

# Asians in the Maine Economy

Opportunities for Growth





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# Preface and Acknowledgments

**A**sians in the Maine Economy: *Opportunities for Growth* is the second in a series of reports by the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) on immigration and its importance to our state's future growth and development. This report follows on our first report *The Growing Latin American Influence: Opportunities for Maine's Economy*.

We purposely diverged from our usual numbers-based research in order to present both a qualitative and quantitative look at the Asian population in Maine. Statistics can tell us about trends, but only people can tell stories. The story of Maine is a story of in-migration and out-migration, settlement and resettlement. We remain 'the whitest state' in the nation. Our birth rates and population growth is practically stagnant. Our median age is 42.2 versus a national average of 36.8. Many policymakers, economists and business leaders are rightfully concerned about the adequacy of Maine's future labor force, about the 'brain drain' of our youth, and about our aging population. Others are concerned about Maine's future relevance in a global marketplace where our lack of diversity and cultural competency is a disadvantage. The most compelling reason for people to move from one place to another is economic opportunity. Job creation and economic development, particularly since the recession, is the number one priority for the State of Maine. Unfortunately, immigrants – particularly those of non-European descent – are still viewed in some quarters with suspicion and distrust. They are often accused of sapping state coffers and taking away jobs. This is in direct contradiction to current economic research and with our findings in both the Latino and Asian

reports. First and second-generation immigrants to Maine are working long hours and actively participating in the economy.

Asians contribute to the Maine economy in multiple ways; by paying taxes, starting new businesses, working in high tech industries and health care, as educators and students, participating in civic activities, consuming goods and services and revitalizing communities. The net financial gain from immigration in America is widely documented. But economic contributions are not the only reason why Maine needs new immigrants. Life experiences, traditions, ideas, customs, cuisine, art, music and language all serve to enrich our communities and our state.

The face of Maine is changing. In this report, we hope to break some of the stereotypes and misconceptions about Asians in Maine; who they are, where they come from, how they get here and why they stay. With good public policy and sound business practices and incentives, we can build on those contributions.

The quantitative research for this report was carried out in the summer of 2010 by Vaishali Mamgain, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Southern Maine with assistance from student research associate Abraham Dailey. They prepared the quantitative data for the first section of this report using the American Community Survey 2003-2005 and 2000 census data. Whenever possible, we inserted newer data as it has become available. Connie Zhu, policy analyst at MECEP, also provided research and assistance. Bates student intern Kim Anh Dinh worked at MECEP during the

spring of 2010 on early data collection. Dolgormaa Hersom, Director of Language Access for New Americans, conducted the interviews. Wordsworth Typing and Transcription provided the transcriptions. Deborah Felder was the project manager and also wrote the profile stories. Victor Damian did the photography for this report and the Latin American report. The advisors to this project were Robert Ho, Juan Perez-Febles, Ben Chin, Grace Valenzuela, Ngo Vinh Long, Pirun Sen, and Noel Bonam.

The final report was written, compiled and edited by Deborah Felder with assistance from Garrett Martin, associate director at MECEP. The report was designed by Neil Amaltifano and printed at R.N. Haskins Printing Company in Oakland. Cover panoramas were photographed by Mark Felder.

Funding for this study was made possible by a grant from the Maine Community Foundation, the Catawamteak Fund at the Maine Community Foundation, Jonathan Lee from the JSL Foundation and Mary Offutt, individual donor. We sincerely thank them for making this work possible.

# Executive Summary

The first Asian in Maine was recorded in the 1870 census. Up until 1960 fewer than 200 Asians were recorded in each census. It was only in the 1960's, after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Naturalization Act, that Asians in Maine began to increase significantly.

As the whitest state in the U.S., Maine will likely see continued increases in the number of foreign-born residents. To remain globally competitive and deal with an aging workforce, the state should identify ways to maximize the potential contributions of people, native and non-native alike, who locate here, and to appreciate the competitive gains that can be achieved through increased diversity and cultural competency.

To foster greater understanding and establish a baseline for future policy action, the Maine Center for Economic Policy has published the report on Asians in Maine and our previous report on Latinos in Maine. Following is a summary of key findings and recommendations.

## Key Findings:

**The numbers of Asians in Maine has increased significantly each decade.** 12,504 Asians lived in Maine in 2009 and accounted for approximately 1% of the state's population. From 1990-2000 the state's Asian population nearly doubled. From 2000-2009 the population increased yet again by 33%.

**Asians in Maine are a heterogeneous group that come to the state for a variety of reasons.**

Chinese, Filipinos and Asian Indians make up the largest share of the Asian population in Maine followed by Cambodians, Vietnamese and Koreans. Other Asian countries have smaller representation. Political turmoil, education and employment opportunities, marriage, and quality of life are some of push/pull factors that bring Asians to Maine.

**Refugees from Southeast Asia resettled in Maine following the Vietnam War are faring well.** Many Cambodians, Vietnamese and Laotians who were resettled in Maine in the 1970's and 1980's following deeply traumatic experiences have put down roots in Maine. Many of the children and grandchildren of these refugees continue to live and work in Maine.

**Asians are represented in every county in Maine.** The highest percentage of Asians live in the greater Portland and greater Bangor areas with smaller populations recorded in every county, numerous small towns, and island communities.

**Educational attainment levels of Asians in Maine exceed other minority immigrant groups.** Nationally, Asians are more educated than other immigrant groups overall and often surpass whites in post-secondary degrees. This is also true in Maine. Asian females in Maine are less likely than males to have a high school diploma.

**Asians are playing a significant role in Maine's labor force.** Asians in Maine have a median age of 31.8 and are employed in all sectors of our economy. Asians with family-owned businesses work long hours and often have other family members and relatives working with them.

**Asians remain connected to their culture and to their countries of origin.** Despite small numbers and the isolating geography of Maine, Asians have managed to remain connected to their countries of origin through international television and the internet. Many friendship societies, mutual associations, language schools, places of worship and Asian markets have been established to ensure their traditions, cuisine, culture, customs and ceremonies are maintained. With more political stability and economic expansion in Asia, more Asians are visiting their homelands and engaging in charitable endeavors.

**Asian contributions to Maine's economy are many and varied.** Maine's 1,143 Asian-owned businesses had sales and receipts of \$284 million and employed 2,543 people in 2007. Asians work in Maine's high-tech industries, service industries, the financial sector, government, health care, biomedical research, public schools and higher education. Consumer purchasing power for Asians in Maine is calculated at \$303 million. Asians in Maine have high civic participation and voter turnout rates.

Immigration reform occurs at the federal level. States, however, can promote policies and programs that bring diverse communities together while highlighting values that unite people and promote American ideals of equality and opportunity. Maine should reject policies that attempt to isolate, scapegoat, target or stereotype immigrants and focus instead on integrating new immigrants into our local economies in ways that will benefit everyone, native and immigrant alike.

## Recommendations:

**Expand English language programs for immigrants.** Language acquisition is a first step toward economic self-sufficiency. In the past five years, Maine has increased language programs for adults and children, and expanded interpreter services – most notably in Southern Maine. These programs and opportunities should be expanded statewide.

**Recruit, support and provide incentives to international and immigrant students.** Maine's colleges, universities and increasingly, Maine's public and private high schools are actively seeking new students. International and immigrant learners can be a pipeline for Maine's future workforce. Scholarship opportunities, job placement, and other incentives for study and work in Maine should be pursued coupled with appropriate support systems.

**Advocate for increased work visas for Maine employers.** The H1B is the most popular and sought after work visa for trained specialists wishing to work in the United States. There is a congressional yearly cap on the number of these visas. In FY 2011 the quota was reached within three weeks of the application process (January 26, 2011).

**Develop consistent data collection policies and standards.** Without comprehensive data collection and analysis on race, ethnicity and national origin, a climate of misinformation becomes the norm. Legislators, state agencies, community organizations and businesses need accurate data if they are to assess trends and develop meaningful programs, economic development strategies and quality of life indicators.

**Invest in programs that promote and support entrepreneurship with the Asian community.** Small business is the backbone of the Maine economy. Business ownership provides skilled immigrants with livelihoods and also provides employment opportunities to others. While Maine has some programs in place, more can be done to support outreach and business expansion.

**Build cultural competency across all sectors.** Maine's historic lack of racial, ethnic and religious diversity puts us at a disadvantage in an increasingly multi-cultural, global economy. As we become more diverse, it is also a recipe for increased prejudice and racial/ethnic tensions. Programs that support cultural competency for young people, service providers, employers, state and municipal workers should be expanded.

**Support community policing and law enforcement that engages immigrants.** Maine is one of the safest places in the country. Immigrants and refugees also need to feel safe here. Community policing and law enforcement efforts that are respectful, supportive and inclusive will keep that record strong.

**Provide leadership from the top.** Elected officials set the tone as well as the funding for public policies that determine Maine's future. More can be done to strengthen and improve state-level efforts to promote awareness of immigrant's contributions to our state. State agencies like the Maine Department of Labor, DHHS, and the Department of Education also need clear leadership and guidance to carry out those mandates. ■

# Introduction

The United States is largely a nation of immigrants. Immigration and the melding of cultures keep our labor supply strong and innovation flowing. Nevertheless, immigration remains a subject that elicits strong emotion. While there is general agreement that we need to reform current U.S. immigration policy, there is very little consensus on underlying principles. Recent studies show that immigrants start new businesses and file patents at higher rates than U.S. citizens, for example, and 47% of current venture-backed companies in the U.S. have immigrant founders.<sup>1</sup> As employees, employers, consumers, and taxpayers, immigrants add millions of dollars each year to the Maine economy.<sup>2</sup>

Immigrants comprise about 12% of the American population. They are more diverse than they were a century ago. In 1910, immigrants from Europe and Canada comprised 95% of the foreign-born population in the U.S. Today immigrants hail from a much broader array of countries, including large populations from Latin American and Asia.

There are over 13.5 million Asians in the United States. After years of being excluded from coming here, Asians now comprise 4.5% of the population. Forty-three percent of the foreign-born Asian population entered from 1990-2000.

In 2008, Chinese-Americans were the largest Asian group (3.62 million), followed by Filipinos (3.09 million), Asian Indians (2.73 million), Vietnamese (1.73 million), Koreans (1.61 million) and Japanese (1.30 million).<sup>3</sup>

The first record of any Asians in Maine was in 1870. Today, Asians comprise approximately 1% of the state's population.

According to the U.S. Census, there were 12,504 Asians in Maine in 2009 up from 9,000 in 2006. In 2007, Maine's 1,143 Asian-owned businesses had sales and receipts of \$284 million and employed 2,543 people.<sup>4</sup> According to the Selig Center for Economic Growth, the 2009 buying power of Asians in Maine totaled \$307 million, an increase of 270% since 1990.<sup>5</sup>

Maine's 1,256 foreign students, many of whom are Asian, contributed \$37 million to the state's economy in tuition, fees, and living expenses for the 2009-2010 academic year, according to the Association of International Educators.<sup>6</sup> The number of immigrants in Maine with a college degree increased by 17.6% between 2000 and 2008, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these trends, Asians, like Hispanics, are often less visible than other ethnic groups in Maine. Unlike the urban centers of Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco or Boston, Maine's Asian population do not congregate in dense ethnic enclaves. Though small in number, Asians live in every county of Maine, work in a variety of occupations, represent every socioeconomic class, reside in rural areas, small towns and cities, and include infants, children, parents and grandparents.

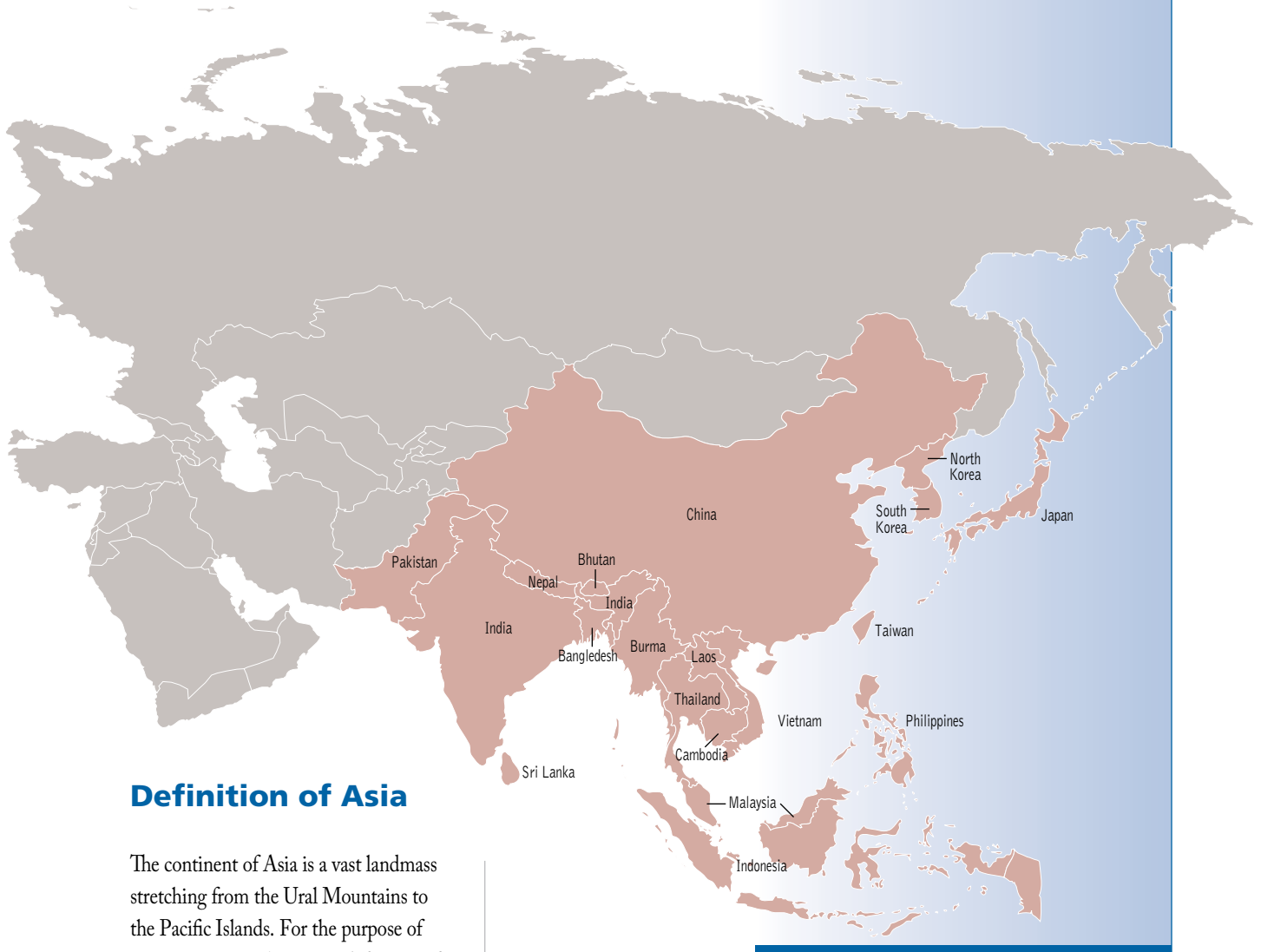
In many quarters Asians and Asian-Americans are often considered 'model-minorities' because of their educational achievements, high test scores, aptitude in math and science, economic success and family stability. This type of stereotyping does a disservice to the wide diversity of Asians and Asian-American experiences. Like all minority groups, Asians continue to experience prejudice and discrimination, are under-represented in political leadership,

get paid less per hour than their white counterparts, and have been historically excluded from many occupations. Public policies that treat all immigrant groups fairly, equitably and consistently will lead to greater opportunity for all.

The people in this report are far from homogeneous. They hail from different countries with diverse culture, tradition, history, political and economic systems, religion and language. Many faced enormous adversity as survivors of war, genocide and starvation. This report focuses on the economic contributions of immigrants and refugees from Asia in Maine. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research we create a simplified 'snapshot in time' of the demographic trends, economic contributions, economic potential, and varied life experiences associated with the state's Asian population. In so doing, we hope to provide a window into the opportunities that 21<sup>st</sup> century migrations present for Maine.



FIGURE 1 Map of Asia



## Definition of Asia

The continent of Asia is a vast landmass stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Islands. For the purpose of statistics, we use the census definition of Asia for this report i.e. a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes “Asian Indian,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” “Korean,” “Japanese,” “Vietnamese,” and “Other Asian.”

Census definitions determine many government classifications and measurements. The census refers to Asia as a racial classification but makes it clear that these categories are sociopolitical

constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature. The census depends on self-identification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify and include both racial and national-origin groups. In the U.S. Census, people who originate from the original peoples of East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia are classified as part of the ‘Asian’ race while people from Siberia, Central Asia, Western Asia and the Middle East are classified as ‘White.’ It is also important to note that the census changes these classifications and definitions fairly regularly. For example, prior to the 2000 Census, Asian/Pacific Islanders were one classification and now they are two separate categories.

There are also a number of geopolitical alliances that have their own interpretations of what comprises East, South or Southeast Asia. For example, The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, includes Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. ■

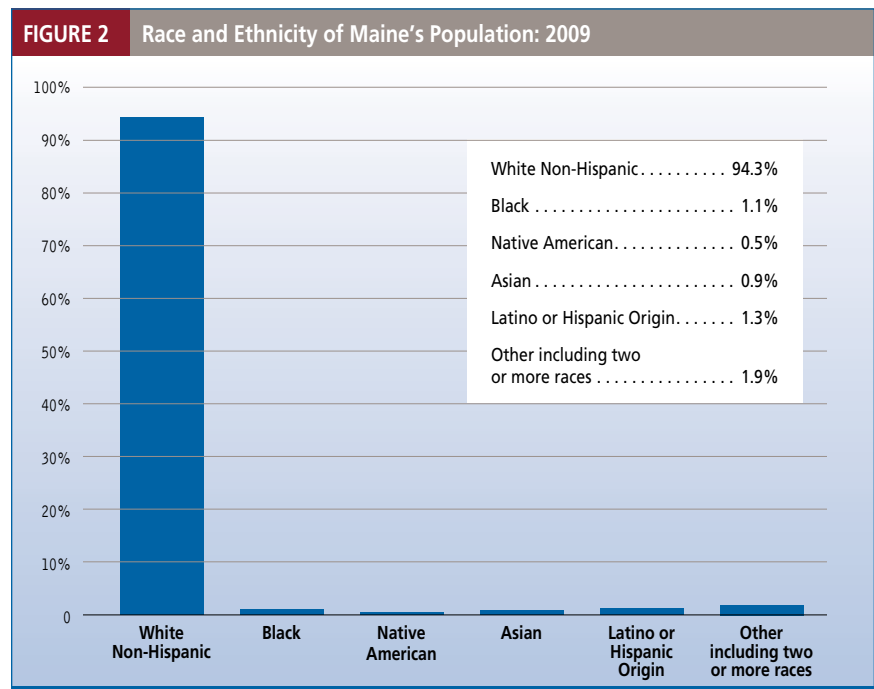
# Immigration and Resettlement in Maine

Maine's economic and cultural history is marked by significant in-migration of foreign born people. Most notable is the influx of Irish and French Canadians in the mid to late 1800's. Between 1880-1924 millions of people from Southern Europe (Italy) and Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia) entered the U.S. Many found their way, in much smaller numbers to Maine. From 1924-1965 U.S. immigration law became more restrictive but after reforms in 1965, a new wave of Asians and Latin Americans began to emigrate to the United States settling for the most part in the large metropolitan areas on the east and west coast. Maine benefits to a small extent from secondary migrations and second-generation immigrants who move to Maine for education, employment or lifestyle opportunities.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 3% of Maine's population (36,691 individuals) were identified as foreign-born. In recent years the growth of Maine's foreign-born population has outstripped national levels. From 2006 to 2007 the number of foreign-born people living in Maine rose from 36,976 to 45,720, representing a 24% increase. Nationally, this increase was 1.4% (37.5 million to 38.1 million) for the same time period.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past forty years, many of Maine's immigrants arrived as refugees from civil wars and political persecution. The peak years for Asian refugee resettlement in Maine (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) were 1975-1980. Through the eighties and early nineties refugees from the former Soviet Union and the Balkans comprised the bulk of resettlement (Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kosova, Poland, Romania, etc). African refugees (Sudan, Uganda, Zaire, Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, etc) began coming to Maine as early as 1987. Today the newest refugees are arriving from the Middle East (Iran and Iraq) and Burma.<sup>9</sup> The diversity of the refugee stream into Maine has led to an increase in language access programs and interpreter services. According to the 2000 census 7.8% of Maine respondents speak another language besides English at home. French and Spanish are the leading languages. According to the Language Access for New Americans project at the Portland United Way, the English Language Learner students' number in Maine schools grew from 2,748 in 2000 to 4,571 in 2010. In 2009, Maine Medical Center received 22,141 requests for interpreter services in 47 different languages in comparison with 4,370 requests in 35 languages in 2005. The top languages spoken by students and parents in these examples are Somali, Spanish, French, Chinese, Vietnamese, Khmer, Russian and Arabic.<sup>10</sup>

Most of Maine's recent immigrants live in the greater Portland and Lewiston/Auburn area. Still, many municipalities across the state are becoming home to more and more new Mainers. ■



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

## Definitions

**Asylee:** A person granted asylum in the U.S. after convincing the U.S. government that he/she has been persecuted in the past or has a well-founded fear of future persecution in her/his home country. Asylum seekers apply for this protection from within the U.S.

**Family Reunification:** The process by which citizens, permanent residents, or refugees and asylees, are allowed to sponsor certain immediate relatives to come live in the U.S.

**Foreign-born Person:** A person living in the U.S. now who was born abroad and was not a U.S. citizen at birth.

**Green Card:** A wallet-sized card showing that the person is a lawful permanent resident in the U.S. So called because it was originally green in color.

**Immigrant:** A person who moves to a country where he or she intends to settle permanently.

**Immigrant Visa:** To live permanently in the U.S., an immigrant visa is required. The major U.S. visa categories include immediate relatives, refugees and asylees, employer-sponsored, or special immigrants.

**Lawful Permanent Resident:** A person who has immigrated legally but is not an American citizen. This person has been admitted to the U.S. as an immigrant and has a green card.

**Lottery:** The Department of State has an annual lottery for immigration officially called the Diversity Visa Program. Up to 55,000 immigrants can enter the U.S. each year from countries with low rates of immigration to the U.S. Lottery applicants must have a high school education or equivalent and two years work experience.

**Native-born:** A person who was born in the U.S.

**Naturalization:** The process by which an immigrant who is not a citizen by birth becomes a U.S. citizen through legal procedures.

**Nonimmigrant Visa:** A legal permit to enter the U.S. granted according to purpose, such as travel, work or study. Each nonimmigrant visa classification has a set of requirements including length of stay that the visa holder must follow and maintain. Letters identify the type of visa i.e. student (F, M), visitor (B), temporary worker (H), etc. There are dozens of nonimmigrant visa types.

