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Public Lives: Fighting a Happy Image of Self-Sufficiency

By CHRIS HEDGES

A FEW weeks after Christopher Kui arrived as a 10-year-old immigrant from Hong Kong, he walked into a public library in East New York. A sign hung on a wall promising a ticket to a Yankees game to any child who memorized the names of the 50 states. And so he set to work, struggling not only to learn the states but also to pronounce their names correctly in an unfamiliar tongue.

The rest one might guess at. Mr. Kui, who won a ticket, went on to excel in school, graduate with an economics degree from New York University and succeed in business. But the story, of the diligent Chinese immigrant who makes good, is one he, in a certain strategic sense, hates. For Mr. Kui has spent most of his adult life trying to organize a swelling Asian community he considers complacent and misunderstood to assert itself.


"When we get involved in the political process, we will no longer be invisible," he said. "I want to erase this stereotype of the model Chinese-American immigrant who does not need help."

As a student tutor during his years at Brooklyn Technical High School and N.Y.U., he was haunted by the stories of deprivation and sweatshops, of unscrupulous landlords and indifferent city bureaucrats that he heard from Chinese immigrant laborers. He continued to tutor immigrants as the manager of a print and design shop but finally quit to join Asian Americans for Equality in 1986, a group set up 27 years ago to combat discrimination against newly arrived immigrants.

"My parents did not understand what this job was about," he said. "They were concerned that it did not have a future, that I could not build a career. But they have come to see that what I do is to help people like themselves and their friends. I saw what my parents' generation did for their children, how they sacrificed their lives so their children could go to college and have professions. I want to give something back."

As executive director of Asian Americans for Equality, Mr. Kui, 41, runs the city's most prominent Asian civil rights group. He is planning street protests over the temporary closing of the Grant Street subway station in Chinatown. The station will be shut down for four years while the Manhattan Bridge is rehabilitated. Mr. Kui led a fight two years ago to get the city to add a second

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exit to the station.

THE closing, he said, is a potent illustration of how the city's Asians, who number some 600,000, are ignored. Although the closing will, he said, "severely impact the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people" who depend on access to Chinatown from growing immigrant communities along the B and D lines in Brooklyn, the city "never felt the need to hold a public hearing."

"If there is no public hearing, the city will not be responsible for the impact on the community," he said. "This refusal to consult the community would have never happened if this stop was on the Upper East Side. A large market for the local merchants will be effectively cut off due to the tremendous inconvenience of having to use the Canal Street Station for transportation. Keeping in mind that the shopping community is in large part seniors and people on the way home from work, the added 20- to 30-minute walk with groceries and goods in tow becomes an incredible burden."

If Mr. Kui walked into a room filled with social activists, he would probably be pegged as the undercover federal agent. He speaks in the no-nonsense tone of an entrepreneur. When asked about his wife and personal life, he dismissed the questions as "something I don't want to get into." Asked about China, Mr. Kui, who lives in Woodside, tersely said: "I am an American citizen now. I was in Hong Kong for the transfer. The visit wrapped up the last vestiges of my attachment to Hong Kong."

He wears dark suits and pressed white shirts. The bookshelves in his office are lined with titles like "Jack Welch and the G.E. Way," "How to Think Like a C.E.O." and "Highly Effective People." He had difficulty coming up with hobbies outside work.

But while his personal mannerisms are understated, his politics are not. And he and his organization have done much to transform Chinatown. His group has arranged financing to renovate or finance the building of 500 units for low- and moderate-income families, with more on the way. "There," he said, pointing to an empty lot near his Norfolk Street office, "is where we will begin our next \$8 million building project."

Along with housing, he oversees a huge citizenship drive. His agency runs language and civics courses. Its staff helps fill out immigration forms and guides families through the process.

Ann Moy, a volunteer who poses as an Immigration and Naturalization Service officer in mock interviews, stood in St. George's, an Episcopal church in Flushing, after a ceremony for 60 new citizens. She ran down the list of questions she threw out in her role. "Of course," she said, "they have to know the 50 states."

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