richest man in the world in terms of his capability and dramatic life experience.

Eddy Zheng was born in 1970, in the southern China province of Guangdong, when the Cultural Revolution was reaching its climax. He’s the youngest son of the family. Both of his parents worked in the military. Zheng’s father was a colonel and a professional basketball player for his military’s team, and Zheng’s mother was an accountant. The father’s monthly salary was three times that of ordinary Chinese people, which allowed the family to enjoy a relatively comfortable life. In 1980, Zheng’s maternal grandparents, who had lived in the U.S. for decades, came back China to visit the family. Although the family was comparably richer, the whole

country was suffering from a scarcity of basic foods. Concerned about the family's living conditions, the grandparents suggested that they move to America. Zheng's parents hesitated, knowing that they would have to start all over.

But eventually they agreed. "The only reason we moved to the U.S. was we wanted to provide a better education for our children," says Zheng's father, 77, who now lives in Oakland. In China, the college admission process had resumed only five years earlier, and the acceptance rate was lower than 5%. The eldest son of the family, then 20, graduated from high school and worked in a candy factory with a monthly salary equivalent to \$6, which was what most Chinese workers earned at the time.

So Zheng's parents quit their jobs, left behind their well-to-do life in China, and moved to the U.S., arriving in Oakland in November of 1982. And as they had expected, the only jobs they could find were menial ones. Since Zheng's father had been a military officer, he didn't have any vocational training. He took jobs as a construction worker, warehouse carrier, and cook at Burger King, finally ending up as a cook at a restaurant, where he worked until he retired. Zheng's mother worked as a nanny in San Jose, coming home only once a week. Zheng's older brother and sister also dove into the busy life of work and study, trying to succeed. Zheng, then 12, was left unattended most of the time. While the family was struggling to make a living, the boy was having a hard time adjusting to his new environment. He could barely understand English, and kids laughed at him at school. He started forging his parents' signatures, skipping class, and hanging out on the streets with other new immigrants. By this time, his family had grown desperate and was relying on food stamps. Zheng was ashamed. He started stealing. He sold drugs. He got into fights. His life was unraveling.

Finally, Zheng made a fatal mistake. In 1986, only four years after he moved to the U.S., he and two other teenage boys, also Chinese immigrants, broke into a Chinese immigrant's house in San Francisco's Chinatown. They kidnapped a family of four and threatened them with a gun, demanding the password to their safe. That led to a six-hour-long kidnapping, which ended in their arrest. Now Zheng faced grave consequences.

Zheng's family was so poor that they couldn't afford a lawyer, so the court appointed one. Unfortunately, the lawyer didn't look out for Zheng's interests. The family's lack of familiarity with the U.S. judicial system made things worse. In China, if a suspect pleads guilty, the sentence often is alleviated, as a reward for honesty and to encourage better behavior in the future. Just the opposite, however, occurs in the U.S. Convinced that he would receive a lighter punishment, Zheng pled guilty to all 16 charges that had been filed against him. Since he was being tried as an adult, he received a sentence of seven years to life, as did the other two kids. Only 16 years old, Zheng was headed to prison.

Zheng's parents were very depressed due to his loss of face. Worried that the bad news would be too much for his grandparents to bear, Zheng's parents decided not to tell them. At every family get-together, they made up stories to explain the boy's absence--that Zheng was too busy at boarding school or was attending a training program of some kind. When Zheng called his grandparents, he pretended that he was phoning from school. Incredibly, Zheng's mother once

took his grandmother to him in prison, telling her that it was a camp. When, twelve years after Zheng was incarcerated, his grandparents died, they still didn't know of his real whereabouts.

Despite the seriousness of his crimes, Zheng was a naïve teenage boy when he entered San Quentin. He thought he would be locked up for only a couple of years, then released. When he finally realized he would probably spend his whole life inside, he was swallowed by fear. That's when the transformation of Eddy Zheng began.

To survive inside prison, Zheng first needed to learn English. He enrolled in a language class. With the help of volunteers, including professors and college students, Zheng gradually mastered English, which in turn allowed him to upgrade his prison labor from making chairs to easier clerical duties. He then took advantage of other educational programs, including public speaking, writing, and vocational training. In 1992, Zheng earned his GED (general equivalency diploma), one of the few inmates in California to have graduated from high school while behind bars. By this time, he also was reading a great deal, especially biographies of well-known historic figures, like Che Guevara and Gandhi. At one time, he had as many as 100 books in his cell. He even developed an interest in poetry, launching the first poetry slam at San Quentin. He started body building about ten years ago while he was in prison, shortly after he quit smoking. Meanwhile, the years passed —19 of them.

