

Exclusive Interview | President of the Committee of 100: Contributing to the US Society, Chinese Americans Should Speak Out for Themselves and Others

Reported by Liu Dong, Chief Correspondent of *The Paper*

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Commissioned by the Committee of 100 (C100), a US-based Chinese American organization, the Economist Intelligence Unit spent more than a year producing a comprehensive study report titled [*From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to The Fabric of America*](#), which has recently been released.



From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to the Fabric of America



The C100 Report

This report is the first of its kind, in that it presents a quantitative analysis of Chinese Americans' enormous contributions during the past 170 years from an economic perspective. It is intended to educate the public that not only have Chinese Americans always been an integral part of the American society, they have also made indelible contributions to every aspect of the American economy and culture; however, on the other hand, as a minority group, Chinese Americans still face many challenges and obstacles in realizing their full potential.

"Most of the people are opposed to racial discrimination. However, what they do not know is that during the past two centuries, Chinese Americans have made significant contributions to every industry of the American society. This lack of knowledge has led to the negative perception of Chinese Americans as the "perpetual foreigners" during the last 200 years. The tensions in China-U.S. relations have also served to reinforce the stereotype. Therefore, we have to demonstrate with facts that Chinese Americans are not perpetual foreigners;

instead, they have a long history in this country, and have made important contributions to this country.” Said Huang Zhengyu, the President of C100.

The Paper (www.thepaper.cn) has conducted an exclusive interview with Zhengyu Huang, who shared the stories behind the report, as well as his observations on the discrimination and unequal treatment faced by Chinese Americans and the future of China-US relations.

Mr. Huang pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more urgent to change the negative image of Chinese Americans, as there has been a surge of discrimination and hatred against these citizens. During the past year, there were 3,000 such cases on record, not to mention those that are not on record.

The major discoveries of this report include: Today, approximately 5.3 million people in the US are of Chinese descent, and 75% are American citizens. There are over 160,000 Chinese American- owned businesses in the US, generating approximately US\$240 billion in revenue and supporting 1.3 million jobs. They contributed over US\$300 billion to US GDP in 2019 through consumer spending, supporting 3 million jobs.

On the other hand, a “bamboo ceiling” is keeping Chinese Americans out of corporate leadership positions. In 2018, Chinese Americans accounted for roughly 3% of professional occupations but held only 1.5% of mid-level management roles and 1.2% of executive positions. Among the workforce of the companies that have featured in the Fortune 500 ranking in the past decade, only 25 Chinese Americans were named to board positions, representing just 0.3% of the total.



Zhengyu Huang, President of C100

In addition, contrary to the perception of “Model Minorities” having a high income, roughly one in ten Chinese American households earns less than US\$15,000 per year and 35% have incomes below the national median.

Huang Zhengyu also pointed out that in terms of discrimination and barriers faced by Chinese Americans, the report also revealed a rarely-known fact—from 1996 to 2008, 17% of the defendants in cases involving espionage or economic fraud and intellectual property theft were Chinese Americans, but from 2009 to 2015, the number increased to 52%. “The data has raised our concerns because it tells us that 170 years after Chinese Americans set foot in this country, they are still impacted by negative stereotypes.”

Founded by the renowned architect, the late I.M. Pei (born in Guangzhou, China with ancestral home in Suchow, China) and Yo Yo Ma, the master cellist who has achieved international fame (born in Paris, France with ancestral home in Yin County, Zhejiang Province, China), the C100 strives to promote the social status of all Chinese Americans in the US society and improve the US-China relationship. Huang Zhengyu became the new president of C100 in March of last year.

Born in Shanghai, China, Huang Zhengyu immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was 10 years old. He obtained a B.A. in Economics, a B.S. in Industrial Engineering, and an M.S. in Computer Science from Stanford University. He also earned his MBA from Harvard Business School. Huang Zhengyu worked at Intel Corporation where he rose to Managing Director and then served under President Obama as a White House Fellow—he was the first one from mainland China who assumed this role—and special assistant to the Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Aid (USAID).

As a cross-cultural observer, Huang Zhengyu discussed Chinese Americans' fundamental transformation in areas such as self-identity and political influence with *The Paper*.

The following is a transcript of the exclusive interview:

Chinese Americans Face Challenges from Within and Outside of Their Community

The Paper: Why did C100 make such a report? Could you talk a little bit about the motivations behind the report?

Huang Zhengyu: During the past year, Chinese Americans had been facing various kinds of discrimination and hatred. There were 3,000 such cases on record, not to mention those that are not on record. We didn't believe this situation represented American values, and more importantly, we felt that Chinese Americans should stand up and speak out, telling all Americans about their own contributions to all areas of the society during the last 200 years. We believed that it was critical that the contributions were demonstrated through data, research, and personal stories.

The Biden administration has signed executive orders condemning the discrimination and hatred facing Asian Americans after taking office. It so happens that the release of the C100 report has provided a good opportunity for the general public to discuss this topic, and more importantly, to realize that the Chinese American stories are the stories of all Americans. Like immigrants from other countries, Chinese Americans have experienced a lot of unfair treatment and discrimination when trying to fit into the US society, although they have been trying their utmost to make significant contributions to the American society—their new homeland.

The Paper: What are some of the main points and new discoveries of the report?

Huang Zhengyu: The 142-page report details the Chinese American contributions to various industries of the American society in seven areas.

Overall, although Chinese Americans account for a small portion of the national population, they have made a significant economic contribution in terms of GDP generation, job creation and capital market growth. They contributed over US\$300 billion to US GDP in 2019 through consumer spending, supporting 3 million jobs. As of 2017, there were over 160,000 Chinese American-owned businesses in the US, generating approximately US\$240 billion in revenue and supporting 1.3 million jobs.

