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Judy Yung, Chinatown native and early scholar of Chinese-American life, dies at 74

Sam Whiting

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Judy Yung, scholar and author of books exploring the Chinese American experience has died. The San Francisco native was 74.

Photo: Laura Morton / SFC

As a San Francisco public librarian working in the Chinatown branch during the early 1970s, Judy Yung discovered a major hole in the collection, and in scholarship in general. There were no scholars on the experience of Chinese-American women, in ordinary life.

So, Yung quit her job to become that scholar.

In her 40s, she went back and got her Ph.D in ethnic studies at UC Berkeley. She then spent two years traveling the country, collecting oral histories, on her way to becoming a tenured professor of American Studies at UC Santa Cruz, where she built from scratch a program in Asian-American studies.

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She also wrote, co-wrote or edited eight nonfiction books, most prominently the bestseller “Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco,” published in 1995.

Born in Chinatown on Jan. 25, 1946, Yung died where she started, on Dec. 14, after suffering a fall at home, according to her sister, Sandy Lee of San Francisco. She was 74.

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The daughter of immigrants from Guangdong Province, Yung was the fifth of six children born into a two-room Chinatown tenement with a community bathroom and kitchen. Cantonese was the first language at home, and there was no second language. Her father was a union janitor in a Nob Hill hotel and her mother stitched clothes in Chinatown. The kids were referred to by number, and Yung was called “Number 5” by both parents.

Yung took it upon herself to become both bilingual and bi-literate, attending public school by day and Chinese school at night, as was tradition. She turned down a chance to attend Lowell High School, in order to stay close to home, and was salutatorian at Galileo, class of 1963. She advanced to San Francisco State College (as it was then known) where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in 1967 with a double major in Chinese Studies and English Literature. From there she crossed the Bay to get an M.A. in library science from UC Berkeley.

This got her the job with the public library that was to be her launching pad. After a few years she left to become associate editor of the bilingual weekly *East West: Chinese American Journal*.

Yung then took a job at the Oakland Public Library where she is credited with opening the first Asian public library in America, at the Park Boulevard branch, in 1976.

Four years later she published her first book, a collaboration with poet Ginny Lim and historian Him Mark Lai, titled “*Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*,” published in 1980.

“Her translations of the poems from *Angel Island* was an extraordinary effort and a beautiful book that no one had thought to do before,” said Bettina Fay Aptheker, professor of feminist studies emerita at UCSC.

That book led to a complementary photography exhibition at the Chinese Culture Center, titled “*Chinese Women of*

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shows in the Holiday Inn, where the Chinese Culture Center remains. “Judy wrote the proposal to get the grant money, curated the exhibit and wrote the catalog. She did it all.”

In 1990, Yung was hired as an assistant professor in the American Studies Department at UCSC. She quickly rose to tenured professor and became chair of the department. By the time of her retirement, in 2004, she had earned about every teaching award offered at UCSC and had been named commencement speaker four times.

“She was just a wonderful colleague,” said Aptheker, who served on the Committee on Affirmative Action and Diversity with Jung. “She inaugurated the idea of courses in Asian American studies at UCSC, and mentored I don’t know how many students. She was warm and the students adored her.”

Yung’s retirement in 2004 only increased her literary output. In 2010, Yung and historian Erika Lee co-wrote “Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America,” to commemorate the centennial of the processing station in San Francisco Bay.

After spending her career interviewing women, Yung decided to include men in her book project, “Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present.” It paid off in multiple ways. While interviewing Asian men who had served in the US Army and been taken prisoners of war, she met Eddie Fung, a fellow kid from Chinatown.

When she told her sisters she was marrying one of her subjects, they assumed “he had been in Vietnam or the Korean War,” said Lee. But he’d been in World War II. She was 56 and he was 81, when they married, in 2003.

After Fung died, in 2017, Yung moved back to San Francisco, to be near her four older sisters, taking an apartment across from Kezar Stadium.

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“She was the best friend a person could hope for,” said McCunn, “and she never quit being a librarian.”

Yung was predeceased by her younger brother Warren (no. 6). Survivors include sisters Sharon Lee and Sandy Lee, both of San Francisco, Virginia Quong of South San Francisco, and Patricia Chin of Castro Valley (nos. 1-4.)

A celebration of her life will be held after the pandemic.

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