**Quota:** Sets a numerical limit to specific visa types. For example there is a current 66,000 quota limit for seasonal/temporary workers (H-2B), a 55,000 quota for the lottery and a 140,000 limit to employment-based green cards.

**Refugee:** A person who is unable or unwilling to live in his or her native country because of past persecution or a well founded fear of future persecution. Refugees are outside of the U.S. when they apply for resettlement.

**Second Generation Immigrant:** The children of immigrant parents, first in a family line to be born in the U.S.

**Sponsor:** A colloquial term for the person or employer who fills out and submits an immigration visa petition for someone to come to the U.S. or completes an affidavit of support for an immigrant visa applicant.

**Trafficking:** The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat, force or other forms of coercion for the purpose of exploitation.

**Undocumented Immigrant:** A person who has stayed beyond the authorized length of her/his visa or otherwise fallen "out of status" or who entered without a proper visa.

**U.S. Citizenship Test:** All immigrants, with some exceptions, must pass the citizenship test before taking the Oath of Allegiance and officially becoming U.S. citizens.

# Immigration Law and Refugee Policy Affecting Asian Migration

Economic historians generally believe no single factor leads to immigration. Immigration can be a response to ‘pull’ factors that propel individuals to come to countries like the United States or ‘push’ factors that propel individuals to leave their country of origin. Pull factors include opportunities associated with education, wages, freedom, democracy, and tolerance. Push factors include population booms, persecution, political or economic destabilization, natural and man-made disasters. The presence or absence of previous immigrants from a country or region and immigration restrictions are also a factor.

## **Few Restrictions in the 1800’s —**

Immigration into the United States was subject to virtually no legal restrictions before 1882.

**Chinese Exclusion Act: 1882 —** Many of the first restrictive immigration laws were directed against Asian countries, specifically China. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 essentially prohibited the immigration of Chinese citizens and it stayed in effect until it was removed during World War II.

**Immigration Act of 1917: The Asiatic Barred Zone Act —** On February 4, 1917, the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 (also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act) with an overwhelming majority, overriding President Woodrow Wilson’s veto. This act added to the number of ‘undesirables’ banned from entering the country and required a literacy test for admission to the United States. The most controversial part of the law was the section that designated

an “Asiatic Barred Zone”, a region that included much of eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands from which people could not immigrate.

## **1921: Quota Act and National Origins Act —**

The Quota Act of 1921 laid the framework for a fundamental change in U.S. immigration policy. National quotas were established in direct proportion to each country’s presence in the U.S. population in 1910. Because relatively few individuals immigrated from southern, central, and eastern Europe before 1890, the effect of the 1924 law was to drastically reduce the number of individuals allowed to immigrate to the United States from these countries. In addition, the act assigned Asian countries quotas near zero.

## **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 —**

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished quotas based on national origins. Instead a series of preferences were established to determine who would gain entry. The most important preference was given to relatives of U.S. citizens and non-citizen permanent residents. Preferences were also given to professionals, scientists, artists, and workers in short supply. Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, such as spouses, parents, and minor, unmarried children, were exempt from the quota. This law was designed to treat all countries equally. Asian countries were treated the same as any other country, so the virtual prohibition on immigration from Asia disappeared.

## **1975: Evacuation of Vietnamese from Saigon —**

Refugee centers opened in the U.S. President Gerald Ford established an interagency Task Force to coordinate

federal activity concerned with evacuation and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. Parole was also granted for Cambodians in third countries, i.e. refugee camps outside of Cambodia.

## **1976: Indochina Refugee Children Assistance Act —**

Extended educational assistance for elementary and secondary education of refugee children in the United States.

## **1977: Public Law 956-135 —**

Indochinese refugees allowed to become permanent residents and could apply for citizenship five years after arrival.

## **1980: United States Refugee Act —**

Federal law reformed United States immigration law and admitted refugees on a systematic basis for humanitarian reasons. Annually, the Proposed Refugee Admissions Report to the Congress is written detailing new circumstances involving refugees worldwide, and each year the new annual ceiling of refugees able to resettle in the United States is established by Presidential determination.

**1990 Immigration Act —** Modified and expanded the 1965 act; significantly increasing the total level of immigration to 700,000. The act retained family reunification as the major entry path and more than doubled employment-related immigration and priorities for skilled workers. It also created a lottery program that randomly assigned a number of visas to help immigrants from countries where the United States did not often grant visas to increase diversity. The modifications also removed homosexuality as a ground for exclusion from immigration. ■

# Maine's Asian Population

Asians and Latinos account for significant and growing shares of the population and economy in Maine. Immigrants make up 3.5% of the state's population and more than half are naturalized U.S. citizens who are eligible to vote. In 2009, Asians represented approximately 1% of the population in Maine versus 4.6% nationally.<sup>11</sup>

Asians in Maine are a heterogeneous group. They represent numerous countries of origin and come to Maine as refugees, on educational visas, work visas, as secondary migrants, and as spouses and relatives of other Mainers. Asians come to Maine from other states and from abroad and are doing so in increasing numbers with 4,249 entering since 2000 versus 2,803 from 1990 -1999.<sup>12</sup>

Asians own their own businesses, work in Maine's large industries, teach in our public schools and universities, are

employed in state and federal agencies, work in the non-profit sector, and engage in critical bio-medical and high-tech research. They live in every Maine county, volunteer in community organizations, promote religious and cultural activities, and raise families.

Maine's 1,143 Asian-owned businesses had sales and receipts of \$284 million and employed 2,543 people in 2007.<sup>13</sup> Asian buying power totaled \$303 million, an increase of 271% since 1990, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth.<sup>14</sup> Educational attainment for Asians in Maine is higher than the native population in general. The median age of Asians in Maine is 31.8 years old.

Business growth, purchasing power, education, age, cultural vibrancy, family stability and community contributions, provide ample reasons for growth and opportunity for Asians in Maine.

**FIGURE 3** Ancestry of Maine's Asian Population: 2009

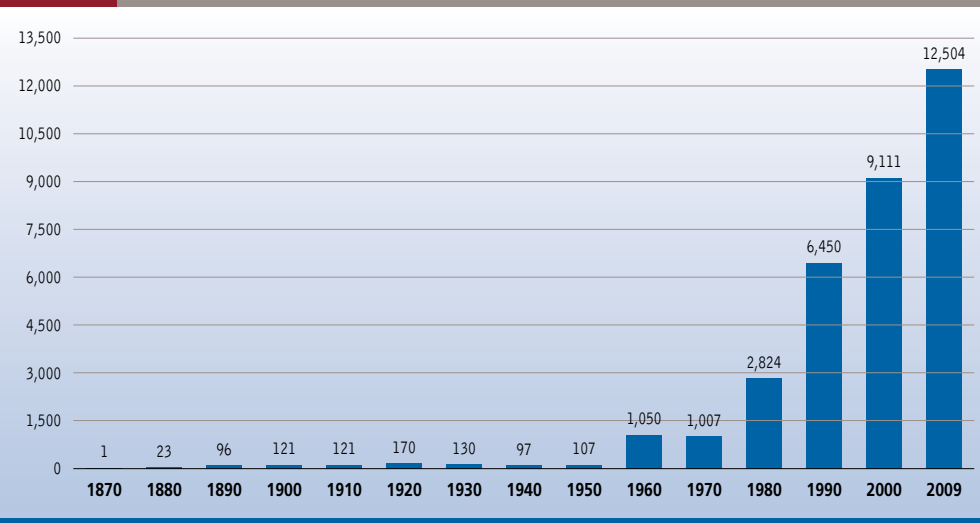
Maine Estimate	
Total	12,504
Asian Indian	1,751
Bangladeshi	93
Cambodian	1,013
Chinese, except Taiwanese	2,885
Filipino	1,778
Indonesian	30
Japanese	590
Korean	1,478
Laotian	153
Malaysian	18
Pakistani	210
Sri Lankan	16
Taiwanese	31
Thai	262
Vietnamese	1,627
Other Asian	295
Other Asian, not specified	274

Source: American Community Survey, 2007-2009 3-Year Estimates

## Historic and Future Growth

The Maine Memory Network, part of the Maine Historical Society, has photographs of Chinese in Maine from as early as 1890. Their exhibit on the history of the Chinese in Maine records the first Asian in Maine as Daniel Cough who left Amoy Island, China as a stowaway on a sailing ship to Mt. Desert Island. Other Chinese came in the late 1800's and spread all over Maine working mostly as laundrymen. Up through 1920, Portland had a vibrant Chinese community with records of Chinese New Year's celebrations, Chinese Sunday Schools and a Chinese Masonic Lodge. In addition to hand laundries, Chinese restaurants began appearing in Maine as early as 1910. Many children of these early Chinese immigrants served in WWII.

**FIGURE 4** Asian Population in Maine: 1870 - 2009



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau

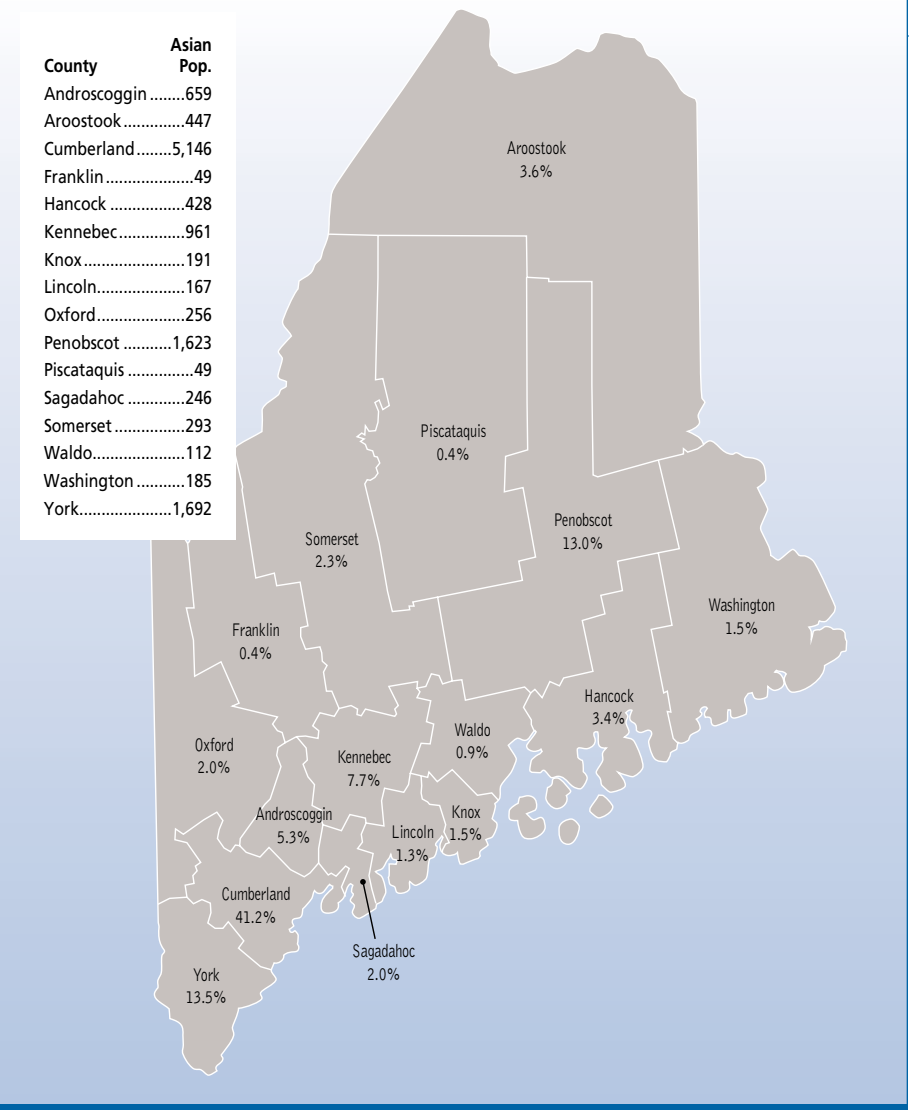


Apart from the Chinese, there are few historical records about other Asian immigrants to Maine prior to the 20th Century. This is probably not surprising since in 1910 only 2% of immigrants in the United States came from Latin American or Asia. With the lifting of exclusionary immigration policies against Asia and the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, Asian immigration increased dramatically. In 2008-2009, 28% of all foreign born in the U.S. are from Asia (Latin America/ Caribbean 53%, Africa 4%, Europe 13%).<sup>15</sup>

During the 1970's and 1980's Maine was also a refugee resettlement site for Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees following the Vietnam War. From a recorded population of 185 Asians in 1950, Maine reached over 6,450 Asians by 1990. Since then the Asian population has nearly doubled in the last twenty years.<sup>16</sup>

Today in Maine there is a Chinese American Friendship Association, a Japan America Society of Maine, an Asian America Heritage Foundation, a Korean Friendship Society, numerous cultural and religious schools, temples, churches, festivals, markets, support systems, affinity groups and services for new Mainers.

**FIGURE 5** Distribution of Asian Population by County: 2009



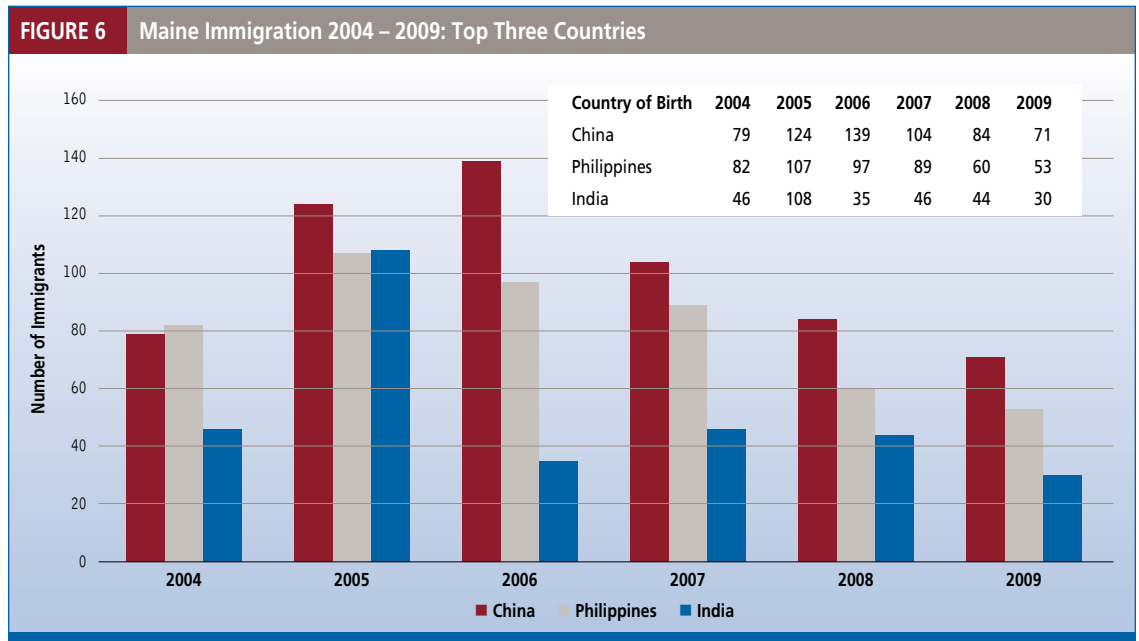
Source: American Community Survey, 2007-2009 3-Year Estimates

## Geographic Location

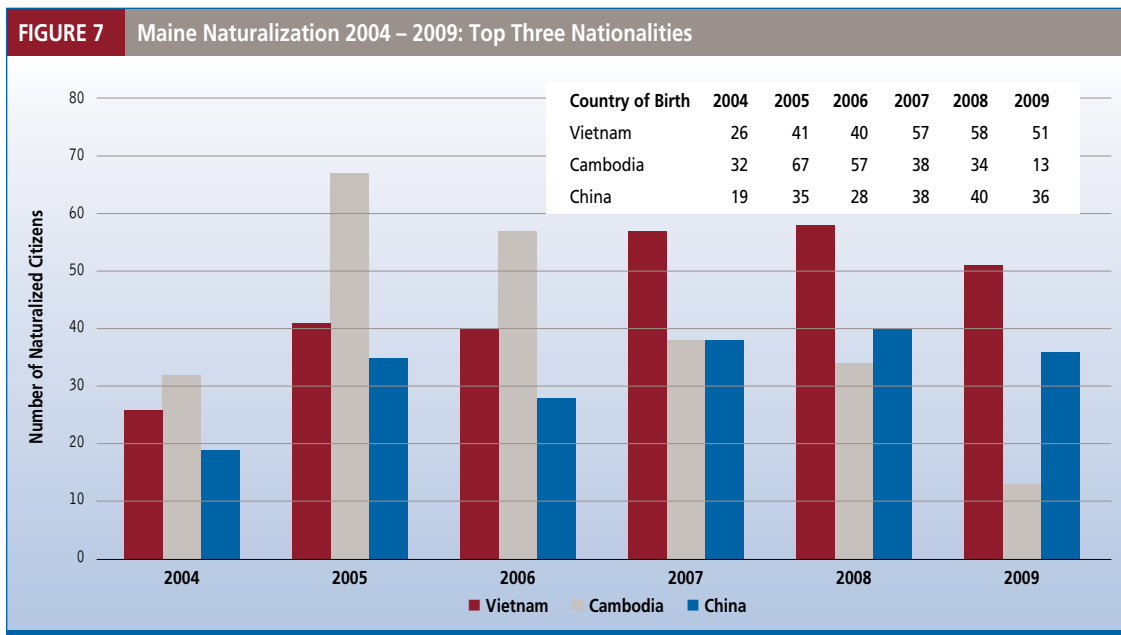
We can find Asians in every part of Maine with the larger populations located around our urban centers of Portland and Bangor, along the coastal corridor and near colleges and universities. In Maine, the top three countries of origin are China, Philippines and India. This mirrors national statistics and the top three immigrant groups overall. Nearly half of all immigrants in New England are naturalized U.S. citizens, one of the highest naturalization rates in the country.<sup>17</sup>

While Maine's Asian population has grown overall in the past decade, we have also witnessed significant out-migration particularly among the Vietnamese who were part of refugee resettlement following the Vietnam War. Maine had recorded 909 Vietnamese in 2000 with only 503 reporting in 2006 (a 44% decrease).<sup>18</sup>

Another phenomena that is changing the face of Maine communities is the adoption of foreign-born children by white parents. The U.S. Department of State tracks these figures and from 1980-2008, China sent the most adoptees to the United States with Russia and South Korea second and third respectively. From 1998 through 2009 Maine families adopted 1,128 children – over half were from Asia.<sup>19</sup> These children are now growing up in communities across the state.



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2004-2009



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2004-2009

## Education and Economy

Asians are more educated and have higher median incomes than other immigrant groups overall. Although many Asians hold post-secondary degrees and high rates of advanced degrees, degree attainment varies widely among nationalities and by gender.

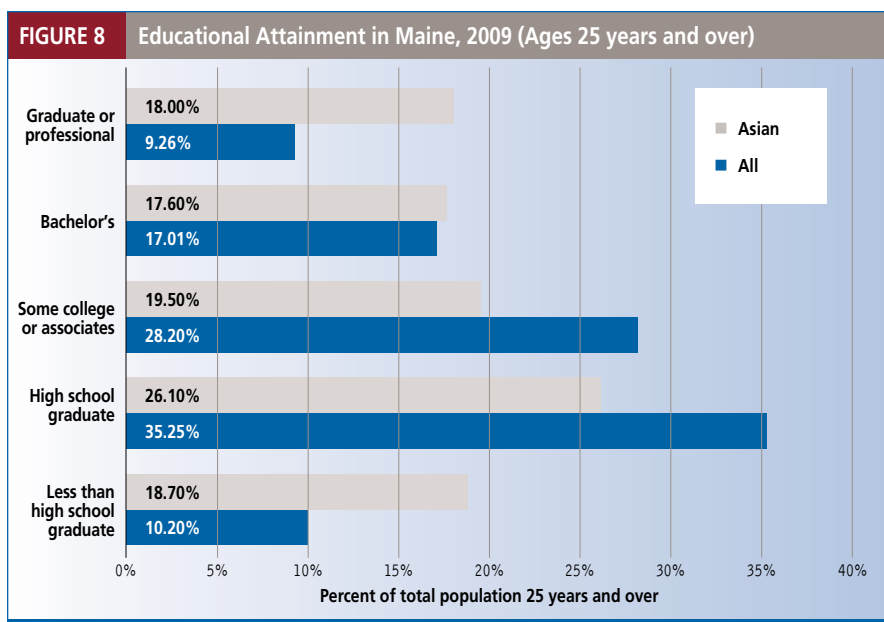
Employment, education and civic engagement are strong values for Asians in Maine. Asians have strong representation in our colleges and universities – both as students and professors, in our high-tech industries and in small business-ownership. Children of Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian refugees are graduating from college and pursuing careers. Like all young people in Maine, their choice to remain in Maine depends to a large extent on economic opportunity.

Asia’s emphasis on math, science and technology in their educational systems over the past few decades has led to a demand for high-skilled workers from Asia both nationally and in Maine. Many Asians in Maine are here on work visas. Many have hopes of becoming citizens and permanent residents.