Zheng applied for parole every time the opportunity arose. And every time he was rejected. Then, on Zheng's eighth try, in 1998, his appeal was accepted. Zheng was elated. So was his family. But the euphoria didn't last long. Gray Davis, governor at the time, reversed the ruling, as part of his "tough on crime" policy. Finally, on March 8, 2005, Zheng was released from San Quentin, though that didn't mean he was free, either. He was immediately transferred to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and locked up again, awaiting deportation.

Once again, Zheng's and his family's lack of knowledge about their adopted country placed them at a disadvantage. Zheng had not acquired U.S. citizenship before he was sentenced. And his public defender didn't apply for naturalization afterward, even though noncitizen parolees were able to waive deportation if they were charged before 1996. After that, the law changed and deportation became mandatory. Making matters worse, in March, 2005, five months before Zheng's deportation hearing, a federal court in New York ruled that deportation cannot be waived in cases of aggravated felonies, like the one Zheng had committed.

Zheng still faces deportation. But he got married in 2005 when he was jailed in immigration bureau, with a massage therapist whom he fell in love with in prison. His wife was a volunteer in prison tutoring English, and was immediately drawn by Zheng when they first met in 1999. The marriage would help him appeal against deportation. Late last year, he appealed directly to former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger for clemency. Schwarzenegger turned him down. His appeal is now being reviewed at the Ninth Circuit Court, the last stop in the process. No one knows exactly when the final ruling will be issued. "It could be next week, or in

several months,” says Zheng’s lawyer, Zachary Nightingale. Zheng is thinking of launching another campaign, trying to drum up support among local politicians. Nightingale says the chance of winning is very high, as the court seems very interested and impressed.

Regardless of the result, Zheng insists that he’s ready. If he’s deported, he plans to establish a youth center in China, dealing with issues similar to those he addresses here. Zheng’s parents are also prepared, for they believe that their son has turned into a very capable man. “We parents were responsible. We didn’t discipline our child well,” Zheng’s father says, wiping tears from his eyes. “But the bad thing has turned into a good thing. He’s really turned a new leaf. I dare not imagine what Eddy would turn out to be if he hadn’t been put into jail.”

Zheng has thought about contacting the family he victimized, to apologize, and to show them what he has been doing in the community to redeem himself. But he’s afraid that that might be too painful for the family, bringing back bad memories.

Zheng’s two accomplices have already been deported back to China. Zheng had met them once after they were released. But since then they haven’t contacted each other, though Zheng heard that one had married and now had a child.

In 2007, when Zheng was released from immigration jail, he and a couple of other prisoners published a book called “Others: an Asian & Pacific Islanders Prisoners’ Anthology.” It’s a collection of writings they did while in prison. Zheng has one poem in the book, which he wrote when he was 33. It goes, “Whenever I think of my crimes I feel ashamed. I’ve lost my youth and more. I’ve learned that the more I suffer the stronger I become. I’m blessed with great friends. I talk better than I write.”

On a sunny afternoon, two teenage Chinese boys are playing guitar in the lobby of the Community Youth Center, located on the second-story of a building in the Chinatown section of San Francisco. The computer in the backroom is playing Chinese pop songs. The scene is tranquil, with sunshine spilling through the windows, making the guitars shine.

A couple more Chinese teenagers trickle in, laughing and talking, followed by two of CYC’s 50 staff members. The kids are new immigrants from China, and they’re here for the after-school program. For the troubled ones, the CYC offers counseling and other forms of help. Eddy Zheng is the project manager of the center’s Intervention and Street Outreach program, which deals with kids who are at risk of getting into trouble, including crime. Since Zheng started working here, in 2007, he has worked with at least 100 kids. Jason (the real name has been concealed to protect the privacy of the teenager) is one of them.

Pale and skinny, wearing a sports coat, 17-year-old Jason tells his story in a soft and gentle voice. He immigrated from Hong Kong with his parents in September of 2006. Both his parents now do menial work. His father is a janitor, his mother a hairdresser. Like many other new immigrant kids, Jason doesn’t speak much English, which allows him to make friends only with immigrants. Soon after arriving in San Francisco, he met other Chinese immigrant kids and started hanging



out with them on the streets. Within two years, he had stolen clothes, engaged in gang fighting and drug dealing, and had been put in jail twice. CYC staff got involved during his first incarceration. They established regular contact. They also persuaded him to participate with other kids at the center, going camping, exercising, and volunteering for community activities, all in an attempt to get him back on track. Zheng, the program director, amazed the kids with his personal stories, also with his weight lifting abilities.

