

A Tribute to Lucie Cheng

Don T. Nakanishi, Ph.D.

Lucie Cheng was, without question, one of the most significant pioneering social scientists and program leaders in the field of Asian American Studies at UCLA and globally. She contributed her many talents, leadership and vision to developing the UCLA Asian American Studies Center during a period when there was considerable opposition to our center and the other three ethnic studies research centers at the university. She also played an indispensable role in building research and other meaningful relationships within the entire Asia-Pacific region, most notably between the United States and China. She leaves an enormous legacy.

I continue to mourn the passing of my very good friend and colleague of nearly forty years, Professor Lucie Cheng. She had an amazingly full and rich life, but I wish she could have lived much longer. I will always celebrate and remember Lucie for her engaging approach to the world, her love of good food and music, her extraordinary administrative vision and leadership, her wonderful smile, and for her everlasting contributions as a scholar, teacher, and mentor.

I will also always be grateful to Lucie for allowing my wife and I to use her home thirty-five years ago for our honeymoon after we got married. Of course, Lucie did not stick around. She said was going out of town--at least we thought she did!

Lucie left many legacies. One of the most significant was the Asian American Studies Center. During her 15-year tenure as the first permanent director, the Center laid the foundation for its many outstanding core programs that have survived and thrived during its forty-year history in teaching, publications and research, library and student leadership; recruited its first faculty and staff; and initiated its extensive ties with rapidly growing Asian Pacific American communities, in Asia and on the UCLA campus. As a result, no other program has contributed to and influenced the field of Asian American Studies in so many ways.

It took very special leadership and intellectual skills, unflinching commitment, and personal courage and tenacity to be director during the early years of the Center. Lucie and the staff had to strive to achieve the very high expectations that students, faculty and community members had for Asian American Studies, while battling the extraordinary opposition and resistance that many sectors of the UCLA campus had towards Ethnic Studies and diversity issues for many, many years.

I still recall an incident in the early 1970s when Lucie returned to the Center, quite upset and shaken, after the UCLA Academic Senate had discussed a proposal submitted by the Center. She said that she had gone to the meeting with a senior member of the Center's faculty advisory committee -- one of the first Japanese Americans to gain tenure at UCLA, who had been incarcerated with 120,000 other Japanese Americans during World War II. During the Academic Senate discussion, there were many faculty members who openly and loudly expressed their deep hostility towards ethnic studies, affirmative action, and changing racial demographics in Los Angeles. The proposal barely passed. After the meeting, while walking across campus, the senior Japanese American professor said he was shocked and dismayed that so many seemingly smart and renowned faculty members could express such mean, uninformed and prejudicial opinions without being challenged by others. Lucie said the Japanese American professor started to cry and said that thinking like that had put Japanese Americans into the concentration camps during World War II. She said she comforted him in front of Murphy Hall. In sharing this incident with me, Lucie shook her head and said she would never allow such a demeaning and shameful discussion to ever take place in her presence, no matter what the consequences might be for her and her career. She said we have a long fight ahead of us, but we will prevail. We have to prevail, she said.

Lucie inspired me and many others who had the special opportunity to work with her during her many years at UCLA. She was a wonderfully brilliant, talented and caring individual. I will always remember her and cherish our friendship.

Don T. Nakanishi, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, Education & Political Science, UCLA
Former Director, UCLA Asian American Studies Center