## Educational Attainment

English proficiency and educational attainment are key ingredients of successful civic and economic integration of immigrants. Immigrants in New England have higher English proficiency rates than their national counterparts: fully three quarters of immigrants in Maine and Vermont are proficient in English.<sup>20</sup> 76.6% of all children between the ages of 5 and 17 in Maine that spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English “very well” as of 2007.<sup>21</sup> New England’s immigrants are also among the best educated in the nation, which is consistent with New England’s traditionally high levels of educational attainment. Of all immigrant groups, Asians have the highest levels of educational attainment. More than half of Asians in New England have at least a bachelor’s degree, and 29% hold a graduate degree.<sup>22</sup> The number of immigrants in Maine with a college degree increased by 27.2% between 2000 and 2007, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute.<sup>23</sup>

Nationally, Asian Americans have the highest educational attainment level and median household income of any racial demographic in the country. Asian Indians have some of the highest median incomes while Vietnamese Americans are significantly lower. The poverty rate for single-race Asians in 2007 was 11.8%. Additionally, 74% of Asians live in a household with internet use – the highest rate among racial and ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup>



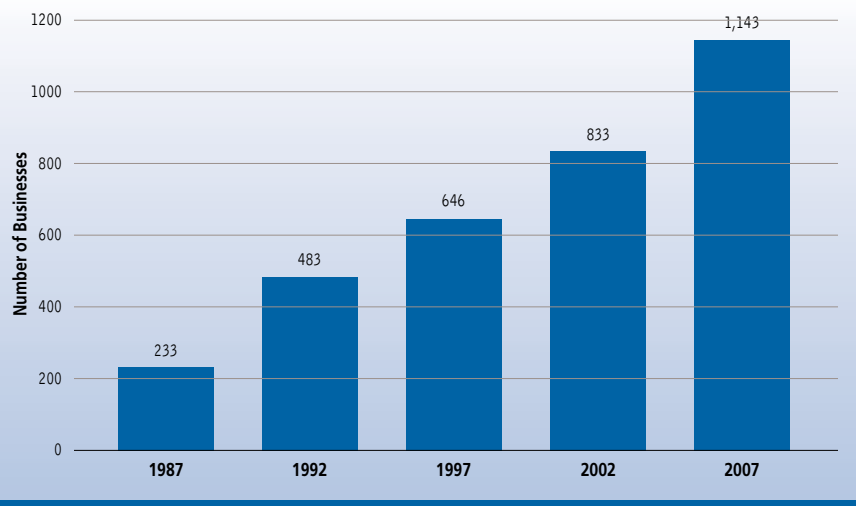
Source: American Community Survey, 2007-2009 3-Year Estimates

## Business Ownership

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2005), between 1997-2002 the number of Asian American businesses in the U.S. grew by 24% compared to 10% growth in all U.S. firms. Asian-owned businesses employ 2.2 million people (2000 census) with the majority of business ownership occurring in California, New York, Texas and New Jersey. Asian-owned businesses in Maine had sales and receipts of \$284 million and employed 2,543 people in 2007. Only 28% of Asian-owned businesses are home-based, the lowest proportion amongst minority respondent groups.<sup>25</sup>

By far, accommodation and food services account for the largest percentage of Asian-owned businesses in Maine. Asian restaurants exist in every county of Maine

**FIGURE 9** Number of Asian-Owned Businesses in Maine: 1987 to 2007



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Business Owners

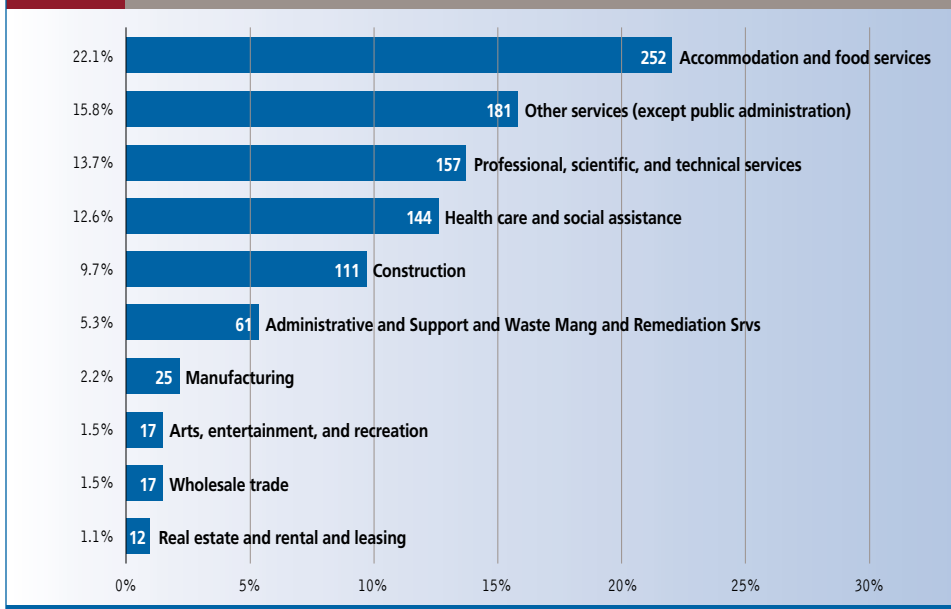
and while Chinese restaurants have been here for many decades, urban centers and tourist areas now feature numerous restaurants serving many varieties of Asian ethnic cuisine. Asians are also gaining a foothold in hotel and motel management. Entrepreneurial small businesses owned and operated by Asians are on the rise. Asians are also widely represented in health care and social assistance programs,

as physicians, technicians, nurses, home-health aids and personal care assistants. Information technologies, education, professional, scientific and technical services are employing Asians at a fairly even rate statistically. Asians are employed in the arts, cultural and recreational sector. Unlike other immigrant groups, Asians in Maine are less-represented in manufacturing and transportation. This is less true nationally where Asians make up a strong component of the U.S. durable goods manufacturing base.

Overall, immigrants, including Asians are more likely than natives to be employed as private wage and salary workers and less likely to work in the public sector. In Northern New England, however (Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire) immigrants are significantly more likely to work for the government than in Southern New England. Immigrants are also more likely to be self-employed in Northern New England.<sup>26</sup>

In 2009, the Selig Center for Economic Growth estimated the buying power of three racial groups over a ten-year period. In 2009, the buying power of Asians was \$508 billion, an 89% percent increase

**FIGURE 10** Distribution of Asian Owned Businesses by Industry in Maine: 2007



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Business Owners

## A Word about Statistics

Research for this report was compiled prior to the release of 2010 census data. The accuracy of the census depends on self-identification and participation rates. These have been historically lower for immigrants than for the general population. Also census classifications of race and ethnicity change. The 2000 census, for example, provided more options for ethnicity than in previous years, and for the first time allowed people to identify themselves with more than one race. For all these reasons, it is difficult to claim 100% accuracy in the data. Census data and the census' American Community Survey (ACS) are the primary sources used by national, regional, and state groups analyzing immigration and economic trends. In this report we have used these primary sources and the extrapolation of that data by numerous research organizations.

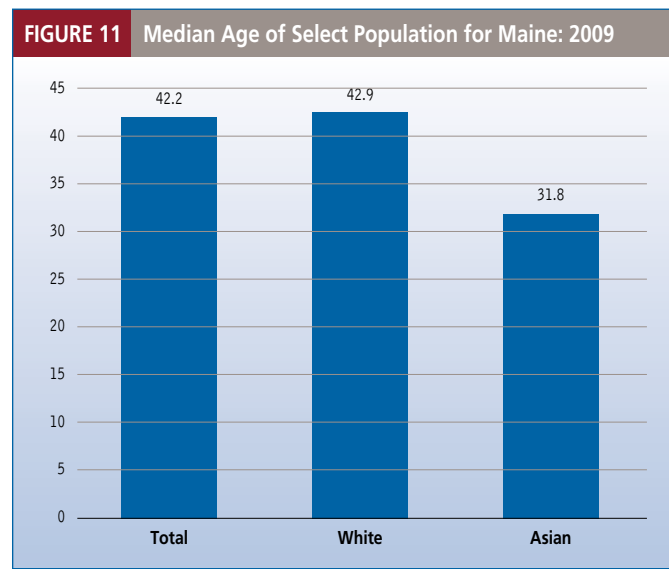
from 1990. This increase is substantially greater than the increase in buying power for whites (46%) and the U.S. as a whole (49%). Despite the economic recession, job growth by Asians nationally is growing at a faster rate than the country as a whole. According to the Selig Center, Asian buying power in Maine is estimated at \$363 million, an increase of 271% since 1990.<sup>27</sup>

## Workforce Participation

In 2008, immigrants comprised 2.8% of the state's workforce (19,937 workers) according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Currently, over 20% of Maine workers are age 55 and older. Asians and other immigrant workers in Maine are significantly younger.

The median age of Asians in Maine is 31.8 versus 42.9 for whites. 52% of all immigrants in Maine are of working age (18-54). Currently, over 20% of Maine workers are age 55 and older, up from 13% since 2001. Over the next decade Maine's aging population will continue to grow as baby boomers move out of the workforce and into retirement. The Maine Department of Labor estimates that individuals aged 55 and over is expected to increase by 57,000, while total population growth slows to around 32,000.<sup>28</sup> These trends have major implications for Maine's economy, tax base, health care costs and business growth. Coupling these statistics with Maine's declining birth rates, out-migration of native-born youth, and recessionary job losses, Maine's workforce is on a downward-trending path.

For these reasons Maine's non-native population is increasingly important to our long-range economic vitality. These trends present opportunities for Maine to grow our labor force and provide intellectual and social capital for Maine's future. ■



Source: U.S. Census, Population Division



## Looking Towards Solutions

New Brunswick, Canada, directly north of Maine and facing similar demographics, has opened its arms to immigrants by working alongside industry to target foreign workers with specific skills, upgrade language programs and provide housing and employment opportunities. By promoting small business ownership and attracting college-age students with tuition rebates, New Brunswick hopes to reverse years of declining population growth and low birth rates. In Maine, similar innovative measures by policy makers and employers are needed.

The new economy according to the Kauffman Foundation is knowledge-based, globalized, technologically innovative and economically dynamic.<sup>29</sup> It's also multi-cultural. According to the National Science Board (2004) among U.S. computer scientists and mathematicians in 2000, half of all doctorate holders and a third of all master's degree holders were foreign-born. Foreign-born university graduates are three times more likely to file patents than U.S. born citizens. Regardless of educational level, immigrants possess a strong entrepreneurial spirit and are 30% more likely to form new businesses than the native-born.<sup>30</sup>

For all these reasons, Maine should pay close attention to the immigrant experience including workforce participation and educational attainment, immigrant entrepreneurship and purchasing power, and economic potential if we are to build a vibrant Maine future.

## Microdata Paints a More In-depth Picture of Maine

In addition to the Decennial Census, the Census Bureau asks more in-depth questions to smaller samples every year. The following data combines American Community Survey (ACS) 2000-2004 and ACS 2005. ACS sampling methodology ensures no duplication within this timeframe. The sample size is small (154 observations). However it does yield a glimpse into details that are lost when analyzing aggregated data.

### ANCESTRY

Nepal . . . . .	1
India . . . . .	14
Pakistan . . . . .	3
Cambodian . . . . .	9
Chinese . . . . .	33
Cantonese . . . . .	2
Filipino . . . . .	30
Japanese . . . . .	11
Korean . . . . .	17
Thai . . . . .	2
Vietnamese . . . . .	24
Amerasian . . . . .	1
Asian . . . . .	7
Number in dataset. . .	154

### CLASS OF WORKER\*

	Asian*	Native/Non-Immigrant*
Employee of private company	67%	59%
Employee in non-profit	9%	11%
Local or City Govt. employee	3%	8%
State Govt. employee	6%	4%
Federal Govt. Employee	3%	3%
Self Employed	11%	14%
Working without pay in family business or farm	1%	.5%
No data available	13%	28%

\* Amongst working age population (18 or over) based on the same dataset. Percents are rounded off.

### WAGES AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT INCOME

	Self-Employed Asians	Self-Employed General Population	Income Wages Asians	Income Wages General Population
Median	\$14,000	\$13,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Average	\$16,142	\$21,646	\$33,404	\$30,981

Number of Asians surveyed = 105, Number in general population = 11,513  
These numbers reflect profit only since Census figures do not reflect actual losses.

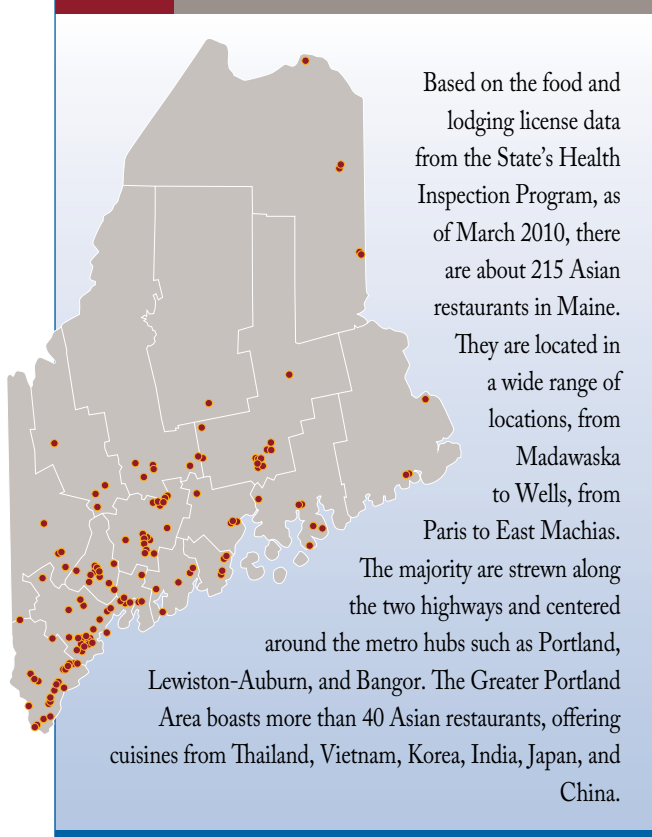
### SCHOOLING COMPLETED

	Asians	General Population
Doctorate degree . . . . .	1%	.7%
Professional school degree . . . . .	4.8%	1.3%
Master's degree . . . . .	5.8%	4.6%
Bachelor's degree . . . . .	18.3%	12.4%
Associate degree in college . . . . .	4.8%	6.4%
One or more years of college, no degree . . . . .	12.5%	10.7%
Less than one year college . . . . .	2.9%	4.6%
High school graduate . . . . .	30.8%	30%
Grade 12 no diploma . . . . .	3.9%	1.3%
Less than Grade 12 . . . . .	9.6%	17.9%

Based on the data, we see a greater percentage of Asians employed in private companies than the native population and slightly lower rate of employment in not-for profit companies. The median self-employed income for both groups is \$14,000 and \$13,000 respectively. The median wages for the general population are higher (\$25,000 vs. \$20,000) than the Asians. Average wages, however, was higher for Asians. This may reflect the influence of the very high-income earners in the Asian population on the average. Educational attainment rates amongst Asians in Maine are greater than for the native population in general. A comparison of doctorate and professional degrees earned shows that almost 6% of Asians earned such degrees compared to 2% of the native population. This difference is very pronounced when comparing Bachelor's and Master's degrees earned as well.

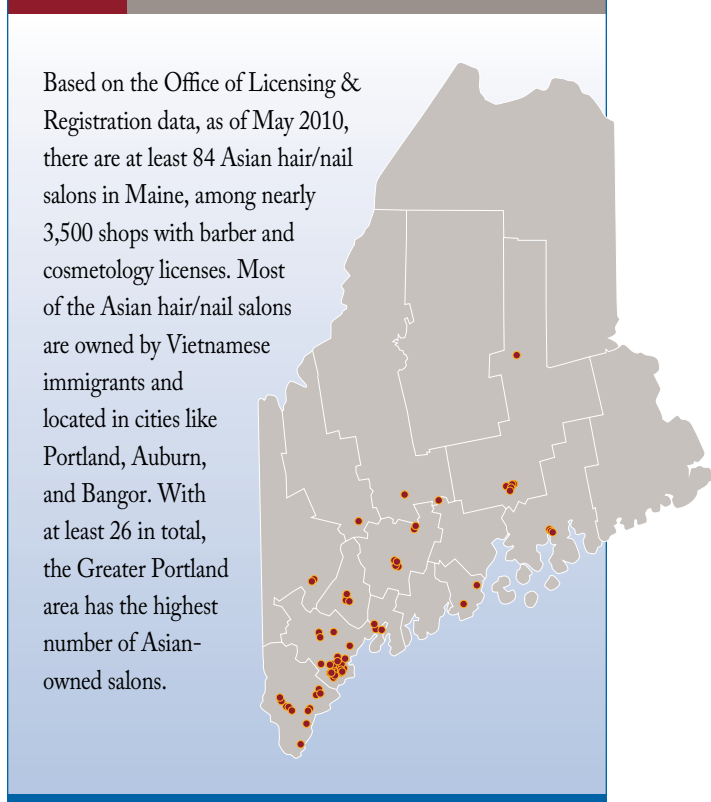
# Industry Snapshots

**FIGURE 12 Asian-Owned Restaurants in Maine**



*This data is not conclusive and is for reference only.*

**FIGURE 13 Asian-Owned Salons in Maine**



*This data is not conclusive and is for reference only.*

**FIGURE 14 Asian Employees at The Jackson Laboratory**

Job Classification	Employees	Gender	Employees	Nationality	Employees
Administrators	1	Female	43	Bangladesh	1
Animal Technician	6	Male	31	Chinese	35
Animal Technician Trainee	4			Fillipino	9
Business Operations Professional	2			Indian	13
Customer Service & Marketing Professional	1			Indonesian	2
Financial Professional	2			Japanese	6
Information Technology Professional	5			Kazakhstan	1
Manager	2			Korean	6
Operations Personnel Advanced	1			Vietnamese	1
Research Professional	18				
Research Scientist PhD	32				

Source: Jackson Lab 2010

**FIGURE 15 Asian Employees at Fairchild Semiconductor**

Job Classification	Employees
Management	6
Senior Staff	3
Technician	4
Operators	15

Source: Fairchild Semiconductor, January 2011

# Destination Maine

The stories of the Asians profiled for this report offer many examples of the factors that propel individuals to put down roots in Maine. Their stories also provide a snapshot of history and the political, cultural and economic forces that drive people from one continent to another. We live in an increasingly multi-cultural society; financial systems, the internet, political alliances, multi-national corporations, trade, even the English language, all play a hand in creating an inter-connected world. War, famine, political upheaval, civil war coupled with U.S. foreign policy and U.S. immigration policy, also create conditions for mass migrations. In this report a number of themes emerge in the Asian migration experience to Maine.

Political events have the power to change lives forever. The rise of communism in China, post-colonial independence in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, American foreign policy during the early part of the Cold War and later in Southeast Asia, are all part of the story of migrations from Asia to the West. Civil war, military coups, the redrawing of boundaries, ethnic cleansing, being on the wrong side of history, or in the wrong social class are experiences

many participants lived through. Pirun Sen, Rotha Chan, Sovann Meas, Sitha and Sakun Prak are all survivors of Pol Pot and the 'killing fields' in Cambodia. Ngo Vinh Long helped the American military during the start up to the Vietnam War while Thao Duong was one of many Vietnamese 'boat people' escaping Saigon at the end of that war. Wei-Teh Tai and her family, members of landowning elites, escaped Mao Tse Tung's China. Indriani Demers experienced first hand the mass killings and communist purges in Indonesia. Pronsavanh and Sisouk Southivong are refugees from Laos. Aye Mie Mie came to Maine after her husband's sushi business located in the World Trade Towers was destroyed on 9/11.

The pursuit of educational and economic opportunity has always been important to the American immigration story. For many of the Asians profiled, the University of Maine system was a first stop on their Maine journey. Aspara Kumarage came to the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) to follow in the footsteps of two other siblings. Word of mouth led Ruky Somansudera to UMF. Many international students benefited under the tutelage of Sheena Bunnell, a UMF business and economics professor, originally from India. Au-Kau Ng was recruited by the University of Southern Maine to help develop a new graduate program in immunology and applied medical science. Jing Zhang came to the University of Maine at Orono to get his Ph.D. in forestry. Yueying Bloomer studied criminal justice at the University of Maine Presque Isle.

The presence of high-tech industries in Maine like Fairchild Semiconductor, Jackson Labs and Idexx, draw worldwide and world-class talent. Yichang Jia was recruited at a conference in Hong Kong to pursue his research in Maine. Se Chung spent thirty-one years working at Fairchild Semiconductor and was a resource to their



expansion in Korea. The financial services, computer and banking industries in Maine all benefit from diverse work places as do the medical and health care fields. Laongdao Suppasettawat is a financial advisor at Merrill Lynch. Dolores Atienza Barcebal worked for thirty years at Maine Medical Center. The independence and satisfaction that comes from owning your own business is reflected in the lives of many of our participants whether it's owning a restaurant, a hair salon, a pet shop, a Chinese school or a franchise.

Visa issues and permanent residency come up in many of our profiles. Aye Mie Mie, Priya Natarajan and Sharma Prem all came here through winning the 'lottery' in their home countries. Others had family and relatives in the United States sponsor them. Those on student visas needed to obtain work visas to stay. Maine employers are often the critical bridge to citizenship.

Finally, love and marriage brings distant worlds together. Marriage to an American citizen or, as is often the case here, marriage to a Mainer is the ultimate commitment. Yueying married an American meteorologist working at the weather station in Caribou. Priya moved to Portland when her American husband wanted to leave Boston for a slower-paced life. Chiharu Naruse met her husband in Germany when he was on a study abroad program from Bates College. Poonsri Sawangaeng met her husband in Thailand, a Mainer, while he was working for a Swiss company.





# A Brief History of Chinese Immigration from an Immigrant Perspective

by Robert Ho

The Chinese have had a long, tortuous history of migration to the United States – beginning in the 1840's. Driven by economic hardship at home, they came as alien laborers (*waigung*) to the land of the "Gold Mountain." Seeking their fortunes, they helped build the transcontinental railroad and mine copper and gold on the west coast and in the mountain states.

Later in the 1890's, they became contract workers on southern plantations, and many were hired as strike breakers by factories in the northeast. These steady streams of migration caused furious anti-Chinese sentiments across the country, particularly from organized labor. It resulted, not only in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, but also in numerous communal acts of violence and expulsion against Chinese immigrant communities in Wyoming, Washington and California. Exclusion targeting Chinese immigrants remained national policy until the Magnuson Act of 1943.



Collections of Maine Historical Society. Courtesy of Maine Memory Network

Quoy Wong family, Bangor, 1922



Dr. & Mrs. Chai

Students, however, were permitted entry into the country under various government and Christian mission sponsored educational programs, e.g., the Boxer Rebellion Indemnity Scholarships. These programs flourished in the first decades of the 1900's. My parents came in the 1920's as students and attended Pomona College in California.

By the 1930's, there were nearly 380,000 Chinese living and working in cities in the continental U.S., concentrated primarily on the west and east coasts. Kept out of major industrial and agricultural sectors, they became restaurant owners, laundry operators and shopkeepers.

Chinese immigrants began to show their presence in Maine in the late 1890's and early 1900's. Notwithstanding the nation's exclusion edicts, they began to settle in Portland, Lewiston and Augusta as well as Bangor. Some came through Canada via Vermont.

The late 1940's and early 1950's saw another generation of Chinese immigrants in Maine. Dr. Chen K. Chai of Bar Harbor emigrated to the United States in 1947 and joined the senior research staff of the Jackson Laboratory in the 1950's. One of his many research contributions was a seminal study of the link between amyloideosis and Alzheimer's disease. Retired in 1982, he recently passed away at the age of 95.



The Sing family

Tommy and Janet (Mama) Sing ran the Sing's Polynesian Restaurant at the Penobscot Plaza in Bangor for over thirty years and, for a short time, the Sing's Cantonese Polynesian American Restaurant on Main Street in Westbrook. Both the Sing's have since passed away. They are survived by four children, twelve grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Almost all of the Sing family still live in Maine.

The Chai and Sing generation was a precursor to a new wave of Chinese immigrants in the 1960's and 1970's, made possible by the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. This landmark legislation finally abolished the racist national origin quota system. It set an annual ceiling of 20,000 visas per country on a first-come-first-serve basis, with priority given to the skilled and educated.