Although many people are aware of the enormous contributions made by Chinese Americans in science and technology, they may know very little about the outstanding Chinese American contributions in areas such as infrastructure, and defense and national security. One in 40 Chinese Americans aged 17 years old or over has previously served in the military, or is currently on active duty either in the military or training to serve in the Reserves and National Guard. Chinese Americans have participated extensively in the US economy, from building transport (the first interstate railroad) and agricultural infrastructure in the 19th century to helping the nation secure its leadership in the Space Race in the 20th century and the high-tech industries today.

In terms of population structure, the Chinese American community contains many different groups and cohorts, reflecting complex migration patterns, past and present. The Chinese American community today is present across all states in the US, with members ranging from first-generation immigrants to fifth- or sixth-generation descendants, and representing great socioeconomic diversity.

While the majority of Chinese Americans aged older than 25 have a bachelor's degree or above—compared with a third of general Americans in the same age cohort—20% of Chinese Americans aged five and older still cannot speak proficient English, double the share among Americans in general.

As is revealed in the report, although the Chinese American community overall has an income level above the national average, roughly one in ten households earns less than US\$15,000 per year and 35% have incomes below the national median.

As a result of the issues above, Chinese Americans are facing many challenges within the community. However, what is more significant are the challenges outside the community. As we know, Chinese Americans are still considered “perpetual foreigners” although they have been in the United States for almost two centuries. Such negative stereotypes continue to persist.

Some people argue that Chinese Americans may be good workers and engineers, but they will never be good leaders. As of 2018, Chinese Americans account for roughly 3% of professional occupations but held only 1.2% of executive positions. Among the workforce of the 721 companies to feature in the Fortune 500 ranking in the last decade, only 25 board positions had been filled by Chinese Americans.

Chinese Americans Should Speak Out for Themselves and for Others

The Paper: Why are Chinese American contributions rarely known?

Huang Zhengyu: I think it's because we don't know how to tell our own stories. No one is going to tell them for us if we don't tell them ourselves. The US history is full of stories about racial integration. When each race or group has an opportunity to tell their own stories but you remain silent, someone else may have “helped” you tell your stories. We hope that the report will open up more opportunities for telling our own stories.

We hope that the release of this report will bring about positive changes. C100 will cooperate with more than 200 organizations in the next few months in order to introduce and promote the discoveries in the report.

Then we are going to discuss how to turn some of the major discoveries in the report into something that the students can learn. Both Chinese Americans and other Americans should learn about the contributions to the United States made by Chinese Americans and different racial groups at an early age. If you open an American history book, most of the time you will find that they are not mentioned. We hope to incorporate these good things in the American educational system.

The Paper: The members of C100 are the elites of the elites. Their experience represents the “American Dream” , which means realizing your own dreams through hard work. While it is highly valued by many Chinese people overseas, traditionally Chinese Americans did not care much about other racial groups, especially the disadvantaged ones. Nor did they actively participate in public affairs. However, the younger generations of Chinese Americans don’ t think that way. What’ s your opinion on this issue?

Huang Zhengyu: Many Chinese Americans work very hard, and they have received tremendous help throughout their life. We believe that the more successful you are, the more obligated it is for you to help others, their communities, and all those who need help. C100 donated 4 million dollars worth of medical supplies to more than 120 hospitals last year specifically for the Latino and African American communities, because we knew that they suffered the most during the pandemic.

Why did we do that? Because we believe that the virus does not make a distinction on one’ s race or background. As Americans, it is our responsibility to help other Americans. Not only do we want to help Chinese Americans fit into the American society, but we also hope to make America a better country.

The Paper: Three years ago, when I was interviewing the last president of C100, a report revealed how Chinese Americans were discriminated against and treated unfairly in the judicial system. Is it worsening today? There have been many Chinese American professors who have been investigated and arrested by the US government recently. What has caused the launch of such extensive investigations against them?

Huang Zhengyu: We have no way of explaining what the US government did, especially the so-called “China Initiative” launched by the previous administration. All we can say is that although it is important to protect the national security of the United States of America, it is just as important to maintain a balance among the protection of the national security, the rights of the US citizens, and the attraction and retention of the talents for the country, because these are essential to the American core values.

Now we feel that the Biden administration, compared to the Trump administration, is more willing to maintain a balance among these three points.

We believe that there is one issue that is the most problematic in the “China Initiative” . The conviction of the so-called economic espionage used to require that the prosecutor prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the suspect stole or misappropriated intellectual property. Currently, however, the majority of Chinese

scholars have been arrested or investigated because they did not clearly mention their cooperation with China in their research application. Although it might be a problem, it was typically handled by the higher education institutions. However, it has become a national security issue addressed by the US government, and those who are involved may be sentenced to 20 to 30 years in prison. We therefore consider it highly inappropriate.

The Paper: Everyone is very concerned about the future development of the US-China relations after the Biden administration took office. As we have noted, a keyword that has been reiterated by the US government is “competition” , whereas the Chinese government has been emphasizing “cooperation” . What are your opinions on the cooperation and competition between the United States and China?

Huang Zhengyu: I think cooperation and competition may co-exist. In fact, as we see, there is cooperation and competition between Chinese and the US high-tech companies in Silicon Valley. We hope that the US and China may strengthen their cooperation in areas that are mutually beneficial, such as climate change, environmental protection, and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are so many areas where the two countries may cooperate.

For example, in terms of the COVID-19 vaccine, there are more than 7 billion people around the world who are in need of the vaccines, and China and the United States are the two countries in the world that are most capable in terms of the research and development of the vaccines. If they cooperate, it would benefit everyone around the world.