The kids view Zheng as a role model, and try to follow his example, even though most of them lack his discipline. One year into the CYC program, Jason went to jail again, this time for gang fighting. And last year, his situation got even worse. Heavy drug use and the stress of street life had made him depressed. He began to imagine that someone was following him, trying to harm him. Unfortunately, Jason's family didn't realize the severity of his condition. They didn't arrange for him to receive therapy. One night, convinced that he'd soon be killed, Jason called Zheng, the only person he trusted. It was midnight. Jason was petrified, nearly incoherent. Zheng immediately drove to his home in Daly City. He took Jason to a hotel, stayed with him all night, then the next morning escorted him the airport, seeing him off on a flight to Hong Kong, where Jason's father had gone for a family visit. After spending about a month in Hong Kong, Jason returned to the U.S. and started seeing a therapist. He has almost recovered now and stays home most of the time. A CYC case manager visits him once a week, making sure he's staying out of trouble, driving him to athletic activities, and so on.

During the four years that Zheng has worked at CYC, kids like Jason have come and gone. They range in age from 14 to 19, and most have issues with drugs, gangs, stealing, etc. Zheng sees himself in the kids, but he doesn't want to see them make the same mistakes. "We would never give up those kids, even if they did," he says. "But we won't."

Zheng also visits a teenage prison every Tuesday, as part of a program called Incarcerated Men Putting Away Childish Things. He conducts workshops, encouraging the kids to study and not give up. He has done several hundreds of workshops over the past four years around the Bay Area.

"He loves kids, and he's very passionate about kids," says Henry Ha, who has been volunteering and working in CYC for five years. "He tries really hard to pull kids back on track."

Besides working on youth issues, Zheng has also been involved in efforts to reduce crime in different ethnic communities. On a rainy Saturday this past March, Zheng drove to San Francisco's Bayview District for a community conference. Most of the households in the neighborhood are low-income. The previous year, an 83-year-old Chinese man had been attacked fatally by a group of youths on a Muni light-rail platform, one block away from Joseph P. Lee Recreation Center, where the conference was taking place. Several grassroots organizations held a vigil, urging cooperation among different ethnic groups in the fight against violence. Zheng helped organized it.

Asked what he would say during his speech, Zheng said he wouldn't know until he checks out the scene. Since he was released, Zheng has spoken before a large number of groups around the country. "The community took me back," he

says. "And I want to pay back." At the conference, standing before about 50 mostly African-American local residents sitting on benches on the basketball court, Zheng opened his speech with one of the poems, "when I see you, I see me. We're all immigrants."

Zheng's other duties include meeting weekly with the San Francisco Community Response Network, a collaborative effort on the part of organizations from Latino and African American communities. They report and discuss issues related to crime prevention. Ricardo Garcia-Acosta, the CRN director, says of Zheng, "His biggest strength is his own story. I've seen grown man, the hardest core gangsters, shed tears at Zheng's speech. Eddy is a walking and talking example."

After Zheng was released, he had planned to apply to U.C. Berkeley and major in psychology. Sarah Wan, the executive director of CYC, who had known Zheng while he was in prison, offered him a job with CYC. Zheng hesitated, but Wan was very persistent. Zheng agreed to take only a part-time job. But before long, he became a full-time staff member. Wan was impressed by Zheng's ability to communicate with young people, and she thinks hiring him was one of the best decisions she's every made. "He's doing a really really good job."

Since Zheng's family moved to the U.S., some 20 years ago, China's economy has been galloping. Its GDP in 2010 was 24 times that of 1982. Zheng's family would have shared in that prosperity, since the military is part of the rising privilege class. Life would have been much easier. Even so, Zheng's parents say they don't regret leaving China, because their children did in fact receive a better education, though in very different ways. Zheng's older sister attended U.C. Berkeley, and now is a partner in global accounting agency. His older brother owns an interior decoration business. And best of all, at least for Zheng, his family now is rich enough to hire a good immigration lawyer to work on his deportation case.

"You should be proud. This is your country. Your grandparents help build the country. Now you should build. Your youth is your assets," Zheng said to the group of Asian American young people at the API conference back in March. "Don't think you're inferior because you're in someone else's country. No. This is our country. This is our home."