Following the fall of the Chinese mainland to Mao's revolution and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, new immigrants came, not only from China as refugees, but also indirectly via Hong Kong and Taiwan. Many of this new wave of immigrants were gifted, well educated, and aspiring high achievers including An Wang of Wang Computers; co-inventor of the birth control pill Dr. M. C. Chang; David Lee of Diablo who invented the first daisywheel printer for mass production; architect I. M. Pei and

the cellist Yo-yo Ma. For the first time in the history of Chinese immigration, “class” made a clear mark on its evolving scope with uptown, or suburban, Chinese versus the downtown, “Chinatown,” Chinese.

With the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping lifted the Bamboo Curtain and called for the development of a capitalist economy under the slogan, “Getting rich is glorious!” Restriction on out-migration was lifted. This heralded the beginning of yet another wave of Chinese immigrants.

***“We helped build your railroads, open your mines, cultivated the waste places, and assisted in making California the great State she is now. In return for all this, what do we receive? Abuse, humiliation and imprisonment. We ask that these things be changed and that we be treated as human beings instead of outlaws.”***

— Petition by a Chinese Immigrant Group to President Wilson, June 1914, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

*Mountain.* We see some of them now in Maine – at higher education institutions, in hospitals and research institutes, and as public school teachers.

Collections of Maine Historical Society. Courtesy of Maine Memory Network



*Chinese Sunday School class, Augusta, c. 1890*

The resumption of diplomatic relations with PRC in 1979 led the United States to double the annual immigration quota for the Chinese to 40,000 giving PRC and Taiwan 20,000 each.

By the end of the 1980’s and as result of the Tiananmen Massacre, more than 80,000 PRC scholars and intellectuals came to settle in the land of the *Gold*

With the PRC’s one-child policy, and the Chinese family tradition of valuing the male child, another development has been the adoption of “orphaned” or abandoned Chinese children – girls predominantly – by American families across the country, as well as in Maine. A large number of these children live in eastern and southern Maine; Saturday Chinese language schools exist in both Bangor and Portland to accommodate these children and their adopted families.

The evolving scope of Chinese immigration is not monolithic. It has many faces – by birth and class, by education and training, and by age and gender. In disparate and unique, but equally significant ways, their life and work has enriched, and will continue to enrich, the social and economic fabric of our state, as you will see by the profiles in this study. ■



*Goon children playing, c. 1934*

Collections of Maine Historical Society. Courtesy of Maine Memory Network



# Personal Connections


Statistics tell only part of the story of Asians in Maine. MECEP interviewed 26 individuals, couples and families for inclusion in this report. These final stories were selected from an initial list of 84 people where country of origin, statistical presence in Maine, occupation, gender, age, county of residence and socio-economic status were considered. All the profiles include Asians who are actively participating and contributing to the Maine economy as current employees, entrepreneurs or recent retirees from long careers in Maine. They include restaurant owners, educators, scientists, artists, health care workers, farmers, bankers, factory workers and many others. All were interviewed in English with a common interview guide. These stories are by no means a definitive analysis of the totality of the Asian immigrant experience in Maine. They do, however, provide a rich and staggering breadth of personal experiences that can inform, illuminate and guide future economic policy and economic development in Maine.



Everyone has a personal story and no two lives are the same. All immigrants share certain common experiences; a journey, an arrival in a strange land, a struggle to fit in, putting down roots, and a hopeful eye towards the future. There the similarities end. Tracing these journeys from countries of origin to current hometowns and places of employment, to the reasons behind these migrations, enable us to know our neighbors and through them, glimpse the historic forces and economic drivers that shape our world today.

## Those profiled for this report:

Dolores Atienza Barcebal  
Yueying Bloomer  
Sheena Bunnell  
Rotha Chan  
Se Chung  
Indriani Demers  
Thao Duong  
Yichang Jia  
Sitha Kimball & Sakun Prak  
Aspara Kumara  
Ngo Vinh Long  
Sovann Meas  
Aye Mie Mie  
Chiharu Naruse  
Priya Natarjan  
Ah-Kau & Sally Ng  
Poonsri Sawangjaeng  
Pirun Sen  
Prem Sharma  
Atif & Farzeen Sheik  
Ruky Somasundera  
Pronsavanh Souththivong  
Laongdao Suppasettawat  
Wei-Teh Tai & Karen Morency  
Jing Zhang & Suzhong Tian  
Sharon & Alex Yeung



Asia experienced profound political and cultural change during the later half of the twentieth century. Many of the interviewees in this report were at the epicenter of that change. Others are more recent beneficiaries of a global economy tilting toward Asia, recruited to work in high-tech industries or encouraged to complete their education here. Some met and married people from Maine. Many were refugees and were relocated here without any choice. Some are secondary migrants – starting off in another state and finding their way to Maine through employment opportunities or personal connections. All are active participants in the Maine economy. Many have children born, educated and raised in Maine. Some have grandchildren in Maine.

In addition to the vast diversity between cultures, religions, ethnicity, languages and customs of people living in Asia, there is an equal amount of diversity within countries. The story of coming to Maine is often part of a longer migratory story that can cover a few years or a few hundred years – from Shanghai to Taiwan to Baltimore to Newfoundland to Maine as was the case with Wei-The Tai's recently-deceased husband, a Rumford physician. And with each successive migration or generation, new skills are learned, educational opportunities fulfilled, and new professions and careers made possible.

In terms of climate, population density, urbanization or even food, there is very little Maine has in common with the home countries in these profiles. Almost all participants remember with shock their first encounter with the Maine landscape. And yet like most Mainers, they too have come to love the peace and the quiet of this state. But more than the environment, it has been the people who helped them out along the way that cemented their desire to call Maine home.

MECEP would like to thank all the interviewees for opening their hearts and homes. We hope we have done justice to your story. We apologize for any errors. Particular thanks goes out to the following: Connie Zhu, Bob Ho and the Advisory Board who helped identify people and make introductions; Dolgormaa Hersom, who single-handedly travelled the state, conducted every interview, and made many new friends along the way; and Victor Damian, the photographer for both the Latin American report and this one, for being such a fantastic photographer and having not only Hispanic, but Chinese ancestry. ■





***“I sometimes think if we were still in New Jersey, our two girls would have grown up totally different. The schools are good and people happen to be very accepting here, so we really enjoy living here.”***

Ah-Kau Ng is a professor at the University of Southern Maine’s School of Applied Medical Sciences. His wife, Sally, is a trained medical technologist and now teaches Chinese in Portland.

Ng was born in 1947 in what was then the British colony of Malaya. His mother’s family came to Malaya around 1900 from Fujian Province in China during a period when the colonial government was bringing in large numbers of immigrants from China and India to help develop the colony. Ng’s father came over from China to Malaya as a young boy.

“In those early days, there was a large Chinese community in Malaya – from laborers all the way up the professional classes. My parents owned a tobacco factory where they produced cigars. My grandfather started it and it passed from generation to generation. We all lived in the same house next to the factory. I still remember seeing all those stacks of tobacco leaves. It was a very traditional family. My parents did not have a formal education, but education was a very important value they wanted for their children.”

Ng attended a Chinese community school. He spoke Chinese, some English, and Malay. Malaya achieved independence in 1957 and in 1963 united with the northern portion of Bornea and Singapore to form Malaysia. When he finished high school he went to college in Taiwan and received a bachelor’s degree in biochemistry.

“At that time there was only one college in Malaysia and because I studied in a Chinese school it would be impossible for me to go there since everything was taught in English. And also after independence, the policy was to accept a majority of ethnic Malay students in order to raise the education level of the population.”

Ng met Sally at college in Taiwan. She was born in Beijing, China. In 1948, when she was three months old, the anti-government forces began attacking the city. The family escaped on the last boat out to Taiwan.

“Until this day, we still think it was lucky we got out. My father’s family was a

target. He was highly educated and they were landlords and landowners in the northern part of Beijing. My father had already escaped to Taiwan. I came with three of my older brothers. My mom brought a lot of luggage but it all got dumped in the ocean because the boat was overloaded.”

Sally grew up in a small town in Taiwan where her father taught English in high school and her mother taught elementary school. They struggled feeding a family of six but eventually their life got better as Taiwan’s economic situation began to improve.

“Ng and I had the same major in college. After I graduated I worked as a chemistry teacher for a year and a half. There weren’t many job opportunities for college graduates in science in Taiwan. Not many families could afford to pay tuition for their children to study anywhere else either so we had to depend on scholarships.”

Ng adds, “This was the post-Sputnik era in the U.S. and President Kennedy’s administration had a really big plan to enhance science and technology education in this country. Many new graduate programs in science started to be built at that time. And the U.S. was very interested in attracting good graduate students from all over the world. So that’s how I had the opportunity to get a scholarship to come to this country.”

Ng came to the U.S. in 1970 to the State University of New York in Plattsburgh where he received his master’s degree. Since Malaysia was fairly westernized, he doesn’t remember experiencing culture shock.

“It was also right after the Civil Rights movement so, you know, there was sort of an encouragement or acceptance of multiculturalism.”

Sally got a scholarship to SUNY Plattsburgh to study medical technology and joined Ng in 1972.

“We were married right after I arrived. I had no family, no parents to join us, just our school’s foreign student advisor. She kindly lent her house for our reception. Only other students and faculty came. We stayed overnight and cooked all the food. But it was a wonderful wedding.”

# Ah-Kau & Sally Ng



After that, they moved on to Temple University in Philadelphia where Ng earned his Ph.D. in microbiology and immunology. Sally worked in a lab at Temple Medical School. They stayed in Philadelphia for three years and had their first child, Dawn.

"Her Chinese name is Xu Hua which means splendid early morning time. And our second daughter is named Jing Hua. Jing is Chinese for Crystal, so her American name is Crystal."

After Ng received his Ph.D. he went to the National Cancer Institute, which is part of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland for three more years of post-doctoral training in cancer immunology.

"At that time there wasn't much opportunity back home in Asia for biomedical research, so I decided to continue working in the United States. This is when I obtained my permanent residency status."

From: **China, Malaysia, Taiwan**

Lives: **Portland, Maine**

Occupations: **Professor, University of Southern Maine; Chinese Language Teacher**

Ng's first faculty position was at Scripps Research Institute in San Diego. After three years, he had an opportunity to move to Columbia University in New York where he could pursue his research and also teach. In 1988, The University of Southern Maine started to develop a new graduate program in immunology focusing on biotechnology. Ng was recruited to come to Maine and help develop this new program.

"New York is a very exciting city and we liked our jobs there but our children were young and we lived in the suburbs of New Jersey. We had to commute and that was challenging. We didn't have enough quality time with the children. And because I worked late at the lab, I missed just about all the school functions."

Moving to Portland, Maine was a big change but it was here that their family life began to blossom.

"The girls could walk to school. They could go out with friends. It's just so much safer here. They found a new sense of freedom. And then we started to enjoy this smaller community. In the 1980's the greater Portland area had already begun to become more diverse. And the Portland public schools had many other ethnic groups whose families had just arrived."

"To this day," adds Sally, "our daughters still see Maine as their hometown even though they were 13 and 8 when we moved here. They totally changed from New York to here. They became nature lovers. They love outdoor activities just like all the Mainers. They didn't want brand name clothing. They became very good students. My younger daughter went to Harvard and my older one went to Cornell. And when they were in college and people would ask where are you from, they would say, 'I'm from Maine!' because they are so proud of their hometown."

While Ng became immersed in developing the graduate program at USM, Sally got involved in starting a Chinese School in Portland so that her girls and other Chinese children

in the area could spend a few hours on weekends keeping up with the language and heritage. The school was located in the Congregational Church in South Portland.

There were about fifty students. The school has since grown and moved to a new location, but Sally continues to teach and tutor Chinese at home.

"I have students all the way up to age 70. I'm trained as a scientist but when I started to teach Chinese, I discovered how beautiful this language is. It's evolved over thousands of years. I just want to promote this language to anyone I can touch."

When Sally and Ng became U.S. citizens, they were able to sponsor Sally's parents into to the U.S. By this time, her parents and brothers were living in Argentina.

"Because I went into science it was easy for me to get to the U.S., but my brothers went into business. There was no way they could get into this country. My father was still very afraid in Taiwan. Because of his family's landlord background, because he betrayed the regime, he never felt safe. So they were able to emigrate to Argentina where my brothers opened a factory."

Sally became her parents' caretaker as they got older. Her father lived to the age of 94 and her mother to age 96. Now her daughter, her daughter's husband and twin granddaughters live with Sally and Ng in the third floor rooms they had fixed up for her mother and father. After college, Dawn did her post-graduate studies in Holland where she met her future husband and then worked at Oxfam. After Harvard, Crystal, attended MIT for her doctoral studies and now lives in San Francisco working for the United States Geological Survey.

"It seems like I always have someone to take care of," Sally laughs. "But I am really so happy we moved here. I could devote more time to my family and to my parents in their last stage of life. And I am so happy that my little granddaughters talk to me in Chinese. They speak Dutch to their father and English to their babysitter. It amazes me because my oldest daughter hardly spoke Chinese to me when she was growing up. It was my dream that we would communicate in Chinese one day. Now we are doing that."

Sally and Ng returned to Taiwan during Ng's sabbatical and intend to go to China on his next sabbatical.

"I've had opportunities to go somewhere else to advance my career," Ng states, "but we chose and continue to choose to live here. At USM, I had the opportunity to help develop something new for the university. We were the first graduate science program for the Southern Maine area. It's been very fulfilling career-wise. At age 63 this is obviously going to be the last stage of my career. But as long as I have some contribution to make, I'll be happy to continue doing whatever I can."

"When you grow old you want to go back to your roots," says Sally. "We loved going to Taiwan, mainland China and Malaysia. The societies there have evolved to a different phase. Asia is changing. It's not the way it was when we grew up. The gap between these two worlds is getting smaller... and we as Asian Americans can help them understand America and our values here."







***"I have really good friends in Maine. We do things together. They are like family and that's a big thing."***



# Aspara Kumarage



**A**spara Kumarage was born in Sri Lanka in 1977. She has an older brother and sister. All three are graduates of the University of Maine at Farmington. Aspara works as a database and computer specialist in health policy for the Muskie Institute in Augusta. She has two children, ages two and four.

Aspara was raised in Colombo, a large city and commercial port located on the west coast of the island of Sri Lanka. Her father was a lawyer and her mother was a science and math teacher. Both parents come from large families and Aspara grew up with many cousins and relatives.

“My favorite memories of childhood are lots of ‘make believe’ games with my sister. Compared to my kids, we didn’t have a lot of toys. I think the first thing I wanted to be when I grew up was to be Miss Sri Lanka. Rosy Senanayake, who is from Sri Lanka, became Miss World and

I remember watching on TV and thinking, ‘I’ll be like that and get a crown and a mink coat,’ but I never grew very tall or as pretty. Then for the longest time, I wanted to be president of Sri Lanka. In school, I used to sign my name and then I would put ‘President, 2012!’”

In 1983 civil war broke out in Sri Lanka between the government and the Tamil Tigers, a separatist militant organization fighting to create an independent state in the north and east of the island. For the next twenty-five years, the insurgency caused significant hardships for the country, with an estimated 80,000-100,000 people killed.

“My parents were not the type to say what their values were. We just watched and learned. They were very generous and helped everybody and anybody. I remember in 1983 when the riots started, we hid a lot of people from the other ethnic group, the Tamil, in our house including our neighbor – a father and three children. We were Sinhalese. People, not everyone, went around burning Tamil houses. There was a curfew. I remember thugs standing outside our gates wanting to get in, but my father was respected in the neighborhood and he stood there and said, ‘No, you’re not opening this gate.’ So they just threatened him and left.”

A lot of people who could afford to move or obtain educational scholarships abroad left during this time. Her brother was the first to come to the U.S. to study at the University of Maine at Farmington. Then her sister came three years later. By the time Aspara graduated high school, things had calmed down, but she still wanted to go to college here. She remembers vividly her first days in Maine.

“It was the day after the ice storm – that was ten years ago. My plane got to Portland late at night. It was like, oh my gosh, I’d never left my country before and here I was, flying across the world and traveling alone. I met my brother at the airport in Boston for an hour and he helped me get my connecting flight and assured me someone from UMF would meet me at the airport. It was so scary. It took about three hours to drive from Portland to Farmington, the roads were so icy.”

Aspara arrived at UMF during winter break so the campus was virtually empty.

“I didn’t know how to make a phone call. I didn’t know the cafeteria was open for international students. For about 48 hours I had no clue what was going on. I remember

walking downtown to Remy’s and buying some chocolates.”

Once Monday rolled around and Aspara had attended orientation, she had already made up her mind about Maine.

“My first impression of Maine was the cold, but also of the people who were really friendly. I think Farmington must be the friendliest place on earth. People hold doors for you; when you cross the road, the cars stop. Nobody stops for you in Sri Lanka, unless there’s a policeman. So it was like, wow, these people are really polite, they really go by the rules. And they were curious. They didn’t want to ask too many questions because they didn’t want to sound nosy, but they wanted to know about Sri Lanka because they really didn’t know anything.”

Aspara studied math and computer science at UMF with an art minor. When she graduated in 2001, she had a work visa. She applied for a job as a web designer for Cuddledown, a store in Freeport and at the UMF Maine Health Research Institute. She was offered both positions but chose to work with Dr. Sheena Bunnell at the Institute and moved to Augusta. A year later she took a position at the Muskie Institute as a computer and database specialist. The Department of Health and Human Services contracts with Muskie for analysis and research.

“I work with health data, mostly MaineCare data which is used for state budgeting and reporting to the federal government. For instance, someone will say, ‘tell us how many mothers in this county had at least three prenatal visits’ and so it’s like a mystery to go and find the answer in the claims database. It makes a difference and it’s technical, so I like it.”

In 2008, Aspara’s work visa ran out. She went back to Sri Lanka for a year awaiting approval to return. In April 2010, Aspara was granted permanent residency.

“USM had already started my paperwork but there was some confusion. I don’t think Muskie had done much immigration paperwork before and it’s a huge process. The same day I bought my house in Maine, I received my permanent residency. It was a close call.”

Aspara lives in Augusta with her two children. Her mother comes to Maine often to help with the children and will stay for five months at a stretch.

“It’s expensive to go home or come here, over \$1,500. When I went back to Sri Lanka last year, my parents wanted me to stay and live with them. But I like Maine. It gives me the freedom to do what I want. I feel more independent.”

Aspara is not concerned about raising her children in Maine.

“Culture is a lot of things. At home, they saw my mother wear a sari and my father wear a sarong. They know the food. They have the holidays. I thought with my mother here, and now her friend here too, they would pick up the language. But everybody’s talking English! I don’t want to push it on my kids. When they’re older and I can send them to Sri Lanka for a whole summer, they’ll learn the language and the culture. Really, I don’t want to say to them do this or that. I hope they’ll be good citizens of the world and of this country and be aware that they’re not the center of the universe. They’re young. I just want them to be kids for now.”

From: **Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
Lives: **Augusta, Maine**  
Occupation: **Database and computer specialist, Muskie Institute**





***“I lost my husband but I am lucky. All my children went to college. I have thirteen grandchildren so I am happy.”***

**S**ovann Meas came to Maine in 1981 with her six surviving children as part of the refugee resettlement program. She lost her husband and two children during the repressive regime of Pol Pot. For the past twenty-five years she has been working in the laundry at Maine Medical Center. All of her children, five sons and one daughter, are college graduates. Sovann lives in Scarborough.

“I was born in Battambang, Cambodia in 1941, sometime in August or September. I don’t remember exactly because the papers were destroyed. My father was the mayor. My mother took care of our farm. I had two brothers and four sisters. My parents belonged to the middle class – not rich, not really poor. We always had everything to eat, everything to use, so there was nothing to worry about. My brothers, sisters, and my cousins all lived together, so it was a very happy time.”

Sovann attended school through seventh grade and was married at the age of eighteen.

“My husband saw me when I was at school. He wanted to marry me right then, but my father said, ‘no my daughter is too young.’ He was six years older than me but he waited and when he was a teacher in Battambang, my father said, ‘You are to be married’ and at that time, you have to listen to your parents. I only met him for the first time the day before we married.”

They had nine children – eight survived. Sovann stayed home taking care of the children. Two of her sisters also came to live with them and help out with the large family.

“When Pol Pot came in 1974, we had to leave. They told us to get out of the town and move to the jungle and turn the land into farmland. We had to take all the trees out by the roots and burn them. It was very, very hard. Two of my children died. There was no food. My husband got sick. There was no medicine. He passed away in 1975. During that time, a million people died.”

# Sovann Meas



For the next four years, Sovann and her remaining six children managed to stay alive working in the rice fields. When the Vietnamese army came into Cambodia, she made a daring gamble.

"I hear the gunshots. The Khmer Rouge captain says, 'Go, go, they'll get us.' But I wait for my children and I go in the opposite direction, towards the gunfire. I said, 'let's go to the Vietnamese. They will kill Pol Pot.' There were two families with me and we had to cross over a bridge to get to them. I'm so scared. But the Vietnamese told us where to go, where we would be safe."

By now the Vietnamese had captured the town where Sovann was born. So after three days and two nights of walking with her children, she arrived home.

"My youngest was five, my oldest was about sixteen. I see my mother. I see my sister. There's no house. They're

all destroyed. We stayed for four months but became afraid the Khmer Rouge would return, so we escaped again, from my town to the border of Thailand. It was another three day walk."

"At that time, there was no refugee camp there, so we just lived on the border, with no government, nothing. We bought some plastic to make a cover to sleep under. I had a little gold that was given me by my husband, which I sold to buy things to make simple desserts which I could then sell. I didn't make enough money to buy clothes, but enough to buy food."

When the refugee camp was built, they were given some bamboo and plastic to make shelters. Sovann's brother had a relative who was married to an American working in Southeast Asia for many years. He spoke Khmer, Thai, French and Vietnamese and was assigned to the camps to document the names of survivors.

"When he came and saw my brother and his wife – they cried together. They were so happy." He helped them with the resettlement process. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1981 Sovann's family was re-located to Maine.

"Over there I pray to God all the time, 'Help me bring my family here.' I don't know this country, what it looks like. I thought it would be like my country. But Maine is very different – very cold, different laws – no walking on the road, no living wherever you want, no rice. That's all my children have been eating all this time, rice and maybe one leg of chicken in it to make soup. But here, there are all kinds of chickens. They couldn't understand how we could have a whole chicken to eat."

They were sponsored by a church in Scarborough and became very close to their sponsor and the community. "People from the church were very nice. They brought my children so much clothes that they didn't have to buy any until they went to college."

At first Sovann lived in the church because no one wanted to rent a place to a widow with six children. "They said, 'we're afraid you'll destroy the house because six children is very hard.' But they don't know Cambodian children. They don't know my children."

