

# Interviews of Three Asian Pacific Immigrants

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by Irene Chang\*

In the preceding article, Paul Ong and Linda Wing have set forth empirical support for the view that providing public education for immigrant children makes sense. The children mature and become productive members of society. In short, the fair way of assessing costs and benefits of educational expense is over the life time of the individual. In economic terms, public education is an investment in human capital. Furthermore, when the children of immigrants mature, their reliance on welfare is highly unlikely compared to the general population. This is further evidence of the dividends the nation receives from its educational investments in immigrant children. For many, the productivity is also a dividend from the public assistance that some immigrant families need.

Presented here are three real examples of Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees who entered as children and relied upon public school education. They were interviewed in the spring of 1995.

## Khanh Phan

When Khanh Phan was eight, he and his two younger siblings came to the United States from Vietnam in 1975. Though it was not an easy transition for Phan to go from a developing country to modern America, he received a lot of encouragement from his parents, especially when it came to attending school and learning English. "At first, coming here was a scary experience because you feel alienated," he said. "One problem was the language barrier. It was intimidating just going to the store to buy things... I remember my parents stressing how it's important to try to learn English as soon as possible to do better in school and to communicate in public. I don't recall how I learned English. It came naturally. I guess I picked it up fairly easily and also retained my Vietnamese."

As the children went to school, Phan's parents went to work. His mother — a housewife in Vietnam — became a hairstylist and eventually set up

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her own shop in Gardena, just south of Los Angeles. His dad — a civil engineer back in Vietnam — used the little money they had brought over with them to buy some rental property and went into property management. They received neither government assistance nor community support; instead, they “started everything on their own.”

Phan paid his own college tuition by doing part-time general office work for \$8 an hour at the Nissan Motor Corporation; his parents helped him by buying some of his books. He graduated in 1991 from California State University, Long Beach, with a Bachelor degree in sociology. Now 27, Phan earns over \$3,000 a month as a social worker in Los Angeles. He assists mentally disabled clients with their SSI applications. “We act as their voice.” Through his work in the county, he also joined in the occasional activities of the Vietnamese Employees Association which tries to educate people about community issues.

“I’ve grown up the majority of my lifetime as an American and affiliate myself more with the American side of it. I have mixed friends; most are Asian or Vietnamese. . . . If you’re going to adapt and survive in a new environment, you need to learn the language and custom of that environment. For someone coming here, you need to learn English to get a job and for basic activities.” After more than two decades in this country, Phan has adapted and is thriving in his adopted home.

## **David Mao**

Born in Taiwan, 11 year old David Mao and his mother came to the United States in 1956 to join his father, who was on the military staff committee of the United Nations. David began his American education in Washington, DC, public schools, which were still racially segregated at the time, and eventually finished up his secondary school experience in San Francisco.

“I didn’t speak English when we came,” said Mao, 48, of his DC years. “I was thrown into the fifth grade. The teacher would take time out with one Yugoslavian child, me and another Chinese. She gave us special lessons — Dick and Jane, etc. They give you tests for tracking. Just coming from China, not knowing the language, I didn’t do very well on the tracking tests for junior high school and ended up in the lowest remedial class in seventh grade. I was almost learning disabled, and that was a great handicap.”

Fortunately, however, Mao earned good grades and every year was able to “climb one level higher” and eventually even managed to take college

prep courses. Taiwan schools begin teaching algebra in elementary school, so Mao found American math classes to be much easier. Because education is so highly valued, it was not surprising that his father also tutored him at home, or that the family jointly decided that Mao should take physics, trigonometry and calculus to help him get into college. "People in school and people in church told me this is what I had to do. In Chinese families, they expect you to go to college and complete a bachelor's degree."

Mao attended American University, University of Maryland and San Francisco State University, with a detour into the U.S. Army and a tour in Vietnam. With most of his assistance coming from the G.I. bill, plus earnings from his part-time work, Mao finally graduated in 1974 in international business from San Francisco State University. Active with R.O.T.C. while in school, Mao is still a Major in the army reserves and serves one weekend a month. "This is the best country in the world, and I should put something back into it."

In 1975, shortly after graduating, the federally-funded Comprehensive Employment Training Act enabled Mao to find a job as a placement counselor for the California Employment Development Department. About five years later, he switched to law enforcement. Now a supervising criminal investigator for the department, he looks into and prosecutes medical, tax and unemployment fraud cases. In 1995, he paid about \$4,800 in federal taxes, \$1,800 in state taxes, and almost \$28,000 in mortgage payments and property taxes.

## **Katherine Chan**

When the Saigon government fell in 1975, Katherine Chan, then just a young teenager, found her family separated by thousands of miles: some members relocated to New Jersey; others, including two siblings and her father remained in Vietnam and were unable to come to the United States until many years later. Uprooted from all that was familiar — including what Chan described as a "wealthy" lifestyle — introduction to American life was difficult. The first year, the family lived on welfare, including food stamps and Medicaid; their clothing came from the Red Cross. "No one in my family liked being on welfare." The family got off welfare after that one year.

Through her mother's business acumen and perseverance, and through long hours of hard work, from 7 am to 11 pm, the family's small candy

store in New York's Chinatown eventually expanded into a grocery store. Earnings grew from \$100 a day to \$1,000 a day.

Chan remembered that life was "miserable." "I attended public schools in New Jersey until the 11th grade. I didn't do well. I hated public school. The students teased us, and we couldn't answer back. I had no friends. I was the only immigrant or refugee in school. That school was not prepared for me at all, because I was in that first wave of refugees." For her senior year, she received a scholarship to attend a private school across the river in New York. There in the smaller school of 120 students, she blossomed and was even elected student body vice president.

A creative combination of grants, national student loans, and work study — which involved spending 40 hours a week working in a biology lab — enabled Chan to attend a private university in Texas. After college, she went to the Philippines, first as a Peace Corps worker and then as a staff member in the United Nations refugee camp. In the Peace Corps, she organized a clinic for eye and harelip operations and worked as a midwife; in the camp, she provided mental health counseling to refugees. "Some of these were boat people; others were sponsored by United States residents. In the camp, for six months, they had to learn about U.S. culture, etc., before coming here."

When she finally returned to the United States, Chan went on to graduate school and earned a master's in social work in 1992 from the University of California at Berkeley. Chan, 33, is a psychiatric social worker for an Alameda County outpatient mental health clinic and provides therapy and case management for severely mentally ill people, most of whom are indigent Medi-Cal patients. She earns over \$40,000 a year.

Though she has voted in every major election, Chan admitted that in 1982 when she became a citizen, she was motivated out of fear: she hoped that her U.S. status would protect her from any harm during her visit to China. It was not until she went to the Philippines, where "we were doing good for people," that she developed "patriotic feelings." There, she became proud to proclaim she was from the United States.