Finally they found a Vietnamese landlord who would rent to them. Six months later Sovann joined forces with her brother and sister – all of whom now had jobs in Maine – to buy a house together.

"I asked my sponsor about how to buy a house, because I don't know about that. But I hear that you don't need all the money. You can put money down and pay the rest month-by-month. We had \$10,000 saved between all of us including nieces. He said, 'okay, you can buy.' So we begin looking for a house and found a three story house for \$62,000."

Sovann's first job was as a seamstress and then as a housekeeper until she found a position in the laundry at Maine Medical Center. Sharing expenses and living arrangements worked out well, but eventually her brother and sister wanted to buy houses of their own. By then, her youngest son was pressing Sovann to do the same since he found it difficult to study with all the noise and people in the house.

She told him, 'What are you stupid? How can I buy a house – only me? They will never sell one to us.' But her other son countered, 'Mom, you want to buy a house – then we have to find money.' And they did.

Everyone in the family went to work and gave all their paychecks to their mother. Her sons worked picking strawberries and beans. The youngest two planted tomatoes on a farm at \$2.50 per hour on weekends. Another did lawn work in Cape Elizabeth. For a year they never bought anything extra and had saved up enough for a down payment on a house of their own.

Now Sovann has thirteen grandchildren. Two of her sons graduated from USM. Two went to college in Boston. Number five went to Colby and number six went to Bates. Her oldest son works at Fairchild Semiconductor. Another is an engineer. One is a machinist. Another studied veterinary medicine, but is now building houses. Her daughter is a clothes designer and has studied in Paris. Four out of six have chosen to live and work in Maine. The other two live and work in Massachusetts.

"How did I do that? Raise my children alone and all go to college? I don't know. God help me. They listened to me, but not only, me – their father. They love their father and I always would say, 'Hey, do you remember your father. Now, go to school. You have to learn. You have to get a good job, get good grades, get a good family so when someone says, who's that? They'll know, that you are your father's child.'"

From: **Battambang, Cambodia**  
Lives: **Scarborough, Maine**  
Occupation: **Housekeeping, Maine Medical Center**



***“Both our children were born in Maine. We love this area. It’s a great place to raise kids. A great place for a business, obviously.”***



Alex and Sharon Yeung are a young couple in their thirties. They currently own three pet stores; Maine Pet and Aquarium in Ellsworth, Lu Lu Pet & Boutique in the Bangor Mall, and Pet Pro in the Bangor Airport Mall. They have about a dozen full-time employees. They live in Ellsworth and have two small children. Alex and Sharon actually lived on the same street in Fujian Province, China but never met until they were in the United States.

“My father was a very reputable doctor,” states Alex, “but under Communist rule, it didn’t give him much opportunity. He was not progressing and he was very dissatisfied. So he gave up practicing and fled to Hong Kong. Back then it was difficult to get paperwork, so many people would just escape by swimming over.”

He worked in Hong Kong for seven years and did fairly well. When he re-joined the family in China, he was determined to get to the United States.

“He decided to smuggle himself out of China with a few other parties through a snakehead.”

A snakehead is the term used to describe a person who helped smuggle Chinese out of the country. In the past snakeheads were generally regarded in China as honest business people providing a valuable service.

“It took six months. They went to Italy and from there they went to the Caribbean and then to Costa Rica. They dropped him off on an island and then used a speedboat at the crack of dawn to reach Miami. From there he took a bus to New York City.”

It took his dad ten years to establish himself in the United States and gain citizenship.

“He had a long term plan, become a citizen and then bring his family here. We had to move to Hong Kong for a year in order to be able to leave Mainland China. I think we had to have British citizenship in order to leave and Hong Kong had a better relationship with the U.S. at that time.”

Alex was eight when he came to the U.S.

“It was a happy time in my village in China back then. You go to school and come home, play with friends and run around everywhere. There are rice paddies and mountains. But here everything was different. Everything is designed for ‘driving distance’ not walking distance.”

The family settled in Huntington, Long Island outside of New York City. By then, his father had opened a restaurant. Alex was the only Asian in the entire school.

# Alex & Sharon Yeung



"Teachers try to help and you can pretend on the outside, but inside, it's not easy at all. You come from an area where you know everybody. You speak the language. You understand the culture. Here you can't communicate, you can't express yourself. If you need to go to the bathroom or want a drink of water, who are you going to tell? So at a young age I learned to hold things back. My parents pretty much didn't know about anything so they just dropped me off at school and let the teacher deal with it. And for the teachers, immigration was so new. There really were no guidelines."

Sharon's father was a construction worker and moved the family to Hong Kong when she was two. He filed and was granted the necessary paperwork to come to the United States as a chef. Once he had established himself here, he brought his family over. Sharon was ten. It was 1989 and winter in New Jersey.

"There was snow and the houses

here were different. First, there's heat in the house. We didn't need heat or coats where I lived. I remember thinking, 'okay, so I have to accept this, whether I like it or not. I have to adapt.' But that also comes with a price. Back then the culture of America wasn't as tolerant as it is now."

"Or," adds Alex, "if there is racism, it's more hidden. I think it was more difficult for my generation coming here from a foreign country than it is today. You always hear the successful stories, the positive side. You never hear the ugly side – the untold story of how we started and how we got here today. But that's what made us stronger, believe it or not."

"It's never an easy start," Sharon explains, "I would say most people that came in, came with a goal. And for us – and probably for Asians in particular, we like to accomplish that goal and most do, one way or another."

After Sharon graduated high school, she went to college and got a degree in fashion design. Alex studied biology in Rhode Island, but dropped out after three years. By this time his parents had moved to Ellsworth, Maine.

"It was getting too populated in the south- too many restaurants. Asians were migrating to the U.S. in very big numbers in the 1990's because the Communists opened the door. Millions of people emigrated. Everybody's opening up a restaurant and there's just about one on every block. So my parents decided to take a chance in the north and they found a spot near the coast – they always loved the coast. They came to Ellsworth, maybe fifteen years ago."

When Alex left college, his parents encouraged him to go into business. Right next door to his parents business was a pet shop. The owner wanted to retire.

"When I showed up, the place is already closed, so they were eager for someone to try, even at half the rent. So I took the risk, not even knowing how to run a business."

It was slow-going at first. "Business was so bad. I wasn't making ends meet, but I held onto it and it got better. Having an Asian run a pet shop wasn't that popular either. But one way I was different from other mom and pop stores is that I had a biology background. So I could answer questions and as my reputation spread I started doing well. I was young and ambitious and thought I could handle a second store – this one in

Brewer. But I was burning out, working too much."

His parents encouraged Alex to close the second shop. Shortly thereafter he married Sharon. Their parents, who had known each other back in Fujian Province, introduced them. Sharon was working for a design firm. They hit it off. She left her job and moved to Maine.

"Now that we were married and had more hands and more brainpower, we were able to open another store. And even though, right now the economy isn't doing so well, we're hanging on because we have such a good reputation."

"I think," says Sharon, "that because of our families – both of our parents have strong business backgrounds and own their own businesses, and we all started at a young age, hanging around watching and working after school, that business is in our blood. We work harder because we know what it takes to be successful. We don't take anything for granted."

"There's a lot of pluses to owning your own business," Alex adds "and minuses. For the first five years I ran the business all by myself with maybe four or five days off. Even after we were married, we ran it by ourselves for three years."

Now they employ full-time and part-time staff at all three shops, but the work is still very much hands-on. Maine Pet and Aquarium is moving to a larger location in Ellsworth this winter. Alex has also managed to go back to school and earn his college degree.

"We still only take off a few days a year. But we're financially stable."

Working so much, the grandparents have taken an active role in helping to raise Sharon and Alex's two small children.

"We still have a house in China. We've only been back once or twice, but we really try to keep our language and culture. We have Chinese satellite TV. Alex's parents are now retired and they go back to China in the winter. For the past several years, they took the grandchildren with them. So our kids actually went to school there for two years and came back in the summer. Both our boys speak fluent Mandarin. We're going to try very hard to make that stick."

"In my parents generation, owning a business in the U.S. was pretty much limited to just a few things, restaurants, nail salons. I am still the first Fujianese to own a pet shop. Still the only one, I think. So far, nobody has followed in my footsteps."

From: **Fujian Province, China**  
Lives: **Ellsworth, Maine**  
Occupations: **Owners, Maine Pet and Aquarium, LuLu Pet & Boutique, and Pet Pro**



***"I have been lucky in spite of all the tough stuff so I'm repaying. As long as I am of service, I feel happy."***





# Ngo Vinh Long



**N**go Vinh Long is a social activist, a professor of history at the University of Maine at Orono, and a leading international expert on Southeast Asia. At the age of sixteen, during the build-up to the Vietnam War, he worked with a team of mapmakers for the United States military. In 1964, he was the first Vietnamese to ever attend Harvard College. During the war, he remained a critical opponent of the war and helped organize the first anti-war march on Washington. He is a frequent expert and guest on the BBC, Radio France International, Voice of America and Radio Free Asia as well as organizing international conferences on current Asian issues. He lives in Bangor with his wife, Mai Nguyen, a social worker, and their two children.

From: **Vinh Long Province, Vietnam**  
Lives: **Bangor, Maine**  
Occupation: **Professor of History, University of Maine**

Professor Long was born in 1944 in southeast Vietnam near the Mekong Delta. He was one of eight children.

“My father came from Hanoi which is now the capital of Vietnam

and my mother came from Hue which used to be the capital of the last dynasty of Vietnam. She was related to the royal family. They came south and I was born in Vinh Long province, hence my name. They were social activists. They organized workers and poor people during the French Colonial Period. It was a resistance movement and you could say they were revolutionaries.”

Long had a difficult childhood. After WWII and the end of Japanese occupation, the French attempted to regain control. This led to the first Indo-China war that lasted for nine years – from 1945 until 1954.

“We were in the countryside. My parents had to go into hiding for fear they would be killed, so they had to run around all the time. I was often left alone by myself at age four taking care of my younger siblings so it was hard. I didn’t have much food either – not more than one meal until I was 16 so that’s probably why I’m about six or seven inches shorter than my father.”

“There was schooling for people who followed the French, for the rich, for the political, economic elites. But for us and especially because my parents opposed French colonization, I was basically home schooled.”

Despite being against the French, Long’s father idolized the United States and encouraged Long to learn English.

“We would walk, father and son, for about a hundred miles from the Mekong Delta up to Saigon to look for English texts. When the British came to Vietnam, they had a lot of novels that they brought with them and also Shakespearean plays. We couldn’t understand Shakespeare, but we got a number of Charles Dickens novels. We got a small dictionary that the British used for talking with the French – you know, English to French, French to English. No guide to pronunciation at all. *Great Expectations* appealed to me. So, my father and I memorized the whole novel in one year. That’s how we learned to speak English.”

Long also taught himself French, Chinese and later, Russian. Because of his knowledge of English, he was one of the best Vietnamese English speakers when the Americans came. He also had an excellent grasp of mathematics.

“I was made the second in command of a team of military mapmakers. I made

detailed military maps for the United States and went around Vietnam, part of Laos, part of Cambodia, and made these maps for three and a half years. I started at the age of 16, so I was very young.”

It was during these travels around the countryside that Long became convinced that what the United States was planning to do in Vietnam was a mistake; that it would be disastrous for Vietnam, for the United States, and for the whole of Southeast Asia.

“I told my various American bosses, who were American ambassadors to Vietnam, how what the United States was doing in Vietnam would create more enemies. They advised me to leave the country, otherwise, ‘one of these days, you’ll be imprisoned.’ So, I said, ‘Where can I go?’ And they said, ‘Well, anywhere.’ So I applied to Harvard University. I took a national exam and came out very high. At that time Harvard was very exclusive. They only accepted 25 international students.”

When Ngo Vinh Long arrived in the United States, he was surrounded by reporters. There were stories of him in the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald* and the English papers in Vietnam; the *Saigon Daily News* and the *Saigon Post*.

“I arrived at the Boston airport on Columbus Day. And my picture was five by seven, right smack in the middle of the paper saying how I was the first Vietnamese ever to attend Harvard and it was quite a privilege and how the U.S. Embassy had helped me to get my visa – you know, taking credit. So, when I was interviewed at the airport, I said I was very grateful to the United States and Harvard, but because I was grateful, I wanted to warn the American people that the United States would soon be sending troops to Vietnam. And that if the United States was going to do that, it would be a very long war because the Vietnamese were not going to give in. Because I voiced my opinion, there were many people in high places who wanted to find out how much I knew and what I was talking about.”

At Harvard there were people on campus that were advising the United States about policy in Vietnam including Henry Kissinger; McGeorge Bundy, national security advisor to both President Kennedy and President Johnson; his brother, William Bundy who was in the State Department in charge of Asian politics; and professor William Yandell Eliot who was a former Undersecretary of Defense.

“So, you name it, I knew most of these people and I tried to brief them about what was going on in Vietnam. They took a lot of my information, but they disagreed with my analysis. They thought the United States had the power to win in Vietnam and I said, no, you can destroy the country, but you cannot win.”

In 1968 Long, while still a student, decided to write his first book entitled, *Before the Revolution: the Vietnamese Peasants Under the French*. It became a classic in the field of Asian studies right away and was intended to be a cautionary tale for the United States. In it, Long tried to show that what happened to the Vietnamese peasants during French colonialism would precondition them to oppose any future occupation.

“It was very clear to me that the more the United States was doing, the more the Vietnamese would resist. But Henry Kissinger said to me, ‘Long, you are very naive. Every country, like every human being, has a breaking point, Vietnam included.’ So, I said, ‘How can you say that? You’re talking about human lives. How many people do you have to kill before Vietnam breaks?’ I decided that I just could not continue to try to talk sense to these people and became an activist. I met with people like Professor Noam Chomsky at



MIT, Professor Howard Zinn, who died earlier this year, and a few other people. We toured the Northeast, analyzing, talking with people about what was happening in Vietnam and how the United States was going to be sending massive numbers of troops to Vietnam. These conversations were known at the time as 'teach-ins'. And then when the United States finally sent Marines to Vietnam in big numbers in March of 1965, we organized the first orderly demonstration in Washington, DC. There were 25,000 Americans marching in D.C."

After that and because of that, Long lost his visa and Saigon withdrew his passport. The U.S. Immigration Service demanded he be deported. Long used his contacts to plead with the authorities to let him stay.

"They called me a Communist because I was anti-war. Professor Huntington at Harvard and others wrote to the State Department saying that I was only going through a radical phase and that, you know, someday I would be the foreign minister of Vietnam or higher. My professor, the foremost Asian Studies scholar in the country, advised me just to tone it down, keep quiet. He had been the head of the OSS (Office of Strategic Service) in China, the predecessor of the CIA. He was very active in supporting Chiang Kai Shek, but when Mao took over, he still said we should normalize relations with China. Right away, he was accused of being a Communist and brought before the House of Un-American Activities and his political career was destroyed. But I told him, 'Professor Fairbanks, you are my teacher and the United States is my teacher. You understand the Asian tradition to respect the teacher even more than the father. So, I respect you. I respect the United States I'm doing this for you and for my father because the sooner we can end the war, the less suffering there will be."

The U.S. government came to an agreement with Harvard that as long as Ngo Vinh Long remained a student in good standing, he could stay until he finished his education. So Long stayed at Harvard for an undergraduate degree, a master's degree and ultimately his Ph.D. in East Asian History and Far Eastern Languages.

As the war escalated, he continued to stay active in the anti-war effort and lobby the White House and Congress. In 1971, along with a number of friends, he helped bring representatives of Oxfam England to Boston and helped open a branch in this country. He

remained an advisor to Oxfam America until 1990. He also helped found the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars that was very active against the war, but is now mainly a scholarly association. Back in Vietnam, his parents had to go into hiding yet again.

"My father had a very hard time because if he hadn't gone underground, he would have been arrested because of me. But he said that I was doing something my conscience asked me to do and so they were very supportive. He died about ten years ago. My mother is still alive; she's 91 and lives in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)."

During the war years there were also many attempts on Long's life.

"I made sure I did not formally finish my thesis until after the war was over. And after that, I didn't have any place to go, so I stayed in the U.S. I never had a real childhood or any childhood friends in Vietnam."

"After Harvard I became a freelance writer and documentary film maker, a carpet layer, a rough carpenter for about five years. Then finally, scholars in the field, my colleagues all over the world, said I have to come back to academics. I thought, 'if I want to teach, I don't want to teach people at Harvard or Yale or other places where they have good teachers already and where there are privileged kids that don't need my support.' So, I applied for a job here at University of Maine in 1985 and I got it, and I have been here ever since."

Professor Long continues to be engaged in various projects in the U.S. and in Vietnam. During the 2000-2001 academic year he served as a Fulbright scholar in Vietnam. Every morning he gets up early and reads a slew of international newspapers to stay up to date. He is a frequent guest expert on international radio and TV. For the past fifteen years he has been organizing international conferences on pressing Southeast Asian issues. Right now his interest is focused on China's increasing influence in the South China Sea which borders China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. This year he is organizing a conference at Yale University and at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University in Singapore.

"I have been lucky in spite of all the tough stuff and so I'm repaying. Repaying the United States and the American people for the privilege of being here and also for the support a lot of my friends gave me during those very rough years. During the Vietnam War years, I basically travelled everywhere. I jokingly say, if I were to quit my job now and just buy an old car and travel around visiting friends, I would be able to live off them for the rest of my life. So, that's rewarding, I think, you know, it's been very rewarding."

# Atif & Farzeen Sheikh



**A**tif Sheik and his wife Farzeen live in Waterville with their three children, where Atif owns a Subway franchise. He employs between 10-15 people. They grew up in Pakistan and came to Maine via Plano, a town outside Dallas, Texas.

"The business brought me to Maine. I began by working in a Subway in Texas. This was a good business opportunity and it is going well so far. It has been good to me. Work is work. You have to have a job and stay in it and here I can make my own hours and enjoy a lot of flexibility."

One of Atif's brothers was already in the States when he arrived in 1990. Farzeen came in 2000. All of her siblings live in the U.S., but her parents are still in Pakistan. Farzeen also worked in a Subway in Texas, but is now a stay-at-home mom.

"Family is the most important to us. We feel very connected to our home country. We plan to visit every

year, but sometimes it's once every two or three years. It all depends on work. But the good thing is that our families come to visit us, too."

"Back in Texas there was a much larger Pakistani community so it was easier to teach children the language and celebrate the holidays. We're both Muslims so we try to raise our children with our cultural habits as much as we can, but it's challenging."

Atif has a business degree in accounting and believes that running a business is pretty much the same everywhere. Maine, however, does pose some unique challenges.

"The hardest thing is that there is no growth. There is no population growth, no economic growth. It's hard to plan any expansion."

Coming to Maine from Texas was a shock at first but now they are enjoying a the quiet lifestyle.

"Everything in Texas is about bigger – bigger house, bigger space. Maine was like going back in time, relaxed, slow-paced. There were not a lot of rental options when we first came so that was bothersome, but now we live in a comfortable house."

"In the 1970's Islamabad was only a small city, less than 10,000 people – surrounded by jungle and streams and deer. It is a lot like that here. The environment here is ideal for raising a family."

Atif agrees with Farzeen. "Maine is a beautiful place. I don't know why there aren't more people coming here. Maybe more business opportunities will help. Maybe if Maine advertises its beauty and what it can offer, more people will come. Life is simple and easy-paced. If you have family, you'll like it here."

Atif and Farzeen are also satisfied with their children's education in Maine. They believe there is less peer pressure than in big cities.

"Children here seem to be focused more on music, sports and reading. Our children have settled well. I want them to enjoy where they live and be proud of where they come from. This is their culture now, but we also speak Urdu at home. Whether they become professional or not, they should be nice people most of all. Get a good education, go to college and do whatever. Stay here or go back to Pakistan – it's their call."

Atif's dream is to own a hotel someday. He's not set on any particular location, but wants to remain open to new opportunities.

"The only thing we miss sometimes is a larger Pakistani community – the social network, the markets, the functions, the community events. There is a small community here, but people move in and out, so there doesn't seem to be any net gain. It's all job related."

From: **Pakistan**  
Lives: **Waterville, Maine**  
Occupation: **Owner, Subway Franchise**



***"Business is business. It has a structure. If there is business help for everybody, then immigrants can gain from it."***





***"I wouldn't go anywhere else. There's no place like Maine because people here are very kind."***

Indriani Demers, who goes by the name of Ina, lives in Wiscasset and works for the Portland School District. Four years ago, she started a volunteer-run evening program teaching English to adults. Born in Indonesia to an upper class family of Chinese extraction, she experienced first hand many of Indonesia's 20<sup>th</sup> Century political and social upheavals. She was born in 1949 in the city of Semarang, on the north coast of the island of Java. Until 1942, Indonesia was a Dutch colony. Her parents attended Dutch schools and Dutch was Ina's native tongue. Ina was educated in Catholic convent schools where she also learned English and Indonesian. She remembers a pleasant early childhood, a huge extended family, and summers spent in her aunts and uncles bungalows in the mountains of Indonesia.

Japan occupied Indonesia during World War II from March 1942 until the end of the war in 1945. Initially, many people welcomed the Japanese as liberators from their Dutch colonial masters. This sentiment quickly changed as the occupation turned out to be equally oppressive.

"It was like going from the frying pan to the fire. We thought the Japanese would help us because we are Asian, but it was really bad. A lot of people who spoke Dutch and had money like my family were put in Japanese internment camps, were tortured or treated very badly. After the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the Japanese left."

Following World War II, Indonesia became an independent country.

"After independence, we couldn't speak Dutch anymore. There was a black market library where we could get Dutch books and newspapers. My education up till then was

very European. My parents could only read and write in Dutch."

Sukarno became the first president of Indonesia and served from 1945 to 1965." He was a good president. He embraced Chinese people like us who had lived in Indonesia for many generations, because, no matter what, we contributed to the country. We had businesses and helped in many ways."

Throughout his presidency there were factions against Sukarno. In 1965 there were widespread rumors that the government was leaning too far to the left.

"It was fearful. In October 1965, we heard the news that the palace had been taken over by the military under General Suharto, and that the President was under house-arrest."

Unfortunately for Ina's family, the new government declared that all Chinese in Indonesia were Communists. Mass killings began. Ina was 17 years old.

"My dad came home and said, 'Close all the windows. Close all the doors. Lock the gate, everything.' They marked all the Chinese houses. We have to mark our gate but our house is behind two gates – iron and cement gates so they couldn't get in. We hid in an inside bathroom and lived there for 26 days."

"People who had smaller places were all killed. They knock on the door. You open the door. They see you're Chinese and they shoot you. Our housekeepers were second and third generation working and living with us. They were more loyal to us than anybody. I'm so glad. They went out and got food for us, otherwise we would not be living."

Over a half a million people were killed during the communist purge. Any remaining

# Indriani Demers



Chinese were ordered to change their names into Indonesian names, completely embrace the Indonesian culture, or move to China.

"We didn't even speak Chinese! So we decided to stay and changed our names. I picked Indriani because it had some of the same letters as my given name. Everything Chinese in the country had to go, any signs, any Chinese letters, dolls, toys – get rid of it like it never existed."

Life returned to normal after the purge but it was never the same for Ina.

"The freedom is gone because as a Chinese, they call you names. I didn't know it then, but now that I'm an adult, I see why they resented us and wanted us out. At that time, the Chinese in Indonesia were only about 12% of the population but we held like 85% of the wealth."

Perhaps because of her minority ethnic status, her European education,

or the events of 1965, Ina never saw a future for herself in Indonesia.

"My mother used to watch Rock Hudson films, Bonanza and My Friend Flicka on TV and I always said, 'I want to go to America.' She'd say, 'Well, then you'd better beef up your English. English will be the language of the world'.

Ina went to college in Semarang, studied English and became an English teacher. One night Ina's friend asked her to accompany her and an American man on a date and act as translator. He was an electrical engineer from Rumford, Maine. Soon they were dating, married and living in Maine.

"It's October, it's cold and I couldn't understand anything anybody is saying! I taught English in Indonesia but it all has a different intonation here, different structure."

Shortly thereafter her husband was sent to Saudi Arabia to work on missile defense systems. They lived there for three years. When they returned to Maine, Ina got a job at the J.C. Penney store in Brunswick.

"I was surprised. They could have hired some beautiful young white woman. In 1974, there were not too many people looking like me in Bath, Maine. So I felt like wow, this is a nice place. The store manager was like a father to me, leading me this way and that saying, 'you know, this is a good time for you to do this, would you like more training.' So I moved up the ladder, from the bottom up."

Ina worked at Penney's for seven years. She became a bookkeeper and then assistant merchandiser for the children's department. She loved her customers.

"Even now when I see them in Wiscasset or Portland, they still remember me."

In 1979 her husband died. A few years later, Ina married a co-worker at J.C. Penney's. At age 36, her first and only child was born.

"I was a stay at home mom, but of course I couldn't stay home," she laughs, "so I took a graveyard shift job, a night job at Zayre's, a retail store like Wal-Mart, stocking shelves. I worked from 11 to 7 so my husband could leave at eight to go to work and my child doesn't have to go to a sitter."

When her daughter entered kindergarten in Wiscasset, Ina began to volunteer a few hours a week at the school. When it was discovered Ina had previously been a teacher, she was asked to apply as a substitute.

"What is that? In Indonesia there are no substitutes. Teachers are never ill!"

She worked as a substitute in the Wiscasset and Dresden primary schools for as many as 160 out of 175 school days. She did this for ten years. Throughout she still hoped to become a real, full-time Maine teacher.

"Back in 1975, I tried to get into the University of Southern Maine. They had never seen transcripts from another country. They said, 'We don't know where to put you.' I have a bachelor degree. I almost had my master's degree, the only thing missing is my thesis. I said, 'start me from scratch.' They said, 'well, we can't read your high school diploma.' 'But I was in college. Here is my diploma and my transcript from college.' But they said 'no, go see this person, go see that person.' After three places, I said, they're not ready so that's why I had to work at a retail store. When it was 1982 and I have my citizenship I thought they would take me. I went back to the University and they said, 'Tell me the whole thing'. Five times I had to see people. Nothing happened. So I kind of pushed that aside again and I tried again in 1985 and then in 1986. Always the same thing."

In 1998, Ina attended a college fair for high school students. She was the oldest person there but she went to the USM booth anyway. She was instructed to bring all her papers to an interview at the college.

"I went to see this person and she said, 'Mrs. Demers, don't you remember me?'"No', I said. 'I'm Kate. I was in your class, when you were subbing in Wiscasset. I was in the sixth grade. You were the nicest teacher.'"

By the spring of 2000, Ina had graduated from USM and in 2001 she began working for the Portland Public Schools. She has K-8 teaching certification and is an endorsed ESL teacher. However she still feels under-utilized.

"I work in a program called Read 180 at the East End Community School. It's an intervention to help ESL kids boost up their language. I like it, but I want to do more."

Four years ago, Ina started a class for adults needing to improve their English-speaking skills. The class is held two nights a week in the community room at Whole Foods in Portland. She works with USM to provide student volunteers to the program as part of their service-learning credit. Volunteers also come from the community.

"I have a retired nurse, a retired CPA, people from everywhere. I only take American people as volunteers because the people in the class need to be exposed to the American sounds. Whole Foods has been very generous with the space and sometimes they come in and give us snacks."

Ina still returns to Indonesia every few years to visit family. Her husband is retired. Her daughter, Elizabeth is now grown and has a degree in political science and foreign affairs from the University of Maine.

"She's looking at me in a different way now. She used to say, 'Mom, you're just wasting your time. You're not going to be appreciated.' That was when she was a teenager, now she is 25. She is an American. She was born here. She doesn't have any accent. Last year she was in Indonesia teaching English. Now she is going to teach English in Korea."

"I want to help all my students have higher aspirations. Helping them get the services they deserve and perhaps not make them feel like because they don't know English they are dumb. Teaching is my profession and advocating is in my blood now. I feel like I owe it to the community because the American community has been good to me."

From: **Indonesia**  
Lives: **Wiscasset, Maine**  
Occupation: **ESL Teacher, Portland Public Schools**





***"It's hard to make friends in such a close tight-knit community. But once you make a friend in New England, it's a friend for life."***

# Yueying Bloomer



**Y**ueying Bloomer lives in Fort Fairfield. She studied criminal justice and accounting at the University of Maine at Presque Isle and worked as a legal assistant at the law firm of Bemis and Rossignol. She's now at home following the birth of her second child. Her husband, Mark Bloomer works for the National Weather Service in Caribou. She grew up in Guangzhou, China.

"I was born in 1980, the year of the monkey, on the tropical island of Haihan in China. My friends called it 'Little Hawaii'. We're a working class family. We moved to Guangzhou when I was two. My mother was a secretary of a fishing and shipping

company. My dad passed away when I was seven, so my mom raised my sister and me. She never re-married. Both my sister and mother still live in China."

"Guangzhou is a big city now, but then it was more suburban. We would swim in the river and pick

oranges. We had lots of fun."

Mandarin is the official language of China, but Cantonese was the spoken language in Yueying's province so she learned both. She was also taught English at school. She remembers her family as being not particularly religious, but very spiritual.

"The Buddhism philosophy is embedded in everyday life. My mother was always full of sayings, like 'to be a good person, have good moral character', 'you reap what you sow', 'where there's a will, there's a way' and 'don't give your promise easily, but if you do, keep it' so I go by the principles that she taught me."

Education in China was standard for everyone, but unlike here, students stay with each other throughout the twelve grades and there is no individual choice regarding classes or subjects.

After high school, Yueying got a job and attended college at night. She studied hotel management and worked for four years as a receptionist at the White Swan Hotel on the Shamian Island peninsula. The American consulate was located next door.

"Everybody who wanted a visa for the United States needed to go there. It was a five star international hotel that received a lot of foreign and government delegations so it provided me an opportunity to speak, explore and practice English."

During this period, Yueying began a correspondence with Mark. After a year and a half, he came to China so they could meet and visit her family. He proposed and she accepted.

"I wanted to see what life would be like here, so I came on a K-1 visa that allows me three months to decide whether I wanted to go through with the marriage and stay in the United States. It was late June. It was northern Maine. It was a beautiful summer time. We had about forty acres of land and we lived in a tree house!"

"We decided to get married in September. My husband is the nicest guy I've ever met in my entire life. Of course, I think that if I came in January, that might be a totally different story!"

Yueying's goal was to submerge herself in her new community, go back to school, get a job, get a car, understand the culture and blend in. She worked at a Chinese restaurant and enrolled at the University of Maine at Presque Isle where she majored in criminal

justice and accounting. In her senior year, she interned at the District Attorney's office. After a few months she was offered a position as a part-time victims' advocate. In 2009 she began working as a legal assistant for the law firm of Bemis and Rossignol.

"There are two paths I may want to take. One is to become an attorney and the other is become an accountant. The job at the district attorney's office gave me a taste of what the prosecution side of being an attorney means. Right now my short term goal would be to become a paralegal and take on more in-depth legal research. My writing skills have been polished tremendously since I started doing this work because legal writing is very different from writing a letter to your mom. I liked the clients as well. They are characters and have funny stories to tell. Some were kind of blunt, but you were never bored."

It's been seven years since Yueying moved to Aroostook County and she has not been back to China. With work, school, and two babies, it hasn't been feasible. In the fall Yueying will be going back to school to pursue a career in accounting.

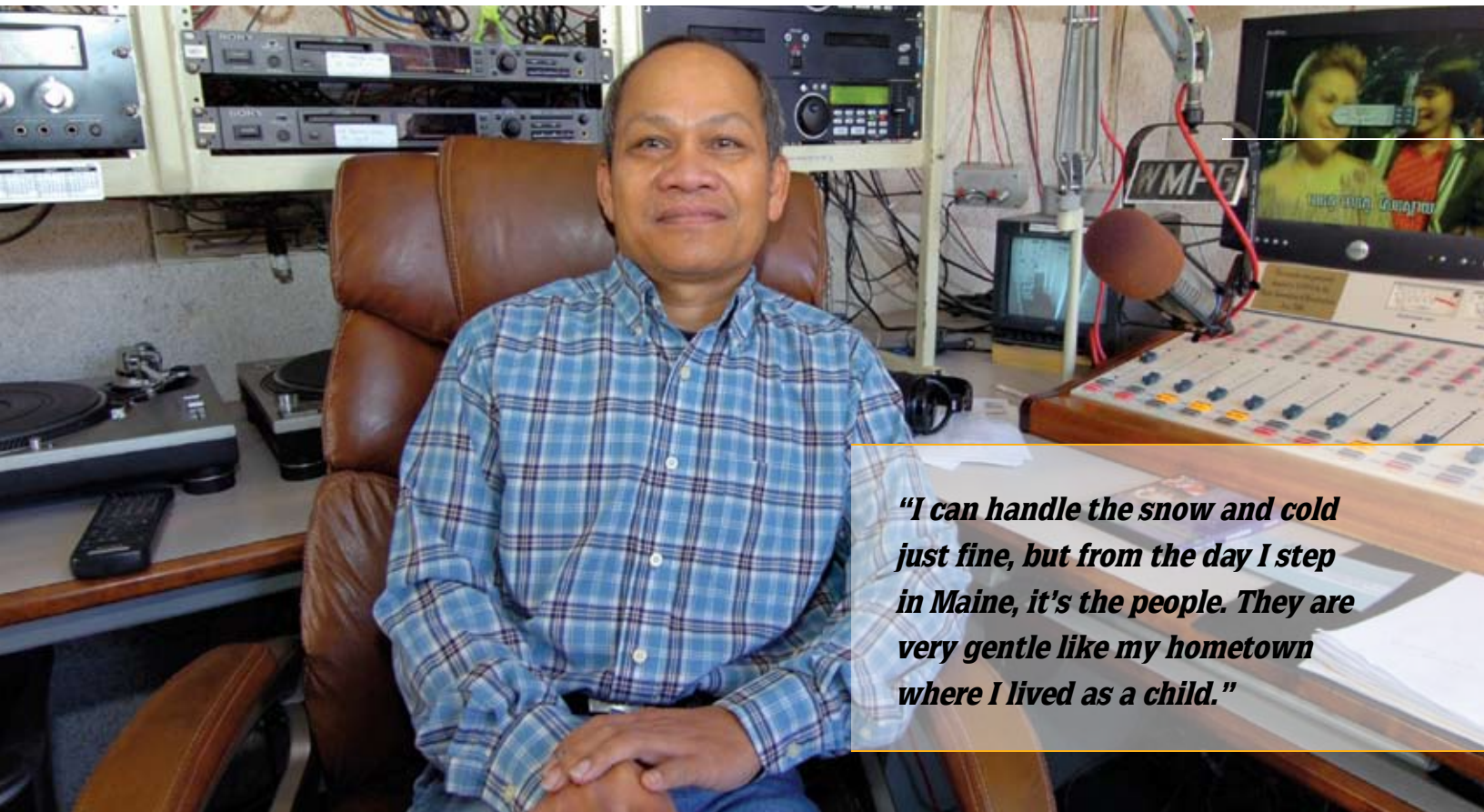
"I miss the food and fruit of China so much. But Mark and I plan to stay and raise our family here and it's easier now with the internet. My mom's been here and we hope to have her back again soon. There aren't many Chinese in Aroostook County – a couple of professors and people who own the restaurants. I don't want to lose my heritage. I try to speak to my daughter in Chinese and I recite poems and sing to her a lot. I'd like to try court reporting interpreting services too so I can use my own language in a useful way and on a professional level."

From: **Hainan, China**

Lives: **Fort Fairfield, Maine**

Occupation: **Legal Assistant**





***“I can handle the snow and cold just fine, but from the day I step in Maine, it’s the people. They are very gentle like my hometown where I lived as a child.”***

**P**irun Sen, like other Cambodians in Maine, was part of the great refugee resettlement program in the United States following the devastation of that country by the Khmer Rouge. He works full-time for the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs at Portland Public Schools as a Home-School Coordinator/Parent Trainer. Before that he was a Burn Technician in the burn unit at Maine Medical Center. A practicing Buddhist, Pirun believes it was not his destiny to die in Cambodia and to that end, he has crafted a life for himself in Maine filled with service to other Cambodians. In 1986, he led Cambodians to build the first Cambodian Temple in Maine. He founded and plays in a traditional Cambodian music and dance troop. He produces a weekly Cambodian news and music show on WMPG. Since the 1990’s, he has been running classes to help Cambodians prepare for their citizenship tests. A few years ago, he decided he wanted to learn about boating and now logs in over 200 hours a year with the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

Pirun was born in 1952 in the Kampong Chhang Province of Cambodia. His father died when he was an infant and his mother died when he was six. He was adopted and raised by his uncle – whom he refers to as his father – and moved to the capital city of Phnom Penh. In 1972 when Pirun was in high school, the Khmer Rouge bombed the defense department.

“They were trying to destroy the building and our house was located about a half a mile from there. It missed the building and fell close to our house. We were afraid the house would catch on fire, so we ran to a pond behind the railroad station. But my mother, grandmother and my uncle kept running back to the house to get more belongings. My great-grandmother and I stayed where we were and lay on the ground. Then another bomb fell like five feet away from me. The soil exploded and I was covered with mud and grasses. My great-grandmother was killed on the spot. I was wounded in the stomach and went unconscious.”

As there were so many injured from the bombings, Pirun lay bleeding for most of the night. When the ambulance finally came there was no more room at any of the hospitals.

“The driver doesn’t know what to do, where to go. But he’s smart. He calls Lon Nol (President of the newly-created Khmer Republic) who says to bring me to Calmette Hospital, which is private and only for the rich. You have to pay cash ahead of time. I worry more about the money than my injury. But the President must have paid because I had surgery, medication and was there for fifteen days.”

During this time, Pirun’s adopted father worked for the railroad. “The railroad workers were treated well by the Khmer Rouge because they weren’t rich and were working class. The country needed the trains for transport. Children of railroad workers were well fed by the Khmer Rouge. We all did hard work, but at least we got fed and educated. Children of railroad workers were sent to medical school.”

Pirun trained for two years and became a nurse. He also got married during this time and had his first child, a son. By then his father was doing maintenance work on what was then the only operational railroad in Battambang Province near the Thai border. After the 1978 Vietnamese invasion and the removal of the Khmer Rouge regime from power, his father was given a job by the Vietnamese, but not Pirun. He and his brother-in-law decided to cross over to Thailand.

“The women stayed behind while we tried to see what would happen. We went across the land mines and past the robbers – in the forest, the thieves are crazy. When we get to the border, I’m thinking, no way would I walk my wife across these land mines. My brother-in-law was an army trainer and well educated in terms of dealing with guns and mines – but he was as scared as me. So I hired a friend of my father to go in after my wife and my infant son.”

They stayed in a small cottage until that was robbed and then moved to the refugee camps where they lived for the next two years.

“If you pass the tests, they move you from there to what we called transit camp – which means that you are ready to be put on a plane and resettled. There were six of us in all – my wife, my son, my mother-in-law, my wife’s brother, and our new baby daughter.”

# Pirun Sen



"They gave us two options. One is to let the ambassador decide where you'll go and you'll go quickly. If you pick on your own, like let's say California, then it takes a long time. I just wanted to leave. Any state in the United States. Just get out of here! As soon as I got the letter to go to Maine, I ran to my friend, Kyle Coble, who was a doctor in the camp and he says, 'Oh, Pirun, you are going to freeze!' And he was from Kansas! So for two months I hid that information from my family, I kept it to myself that we were going to such a cold place because I was afraid they wouldn't want to go."

"It was September 17, 1981. I remember the date. We came to Portland and stayed at the Chestnut Street Church."

From: **Kampong Chhang Province, Cambodia**

Lives: **Portland, Maine**

Occupation: **Parent/Community Specialist, Portland Public Schools**

Pirun got CAN training at Viking Nursing Home in Cape Elizabeth and his first job in Maine was as a nursing assistant for a medical personnel pool. Fortunately, Pirun had good English skills. He soon got a full-time job at the Barron Center, a long-term care

facility in Portland. A year later, he got a call from Maine Medical Center and worked in the Burn Unit alternating night, day and weekend shifts for nine years. His wife went to work at Gillespie Farm in the daytime and in the bakery at night.

"One day my car got stuck in the snow, like seven o'clock in the morning on my way to work at Maine Med. People came out with their pajamas on and pushed my car away from the snow. Their kindness broke my heart. I don't think you can find such kind people now."

Pirun's mother-in-law stayed home with the children while Pirun and his wife worked. In four years they had saved enough money to buy a home. Two more children were born, a second daughter and a second son. In 1985, Pirun took a job with the Portland Public Schools as a home school coordinator and parent trainer. It meant less work hours, more travel to conferences in other states, and an opportunity to work with the immigrant and refugee community. But he still misses nursing and the medical field.

"The biggest accomplishment I've had in my life, besides my family, is that I led a group of people in Maine that built a temple. Others before me that came in 79 and 80 tried to build one, but they did not have the religious skills to know how to run it and make it work. I had been a Buddhist monk for eight years, when I was a teenager in Cambodia, so I know the rules and regulations."

The first temple was located in Portland and then relocated to Buxton, Maine. Temple Watt Samaki in Buxton is the only Cambodian Temple north of Boston. Establishing the Temple was a long-drawn out affair. There were planning board issues, legal and financial complications, public detractors and public cheerleaders. Through it all, Pirun, as President of the Board, held tight to the vision.

"Every weekend I'm traveling between Portland, Sanford, Augusta and Mexico, to visit with other Cambodians, to build support. My goal is to team up with people, to build a net, to get in closer. We eat dinner together. We play music together. We're meeting together for the Temple. That is my goal."

In this way the Watt Samaki Temple and the Samaki Ensemble was born.

"I play Cambodian xylophone and a high pitched two-string fiddle. We have six musicians and a vocalist and 10-15 dancers. It's traditional music."

Since 1990 Pirun has also been conducting citizenship preparation classes for the Cambodian and Vietnamese community. The classes run three hours a week during the school year. He says it takes about 100 hours to go through the U.S. government, history and writing competencies needed to pass the test. In addition, he runs his weekly Cambodian news and cultural radio broadcast on WMPG. A few years ago, Pirun started hankering for a boat. Many fellow ensemble players already had boats and often talked about how much they enjoyed being on the water.

"I told my wife I need to buy a boat and she said, 'Why don't we remodel our home first!' So I was stuck right there. We remodeled the kitchen. Okay. Got that done. Next year, I buy my boat. So we went to boat shows in town and my wife says, 'We got to have the big one, the one with the cabin so if it flips over we'll be sealed.' And I thought, my goodness, I want small and easy. But we have to buy big because she wants to share the boat, too. So then the question comes, how can I handle it right. I better sign up for some classes."

Pirun signed up for a boating and seamanship class at Southern Maine Community College. This just whetted his appetite and made him want to learn more about navigation. The next course was very expensive. He was told that if he joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary the course fee would be waived. So he signed on for the Safety Patrol Operation with the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary.

"We go out all weekend, from island to island in Casco Bay, everywhere. You can put in as much time as you would want. In my case it runs between a minimum of 200-500 hours per year in study times and safety patrol mission. I've been doing it for three years now. It's a duty. You don't get paid. It's good for the public. I love it. But it was a little shock for me. You know, I'm a musician, a Buddhist monk. The way I talk, you know, my language is very nice and soft. But when you join this team, your voice has to become authoritative. They train you to talk like that!"

Now Pirun is thinking about his future retirement. His children are grown. Mono, his first son, attended Tufts and received his graduate degree from the University of Illinois. He is a cell tissue researcher and works in New York. His daughter Puteavy went to Northeastern, where she met and married a man from Laos. She is a pharmacist and lives in Massachusetts. Their daughter, Rebecca, born in Maine is a USM graduate, currently in training to become a physical therapist. Their youngest son, Tony, is still in high school. Two years ago, Pirun's wife retired from a long career at Barber Foods.

"My wife never worked in Cambodia. Once she got here, the idea of making money, she just went work crazy! I try to stop her, but she's so happy. So I worry about her staying happy now she's retired. Otherwise she could ruin my life!"

Pirun Sen is joking of course, because his primary hope for his children is to carry on the tradition of a long and happy marriage.

"You know, you just have to keep moving. We don't know where we will end up. Twelve times, in various ways, the Khmer Rouge tried to kill me. Millions of people did get killed. We made it to Portland and we like it here. But I cannot say where I'm going. I may be here until I pass away or maybe someplace else. It depends on my destiny, but I cannot tell, see? That I believe in."





***“Raising children in Maine, in a small city like Portland, we can give them a sense of family.”***

**A**ye Mie Mie and her husband, Ushwe Tun own the sushi stand franchise at the Hannaford supermarket in Yarmouth. They are from Burma and came to Maine after her husband’s sushi business located in the World Trade Towers in New York City was lost on 9/11. Aye Mie Mie also works as an on-call Burmese interpreter for Catholic Charities Maine interpreter services and attends school at USM.

Aye Mie Mie was born in 1982 in Yangon, Burma. Yangon (Rangoon) is the capital of Burma (Myanmar). Yangon was a British Colony from 1852 until independence in 1948. In 1962 there was a military junta. Today there is still political unrest in Burma between the current ruling military junta and pro-democracy forces under the leadership of Aung Sun Suu Kyi. In 2007 there were widespread protests led by Buddhist monks and subsequent government crackdowns.

“Families are very strong in Burma. Marriage is very strong. We have to give respect to older people. We have to obey. My mother is very strict, she doesn’t like it when we are laughing loudly – just smiling is okay. Not good to show too much feeling. Values are based on religious belief. My family is a very strong Buddhist family.”

Aye Mie Mie attended school at the military compound in the province where her father was stationed. She and her sister were both good students.

“In my country, I have to memorize everything. Every day, even in kindergarten there is homework and a final exam. If you don’t pass the score, you fail and have to sit again in kindergarten. Not like here.”

After high school, Aye Mie Mie went to Rangoon University and studied mathematics. She was an honor student all four years.

“In my country high school is nothing – you only celebrate for a university degree. After my degree, I was a college instructor for a time. My sister is now a doctor and

working at the General Hospital. She wanted to come to the United States because she had friends here so she said, ‘let’s apply for the lottery’. I won. She didn’t. So I came here.”

Aye Mie Mie came in January, 2001 staying first with family friends in Chicago and then moving to New York City where her cousins lived. She was taught English throughout school and could read and write well, but actual conversations were a different matter.

“It’s all memorizing. We don’t use the language. So no one here could understand my accent. I had to write everything down. But in three days I got a job.”

The job was at Precious Trade in New York, a company that works with precious gemstones and frequently hires green card and H1B visa applicants

“Jewelry stores, like Tiffany, order from there. It’s loose stones. Let’s say they need five emeralds for a ring or diamonds. So I have to choose the stones to fit that ring and match everything. And then after six months I got a promotion.”

It wasn’t work that made adjusting to life in a different country and culture difficult for Aye Mie Mie, it was the every day things.

“For three or four months, I can’t eat anything. Everything smells. Even the vegetables, I can smell – it’s not fresh. I can only eat like fish and shrimp from Chinatown that is fresh. Cucumbers, cauliflowers, all smell. I lose weight in that time. And cashing my paycheck, I don’t have a bank account. I need cash but don’t want to pay three dollars to a check-cashing place because I need that money and I don’t know how to open an account. I finally figured it out.”

During her first six months here, Aye Mie Mie met the man she would soon marry.

“At my company there are four Burmese workers and one of my co-workers told me about my husband. You know Burmese man and woman, they don’t talk to each other. We



# Aye Mie Mie



see each other. We meet at a Burmese gathering. That's all. At that time I'm looking for another job on the weekends. He has a sushi bar at the World Trade Center and is looking for another helper. He says, 'Come and study how to make the sushi.' So I went there and I work for a week, only one week and he proposes!"

It's traditional for parents to approve of marriages in Burma so Aye Mie Mie needed to get her parents permission. Luckily Ushwe Tun's parents also lived in Yangon so they were able to make inquiries about his background and approved of the match.

"So we are engaged and then September 11<sup>th</sup> happened. He called me. He was already there when the first plane came and he said, 'Something happened, don't go to work.' At 10:30 he had a regular delivery to the 94<sup>th</sup> floor but he is lucky, it is only 8:30 so he is downstairs in the South Tower. The first plane hit the North Tower and then he was outside with everyone

else looking when the second plane hit so everyone ran."

Ushwe Tun lost his business and spent many months looking for another location before finding an opportunity to open a sushi stand at a Hannaford in Maine. He liked the store and the location and moved here. Aye Mie Mie stayed in New York. He didn't want her to resign her job until he established the business. Aye Mie Mie is now pregnant, lonely and suffering from morning sickness.

"Now even the water smells bad. I can't eat or drink. Only thing I can keep down is watermelon. I eat watermelon for two months, but it is so big I can't pick it up and carry it to my apartment. And the subway and train, I would throw up. So I call my husband and say, 'I cannot stay here anymore. If your business is good or bad, I'm coming to Maine.'"

Aye Mie Mie told her husband that if he could find an Asian market, she would live here. He discovered Haknumen Market on Forest Avenue and told Aye Mie Mie that now they could live in Maine because she knew how to cook everything.

"So I like it in Maine and am happy. The Burmese community in New York is big and there is a lot of talking and gossip. Here, we were the only Burmese family. Then we heard of a family in Lewiston. Now I think there's maybe 43 or so Burmese in Maine."

Advanced Fresh Concepts (AFC) is the largest supplier of fresh sushi to supermarkets. Ushwe Tun started the franchise in the Falmouth Hannaford and was eventually given the Yarmouth and Westbrook stores. They have been working together as husband and wife and now as parents of two small children.

"We have to work very hard, seven days a week and not making much money."

It was not the kind of life Aye Mie Mie wanted to

lead – always working and not enough time for her children so they decided to transfer two of the stores and went back to managing only the Yarmouth store.

In addition, they hired a Cambodian woman who works for them on weekends. They also decided one of them needed to go back to school and get a different career.

"We decided it would be me, because I'm younger and my educational background is better."

Aye Mie Mie completed the CNA (certified nurse's assistant) program at Southern Maine Community College and took a job in a nursing home. The plan was to eventually go to a two-year nursing program and then become a registered nurse after completing a four-year program.

"I tried this for a year. You know making sushi is very hard, but working at the nursing home is harder. It made me very sad, because of the culture. In my country, the elderly people stay at home with their family. Even when they are very sick, they stay home and children or grandchildren take care of them. I see all these elderly people and they are lonely. And the CNA's sometimes work 16 hours a day because they cannot find workers for the different shifts. So I told my husband, 'Yes registered nurses make money, but not CNAs. I am not going to do this.'"

So another plan was called for and it cycled back to what Aye Mie Mie had cared about and excelled in back in Burma – math. She wanted to teach math, preferably at the college level, but it would take years for a doctorate degree and too long to help with the finances needed now. So she settled on becoming a secondary school math teacher.

"Math is my passion. When I am doing a math problem, my mind is clear. I was a college educator in my country. I like to teach."

Aye Mie Mie is now enrolled at USM. She takes evening classes and continues to work with her husband. In the future, Aye Mie Mie sees herself teaching math at a public high school, pursuing a master's degree, and still making sushi.

"I like the sushi business. I like to cook and if I give food to people and they like it, I'm happy. It doesn't matter making money or not."

When she and her husband are older and ready to retire, she would like to return to Burma and open a school.

"A private school for poor children who are bright and smart – like a foundation where you give scholarships. Now in Burma if you have money you send your children to school in Singapore. The education is very bad now for poor people. My children will have a good education and they can stay here. Or if they like to do charity work, they can come with me and work for the children of Burma to give them an education."





***“When you listen to music or when you’re performing, you connect with that deep something that’s inside all of us.”***



# Chiharu Naruse



Chiharu Naruse is a classical pianist. She's performed throughout the world in recitals and piano competitions including in Japan, Switzerland, Italy and Austria. She holds a master's degree in Music Performance and Music Instruction from the Hochschule Fur Musik Hanns Eisler in Berlin. In 2002, Chiharu moved to Maine where she has given several recitals at Bates College and played concerts with the Portland String Quartet, DaPonte String Quartet, and the Augusta Symphony. In addition to maintaining a regular performance schedule, she is a member of the applied music faculty at Bates College, University of Maine at Farmington and The Portland Conservatory of Music.

Chiharu was born to a family of musicians in Hyogo, Japan, which is about twenty minutes from the major city of Osaka.

"My mother gave private piano lessons and my father taught at the public music high school. My older sister also plays piano. I started

playing when I was three years old. My other sister didn't want to play piano. She's in medical school."

"It's a very competitive environment in Japan – at least in my generation. This country is more relaxed. By the time you're in third or fourth grade – there's afterschool programs and it's just study, study, study or in my case, practice, practice, practice. I wasn't allowed to do anything else, until I practiced. In the middle school, during the summer, I practiced eight hours a day."

She attended the public music high school and applied to the one national public music college in Japan. She didn't get in.

"It's very hard in Japan. They only take about twenty students. There are private music schools, but they are very expensive. Not something we could afford. So I took a year off and my father's colleague suggested that I try for this school in Germany. I auditioned and passed the exam and ended up studying there for five years."

In Berlin, Chiharu studied under Klaus Baessler and Wolfram Reiger.

"I learned a lot of German that first year and I also had to take music history and theory. We were required to pass a middle level German exam after one year. It was crazy but it was good."

It was in language school that Chiharu met her future husband, Seth Fairbanks. He was in his last year at Bates and had come to Berlin to study. For the next four years they had a long-distance relationship between Germany and the United States. They were married during Chiharu's last year of school. She came to Portland in the spring of 2002 where they lived for a few months before buying a house in Hallowell. Seth is a lawyer.

"Portland was okay. I could walk around and go to café's and things, but Hallowell was hard. I didn't have a driver's license. I didn't have any English – just a little bit from school, but I couldn't speak it. It was so quiet. I was stuck in the house. I missed the big city life."

In Hallowell, she eventually met a violin teacher whose husband was Japanese. They helped Chiharu find piano students.

"And then all of a sudden, I have like 50 students! From 7:15 in the morning to 7:30 at night. When my daughter was born, I cut back on the private lessons, plus I have

college teaching and I perform, so that's a big part of what I do now."

"I'm getting more serious students now. I love to teach and I think being Japanese helps children open their eyes to something different. It's fun. But five years from now, I don't know. It depends on my husband's job and where I can perform. I want to get more involved in that."

Today Chiharu lives in Gray with her husband and two children. Unlike her parents, Chiharu is not going to push her children into music.

"It's a hard life. It's so much work, so much practice. If they want it fine, but I do hope they have something they can be passionate about and are willing to work hard for."

From: **Hyogo, Japan**  
Lives: **Gray, Maine**  
Occupation: **Classical Pianist**





***"I believe in giving before taking. Wherever you are you should try to be a good addition to the community."***

**L**aongdao "Tak" Suppasettawat was born in 1963 in northeast Thailand, near the border with Laos. She is a financial advisor at Merrill Lynch in Portland. Her parents were clothing merchants. They divorced when she was two years old, and her mother left Tak and her two siblings with their father. He remarried and then died shortly thereafter in a car accident.

"We were left in the care of my grandmother, step grandfather, uncles and aunts. When I was ten or eleven years old I had to work in my aunt's restaurant. The place was very rural. There were a lot of farmland and rice fields. Now that area has become a major business hub for the bordering countries. More roads and houses and less farm lands "

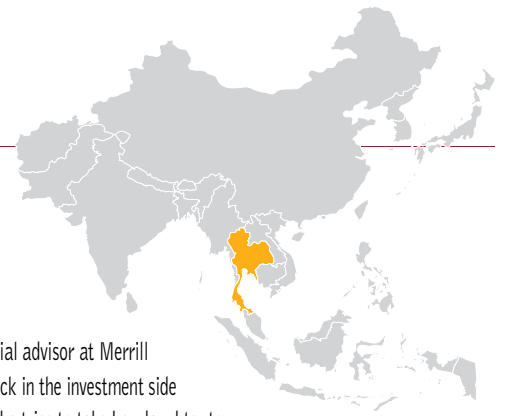
At fifteen, Tak wrote a letter to her mother in Bangkok asking for financial help for higher education. It was the first time she had been in touch with her since she was a toddler. Instead of sending money, her mother came on the overnight train to get her.

"I had to pack and leave. It was very sad to leave my grandmother and my home town to be with my mother who was like a stranger to me."

In Bangkok, Tak attended vocational school and studied accounting.

"My sister was already living in Bangkok with our mother who then had three other children. We had to work for her – cooking, cleaning, taking care of our step sisters, in exchange for education. She was very tough and strict."

# Laongdao Suppasettawat



After Tak got her associate's degree, she went to work with HSBC (The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) in the IT department.

"Within two or three years, I moved out of my mother's house, which is very unusual then, especially when you are still single. When my sister started working, she supported me and my brother. When I started working, I helped my brother to go to college. Our cousins and relatives from the Northeast also lived with us when they needed a place to stay in Bangkok while they attended college. It was cramped in a small house, but we were very happy to help out our sibling, cousins and relatives. We think it is important to take care of our family and relatives. It is our strong belief."

Tak married her first husband in 1989. They lived in many different countries and had to move around often due to his job as a global banking executive. The marriage ended in 1999 after many years of

separation. Tak had a long career in the financial services industry in England, Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore. She met her current husband, Fred Thomas while he was visiting London on a business trip.

"We got married in 2000 while I was working in Singapore. After our daughter was born, my husband wanted to move back to America after his long career overseas. I applied for permanent residence from the U.S. Embassy in Singapore. In the summer 2001, we landed in Boston and stayed with my sister-in-law for a few weeks. We tried to look for a place to live but the rent was so high that we decided to put it off and came up to Maine to spend the summer with my husband's family. They have been coming to Maine for summer vacations for generations."

"After the summer, we spent a few months longer and looked around for a place to live in Camden, Rockland and Belfast. At first, I felt very isolated. I didn't meet any Asians and there wasn't any Asian supermarket. Family friends who live in Cape Elizabeth told us to check out Portland. We ended up in Cape Elizabeth. It is close enough to Portland where I can get Asian groceries and live in a bigger space near the ocean."

Even though both Tak and her husband had strong experience in the overseas' financial market, they found it difficult to find employment.

"I decided I should go back to school. I went to USM to finish up my degree in Finance and Accounting."

After graduating, Tak got a job as a tax accountant with Baker Newman Noyes. Her husband, an avid cyclist and a Maine State Time Trial champion for four consecutive years, has been staying at home and taking care their daughter, Nina who is now ten years old. He has set up his own company importing racing bicycles and cycling related products.

"I am grateful for my husband's support and am very happy with our situation. Many times when we are back to Thailand, I sense that my elderly family members and friends are concerned about me since my husband does not have a full time job in the corporate world or is a successful businessman. Asians still believe that husbands should be bread-winners; women are expected to marry well, stay home and raise kids. But that's changing, even in Thailand, women want independence."

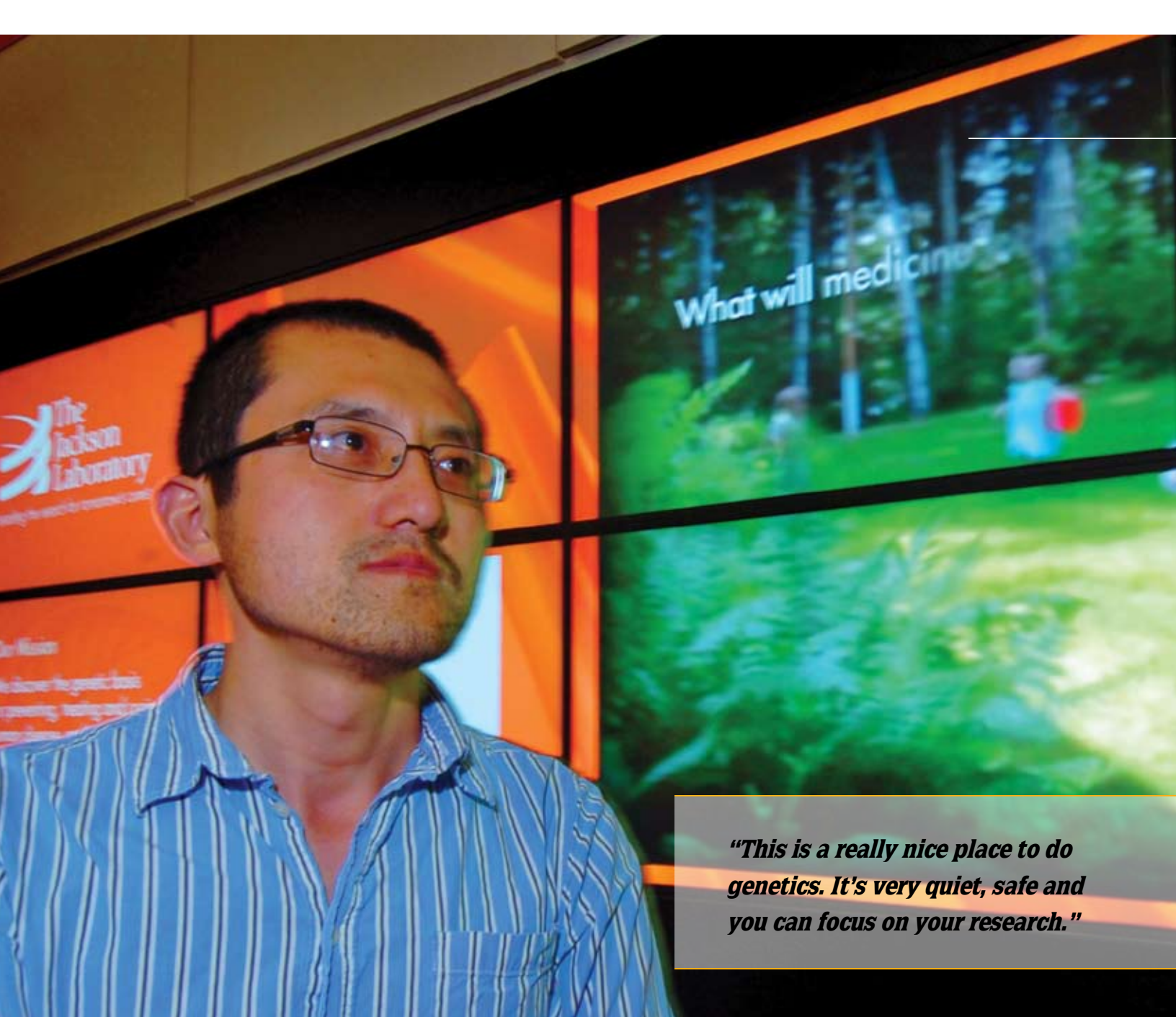
Today, Tak is a financial advisor at Merrill Lynch and enjoys being back in the investment side of the financial industry. She tries to take her daughter to Thailand every year to visit families and relatives.

"I try my best to speak to Nina in Thai and pass on to her some Thai heritage. I have a strong belief in the family unit, children who are brought up in warm and loving families tend to be good and responsible members of the society. I hope! We love to cook and try to have dinner together as much as we can. We don't want our daughter to spend too much time in front of the computer and want her to retain her "Thai-ness." We try to teach her to be confident and independent. I want both a happy family and a successful career. This will make life a lot easier in Maine."

"Sometimes I feel like I am missing out living and working in Maine. I hope I add value to the community. I believe in giving before taking. I do volunteer work with local non profit organizations including Partners for World Health, the South Portland and Cape Elizabeth Rotary Club and the World Affairs Council of Maine. Wherever you are you should try to be a good addition to the community."

From: **Thailand**  
Lives: **Cape Elizabeth, Maine**  
Occupation: **Financial Advisor, Merrill Lynch**





***“This is a really nice place to do genetics. It’s very quiet, safe and you can focus on your research.”***

**Y**ichang Jia was born in Nanjing, China in 1972. He came to Maine in 2006 as a post-doctoral fellow at Jackson Lab in Bar Harbor. His wife joined him a few months later and also worked as a scientist at the lab until the birth of their third child. They are in the United States on an H1 visa that allows U.S. employers to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations. The Jackson Laboratory has many scientists from Asia on staff as its work in mammalian genetics and genomics requires highly specialized knowledge and training.

“My mother and father were both doctors. They worked in a big hospital in Nanjing – my father was a surgeon and my mother a pediatrician. So I grew up in a family where we didn’t need to worry. It’s a very peaceful childhood. They didn’t make a lot of money but it’s enough for a family. They always had so much work to do. Someone might knock on the door in the middle of the night and say, ‘Dr Jia, you need to get up, there’s an emergency.’ So I didn’t remember my parents spending too much time playing with my two sisters and me. It’s different from here.”

With an urban population of over five million, Nanjing is the second largest commercial center in the East China region. Yichang felt a lot of pressure growing up to do well in school and get high scores on the exams that would get him into a good university.

“Most of the time my scores are in the middle – not in the top ten. It bothers me to disappoint my parents. My mother always said, ‘you should get a higher score than this.’ Or they didn’t say anything and I still felt guilty.”

After high school, Yichang attended medical school in Nanjing. “I was accepted into medical school, but not for clinical medicine – which is the department my parents wanted for me. My major is public health which was easier to get into.”

After medical school, Yichang worked for the next four years at a comparable Chinese organization to the Centers for Disease Control before deciding to return to school and get a master’s degree. It was in graduate school that he met his wife Li Luo who was in the clinical medicine department.



# Yichang Jia



"I didn't want to go back to my original job. It's just routine work. Not very challenging. It's government work – good for someone who is older, good salary and good working environment, but I am younger and gaining more confidence. By this time, my wife was pregnant and we made a decision. "Follow your dream," she told me so I began to go in a new direction."

Yichang started to pursue his Ph.D. degree at the Institute of Neuroscience in Shanghai. This was a brand-new institute started by a famous Chinese-American neuroscientist who lived and worked in the United States. Everything at the Institute was designed to mimic state-of-the-art American science at the time. He focused on molecular and cellular biology.

From: **Nanjing, China**  
Lives: **Bar Harbor, Maine**  
Occupation: **Post-doctoral Fellow, Jackson Laboratory**

"My work is on neuron survival and I had the opportunity to go to an international conference in Hong Kong. The conference chairman, a famous neuroscientist from MIT, thinks my work is very interesting and asks me to give an oral presentation. There are people from Salk Institute, John Hopkins, and Jackson Lab at the conference."

Jia was impressed by the talk presented by Dr. Susan Ackerman and over lunch he had the chance to ask her about their post-doctoral fellowships.

"After I gave my oral presentation, I was so nervous. I walked out of the auditorium and Dr. Susan Ackerman also walked out. And she at once told me she wanted me in her lab. And it's just boom, she gave me an offer!"

It was 2006. Jia wrapped up everything in Shanghai, said goodbye to his former colleagues and temporarily left his wife, who was an Assistant professor at Nanjing Medical University, behind. He arrived in Bangor airport right after Christmas and was driven to Bar Harbor by a Jackson Lab employee.

"Oh my god. It's very cold and there's nobody, nobody here. No cars, nothing. It's midnight. Oh my gosh, the whole street was empty. It's completely different. It shocked me a lot. But when I got into the lab, I feel it's okay because it's a research environment. Every piece of equipment is available, just like I had in Shanghai. So I calmed down."

Li Luo came to Maine a few months later. When their son was five, she applied for a job at the Lab and worked as a principal investigator in stem cell research. Her work has been published in the Journal of Cell Science. With the birth of their third child a few months ago, Li is now at home full-time.

Together, they have adjusted to the quiet life of Maine. Jia still feels his English is not good enough and believes this sometimes inhibits relationships he might have with people in the community. Nevertheless, he feels the people of Maine are friendly and that his children will be ambassadors to the American culture.

"My elder son is seven and a half years old and he doesn't even want us to speak Chinese at home! But we think it's important for him to understand the language. It will give him more opportunity in the future. But we are so busy, we don't continuously push it."

For Jia, science matters far more than language or even place.

"The best part is the findings. We use genetics, combine molecular biology and

cellular biology to address the mechanism underlying neural degeneration. It's very exciting. To be a scientist, we want something new. Something creative. That is the internal motivation to be a scientist. You have a problem. You have a hypothesis. You have maybe a parallel answer or several answers. You need to carefully design the experiment to show which is wrong, which is right. That is the beauty of science."



***"I feel like I belong here. I have family here and lots of very good friends in Monroe. I miss Thailand also, but definitely I call this my home."***

**P**oonsri (Ning) Sawangaeng runs an organic farm with her husband, Josh Oxley in Monroe, Maine. They met in Thailand while Ning was working with high-end condominium sales and Josh was an engineer for a Swedish company. Ning had always wanted to be a teacher and Josh suggested she attend the University of Maine. When their first child was born, they decided the corporate life was not for them and became organic farmers.

"I was born in 1976 in a small province about half an hour's drive from Bangkok. My mom owned a small restaurant and my father was a soldier. I have two brothers and we all helped out in the restaurant. My grandmother lived next door."

"My mom is very open-minded. She had a lot of belief in me. She would say, 'I know you are a good girl and will make good decisions.' My grandmother was very strict with the curfew and being polite and being careful with money. 'If you're not using the light, turn it off!' It was a good balance. Lots of happy memories."

When Ning finished high school, she passed the entrance exams for college and studied history and tourism with a minor in English. She spent six months on a student exchange to Australia. After graduating from college, she got a job in Bangkok as a marketing executive.

"The apartments and condominiums were a project of a Bangkok bank and I promoted the sales and rentals. These were five-star full service apartments. It was while I was doing a presentation that I met Josh. He just came in and picked up some brochures and then we kind of kept in contact and started dating."

Josh was born in Brewer, Maine. He was working for the Swedish firm, M2, one of the world's leading manufacturers of optical disc manufacturing systems.

"It was late 2000 and I remember telling him, 'I'm really tired of this. I don't want to think about money. It's never been my interest, how much I make.' And he asked me

# Poonsri Sawangjaeng



what I wanted to do and I told him that I wanted to go back to school. I always had the dream of becoming a teacher and maybe going up north in Thailand and teaching the less fortunate children. I said, 'I want the dream back, I want to study and be a teacher.'"

Josh brought her information about the University of Maine at Orono. She applied and was accepted. The first six months she enrolled in intensive English classes.

"My first impressions were just being excited. I was ready for a new experience. But English was hard. I missed home and I didn't understand what was going on with the different culture, but I was determined to do well."

Fortunately many of her college credits from Thailand were accepted and she was able to graduate in two and half years with a degree in elementary education. She applied for a job in Portland at the Catherine Morrill preschool. She and Josh were married by then and lived in Gorham.

From: **Samutsakhon, Thailand**

Lives: **Monroe, Maine**

Occupation: **Organic Farmer**

"I was lucky to get a job so quickly. I worked there for two years and loved it. I would come home and talk about it so much that Josh started to think, 'Why is Ning so happy about what she does and I'm not?' He didn't feel anything for what he did anymore. And then our son, Nathan was born. I knew I wanted to stay home and be with him, so I left my job and Josh was still traveling a lot."

"I kept pushing the fact that I missed him when he was gone and that I hoped that with babies coming, we'll have more time together. And then he read this book called, *Your Money or Your Life*. And I think the book opened up the possibility to live your life differently. It's not that one is better than another, but that you have choices."

They began looking for property. They found a farmhouse with 65 acres in Monroe. This was four years ago.

"It shocked a lot of people. My mother thought it was crazy that Josh would leave his engineering job and I would stop teaching. 'What is wrong with you?' But we had done the corporate world. We wanted to raise our children in a natural setting. There were a lot of details we had to learn about farming. But we never felt that we couldn't do it. We're just – let's go for it."

The Rolling Acres Farm is an organic MOFGA certified farm. Josh and Ning use solar energy for electricity, heat with wood, and get water from their private well. They grow a wide variety of vegetables and raise a couple dozen chickens. Josh does most of the farming and the building construction. Ning works on the farm three days a week. They sell their produce at the farmers market in Rockland and also supply vegetables to the Camden and Belfast Coops and local restaurants. In the summer they hire apprentices from MOFGA and from WWOFF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms). This year they had an apprentice from Thailand.

"We have two big greenhouses and a couple of little tunnel structures. We also received funding from USDA for our barn. There's another building behind the house that Josh built where his mom lives downstairs and we use the upstairs for storage."

"It's allowed me to be with my kids while I work." They now have two. "Just the other morning, Nathan is walking behind me while I am cutting greens and just singing a song. They are happy. They can come to the farmer's market with me. And we have

meals together every day. A lot of farming is just working with nature. If it's raining you still have to go out there and get soaked. But the rest, you know, we can just play around."

"We're still inexperienced. We're still learning. The first year we just looked at seed catalogs. This is what kale looks like and you have no idea what the plant is going to do, how big it will grow – how much room it will need. It's so exciting."

In the winter when things are slow, Ning has been able to visit her mother and brothers in Thailand. That is the upside for her of being her own boss and living in a place with long winters. The downside, of course, is as farmers they don't make very much money.

"We're very frugal. We drive old cars. We live off the grid. We get clothes from Goodwill. Everything in life has a good and a bad side. It's all about balance."

This year, Ning became a U.S. citizen and hopes this will help her mother obtain a visa to come visit and see the farm. At home in Monroe, Ning continues to speak Thai to her children and teaches them about her Buddhist religion. She also volunteers at the local library and serves on the board.

"I love this town. It's the first town that I feel like I belong in. I'm a part of the community. The first couple of years that we lived here, we got so much help and support. And we have found people who have become friends and have lots in common with us in terms of our interests."





***“I feel like we’re so fortunate to start out with nothing and to end up like this. It’s all thanks to my parents for all they had to go through, and for taking that first step.”***

Sakun Prak, his wife and two children came to Maine from a refugee camp in Thailand carrying nothing with them except their immigration documents. They were resettled in Biddeford in a small apartment across from the police station. Everything was so unfamiliar and frightening that they spent the first week with their doors locked and shades closed, afraid to go out to even buy food. Today Sakun works for Irwin Industrial Tools. His daughter, Sitha, who was four years old when they came to the United States, owns a hairdressing business, *Highlight Zone Salon Excellence*, in Biddeford and has two employees. Her older brother, Sithoeun, who was also born in the refugee camp, is married with two children and lives and works in Boston. Her youngest brother, Sothonn was born in Maine and works for Jared Jewelry.

“My parents lost everything during the war in Cambodia,” says Sitha. “My mother’s father was a really famous singer – she lost everybody. My father was supposed to be a monk. He was studying in the monastery when the civil war broke out.”

Sakun began living in the temple at Pursat Province when he was twelve years old. He stayed there as a monk until the Khmer Rouge took over and moved the monks to the mountains to construct a dam. The thirty monks worked day and night carrying rocks and were given only four cups of food a day to share. This continued for about a year until

Sakun Prak became so weak he could no longer walk. At this point, all the monks were told they could leave if they became civilians.

“In Cambodia, when you’re a monk, you have to ask permission from your parents to leave. My family was separated by then, but I did have an uncle. I said, ‘Uncle, I don’t want to be a monk anymore because they punish me.’ And he said, ‘You need to ask your Dad’ but of course I couldn’t find my Dad because the Communists had taken over and folks were sent everywhere.”

He made the decision to leave on his own and asked his aunt to make him some civilian clothes. She hand stitched his remaining two sets of monk garments into trousers and a shirt and then dyed them a dark color. He was sent to a labor camp for young people in their teens and twenties and there he met his future wife. By the time the Vietnamese army came, Sakun was married and his wife was pregnant with Sitha. He had already decided he didn’t want to raise his children in a communist Cambodia.

“I was living on the border between Thailand and Cambodia and I heard there was a refugee camp. I want to go but I have no money. It was hard time. We need to find some way to survive. I find a bucket and fill it with water and then I sell water. Any profit, I buy grapes by the bucket and then I sell that. Then we saw the army, but they

# Sitha Kimball & Sakun Prak



are dressed like the American army. Then there's fighting. I'm separated from my wife. This lasts for a few days. We find each other and see a military truck on the road. We jump in. We don't know where we're going. And then I get scared and try to get out. But they bring us to the refugee camp in Thailand. I see a lot of people. I'm so happy."

They stayed at the Khao I Dong refugee camp for four years. Sitha and her brother were born there. Sakun applied to a number of countries and was ultimately accepted by Japan and the United States.

"I learned some English as a monk. I didn't know any Japanese. I have to know someone to go to the United States. I have a friend who lives in Minnesota, an uncle in New York and my wife's cousin lives in Maine. I wanted a long airplane ride so I picked Maine! I bought tickets to Portland, Oregon, I didn't know about states or anything – Chicago, New York, Maine, it was all

From: **Cambodia**  
Lives: **Biddeford, Maine**  
Occupation: **Owner, Highlight Zone Salon Excellence; Toolmaker, Irwin Industrial Tool**

the same to me."

"I do remember coming to the States," says Sitha. "Everything was weird for my parents. They didn't eat the food. They didn't speak the language. They didn't even want to sleep on a bed! When we landed in San Diego they put us up in a hotel and they said, 'Where is the canopy, where are the hammocks?' When we stopped in Chicago it was snowing. I was wearing just shorts, not even a shirt. My mom and dad had clothes like sarongs on. The pilot gave us coats and we were like, what do we need these for?"

Sitha started kindergarten and her father got his first job at a seafood plant, cutting crab legs. He rode the bus from Saco to Portland every day. Then he got a job closer to home at the Herman Shoe factory. He worked there for one year but the company closed down. He then got a job at Shape in Kennebunk, a tape manufacturer. Then that company closed down. West Point, a blanket factory, became his next job. Ultimately he landed at Irwin Industrial Tools where he has been ever since.

"In the 1980's there were a lot of mills in Maine. My mom also got factory jobs at Fiber Material, West Point and Sprague. It's slim pickings now. But I'm proud of my parents – they both eventually got their GED's."

The family lived in Biddeford in a small two-bedroom apartment. There were three siblings now and Sitha remembers school as a challenge.

"I really didn't pick up English until third grade. I remember going to ESL classes and not really being in with the other kids. There were barely any Asian kids then, except my cousin and I felt like she was a traitor because she spoke such good English."

"Kids have a way of letting you know that you're not really one of them," remembers Sitha. "I always felt like I was the only dark haired kid in the classroom. They remind you

almost every day. Nothing major – random jokes and stuff like that, but it's a battle. You feel like you're always just defending your culture. It got better in high school, maybe because TV shows had more Asians in them by then."

After high school, Sitha went to Thomas College in Waterville to study accounting. "As a child, I loved to fix people's hair. At college, I promoted myself as someone who could cut hair. I'd knock on doors and say, 'hey do you want a trim?' By then I'd met Jack, who became my husband and he said, 'Why don't you sign up for hairdresser school?' So I transferred to Capilo's Institute for Hair Design in Augusta."

After graduating, a client mentioned that she was opening a spa in York and asked Sitha if she and one of the other stylists would work for her. Sitha was eager to move back closer to her parents so she agreed and worked at the spa for six years. By then, she felt she was ready to strike out on her own. She and her husband saw a business in the newspaper for sale, checked it out, and bought it. It needed a lot of work, but four years later she now has two employees, a possible booth renter and the business is growing slowly but surely. Jack, who was born in Lewiston, and Sitha have three children.

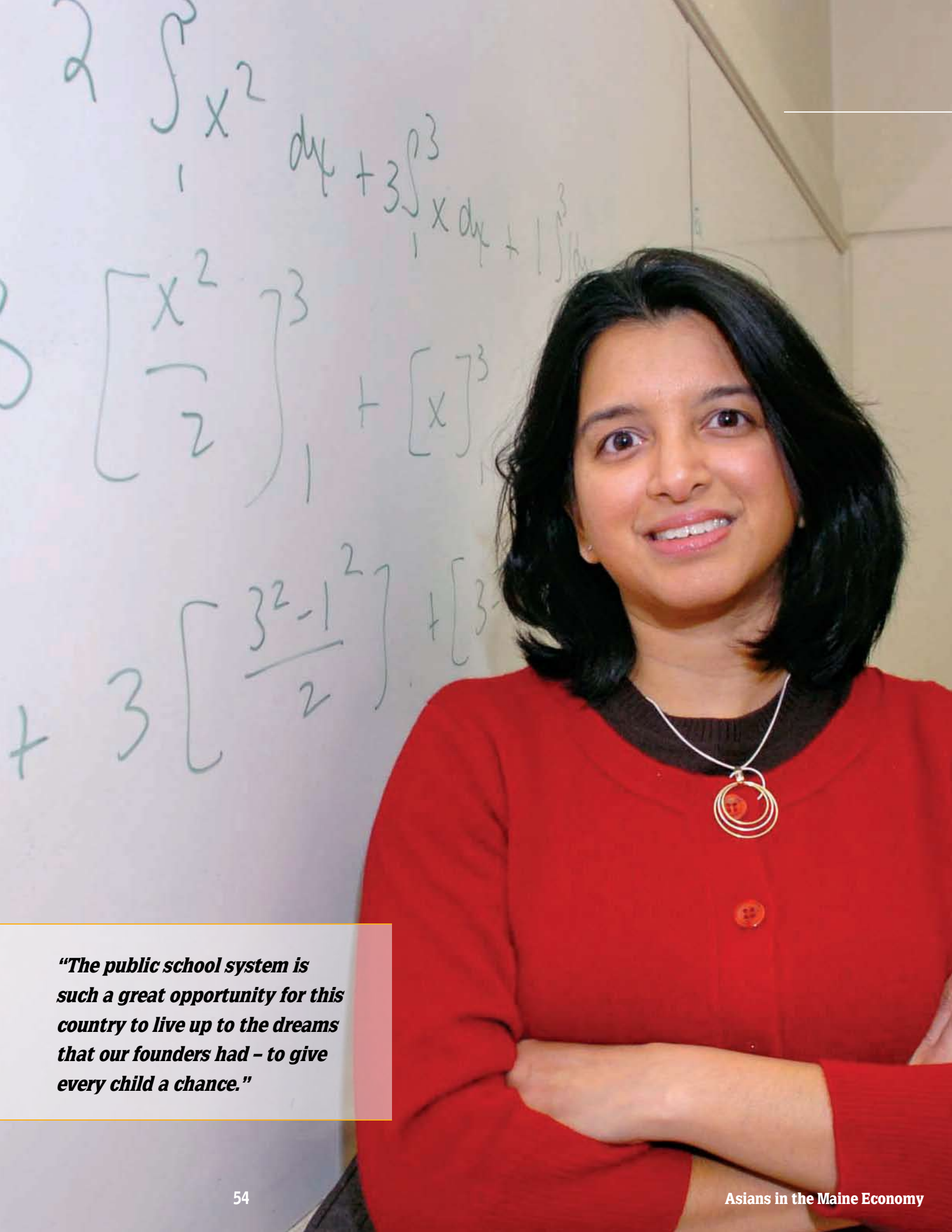
The Kimballs live with Sitha's parents. It's a close family. They celebrate all the Cambodian holidays and cook traditional foods. Sitha's brother is teaching his father the jewelry trade with hopes someday that they might open their own jewelry store.

Sakun said, "maybe in five or six years, I get to work with my son. When my kids graduated from high school, I was so happy. If I stayed in Cambodia, my kids might be nothing."



Sitha concurs, "So many opportunities, that's what I would say too. Whatever you want to do, just go for it. I never thought that I would own a business. I feel like we're just so fortunate. To start out with nothing and to end up like this."

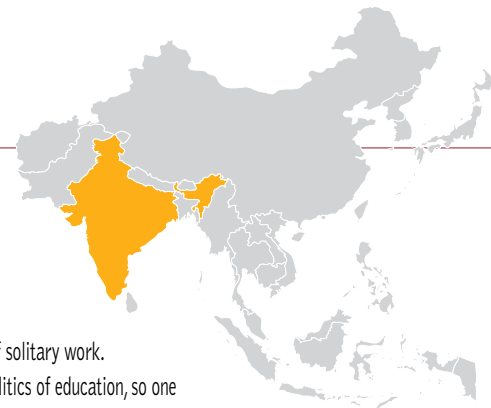




***“The public school system is such a great opportunity for this country to live up to the dreams that our founders had - to give every child a chance.”***



# Priya Natarajan



**P**riya Natarajan was born in 1973 in Chennai in the southern part of India. She moved to the States when she was six years old. Today, she lives with her husband and young son in Portland and teaches math at Deering High School.

Priya's father had wanted to move to the U.S. for a long time and applied through the lottery system. Eventually he got a green card for the family to emigrate. Both Priya's parents come from large and conservative Indian families. Her father was a mechanical engineer in India and her mother had a college degree in math.

"Hindi is the official language of India but almost everything is in Hindi and English because of being a former English colony. Our language was Tamil, but we all could converse in English when we got here."

When her family arrived in this country, they lived at first with an aunt and uncle in Chicago. Her father got a job as a draftsman in Rockford,

Illinois.

"I have few memories of India, just glimpses and sensory things – but I remember kindergarten in Illinois and then in West Virginia. I remember taking tests, to see if they should boot me up to first grade. I was already reading, so it was clear I didn't belong in kindergarten again."

Priya's father sought out a mechanical engineering job and ultimately found one in rural West Virginia where Priya's memories of growing up really begin. There were a few Indian families in the community, but the majority of the population was white and Christian. "A lot of people say that education is number one, but in my family it was the truth. I had extra assignments that my mother would make up for me during dinner. I was expected to bring home A's and if I got even an A-, privileges were taken away; you know, no phone, no television, no playtime. Children were expected to help with chores so I cooked, cleaned, did laundry, babysat my sister. My parents were in charge, what they say, goes. There was no going around that."

Because of her parents' traditional and strict values, Priya's life was different from her peers. She found it difficult to explain those differences and make close friends.

"Lots of American kids' regular high school experience includes dances, dating, wearing shorts and tank tops. In India, back then, only streetwalkers wore tank tops. Curfews, sleepovers, girls and boys mixing together caused lots of battles with my parents. Many events took place on weekends, but practically every weekend we drove to Pittsburgh to go to the Temple so I couldn't go to the mall or out with friends. And then a lot of summers I'd spend in India. It was a lonely feeling at times."

"I don't think it had to do with being Indian. It has more to do with just being an immigrant, a newcomer – but it was hard explaining to people. I didn't have a lot of community support around. Luckily for me I had lots of close-knit cousins."

Her parents emphasis on education meant Priya did well in school and she thought she might like to become a lawyer and enter politics. She went to Ohio University on a full scholarship and studied political science and math.

"It was a beautiful campus. I learned a lot. I studied. And then I went to grad school in Boston at MIT." At MIT it was all about research and Priya soon realized that she was

not cut out for this kind of solitary work.

"I had studied the politics of education, so one summer I did a teaching internship and I really loved it. I transferred to Harvard Education School, got my teaching degree and started teaching in Boston in 1998. I was certified in social studies and math, but my first job was as a math teacher and I've been a math teacher ever since."

To Priya, education is the great equalizer. "I realized I didn't want to be a person sitting in a room writing a law. I wanted to be there, making a difference day to day and I felt the school system is where I wanted to make change. The public school system is such a great opportunity for this country to live up to the dreams that our founders had – to give every kid a chance. I became an American through school. How did I learn about American history, how did I learn about what goes on in America? It was all through school."

"I went into teaching as a social justice sort of endeavor because I think most social change happens with children and I wanted to be right there with them. And my sense was that one of the major gatekeepers keeping many kids out of certain careers is math. We encourage kids to be verbal, to express their feelings and do research, but we don't really actively encourage kids to be good with numeracy."

In Boston and in teaching, Priya had found her niche, but her husband, Andy, whom she met at Ohio University, wanted more of a small town life. They compromised on Portland, Maine. Today, Priya teaches math at Deering High School and volunteers at United Way, as chair of a community investment team and as a member of the diversity cabinet. She belongs to the India Association. Andy volunteers for Portland Trails. Their son who is in first grade, provides opportunities for them to get involved in sports activities and the PTO. They participate both in her husband's Jewish religion and with the Sri Lakshmi Temple in Ashland, Massachusetts.

"I really like that sense of a web that is this community. I live just a few blocks from my school. My son goes to the same school system that employs me and is being taught by colleagues. We have a sense of rootedness here."

Since moving to Portland, Deering High School has seen a huge uptick in the diversity of its student population. Priya is happy with these changes and hopes it will ensure her son doesn't face the isolation and confusion she felt as a child.

"Some people say, 'Let's not introduce race until later', but my philosophy is, I want him to have the vocabulary immediately so that when he is confronted with something, he'll be ready. I've always talked to him about skin color – you know, 'my skin is medium brown, his skin is light brown and his daddy's skin is peachy pink.' I can see he's trying to work it out on his own. He'll say to me, 'Am I all American?' And I'll say, 'Yes, you're all American with some Indian ancestry and some Jewish ancestry.' I want him to understand that American doesn't just mean white."

"We cook Indian food together. I try to speak to him in Tamil. I play Indian and Tamil music in the house. We've been to India once. My mom visits and says daily prayers with him. We sent him to Jewish pre-school. We try to celebrate all the holidays. I want him to enjoy all the blessings we've received."

"I feel like I've had a very lucky life. I'm very thankful that I had educated parents and that at age 23 I found a career I wanted to do and that at 24 I was already doing it. I'm fully aware that there are many people around the world who want to move here and don't get to or get to, but in very different circumstances."

From: **Chennai, India**  
Lives: **Portland, Maine**  
Occupation: **Math Teacher, Deering High School**





***“There is where you were born, and also where you live. I like the people of Maine. I like my customers. So I feel here is my home.”***



# Pronsavanh Souththivong



**P**ronsavanh Souththivong was born in Laos and came to the United States with her parents when she was nineteen years old. She and her husband Sisouk are owners of the Bangkok Restaurant in Ellsworth and live in Lamoine.

In Laos, Pronsavanh's father was in the military and her mother had a small business selling tobacco. There were seven children in the family. During the Communist takeover of Laos, her father escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. Pronsavanh went to Vientiane, the capital of Laos to stay with her grandfather. Eventually all of the family made it out of the country and were re-united. They lived in the refugee camp for two years until the nine members of the family were given refugee status. They arrived in Chicago in January 1984.

"Oh it was cold. A lot of snow. Exciting really. We thought here is our new home and new future."

Pronsavanh had attended high school in Laos and studied French. In

Chicago, she got a job in a factory that made heating pipes. The work was not particularly difficult and there were many other immigrants and refugees working there including Mexicans, Chinese and Vietnamese. She worked there for six years and learned to speak English.

"I didn't think much of anything during those times, just go to work, get up, go to work. If you're not lazy, I think you can make the American dream anywhere."

When the family moved to North Carolina, Pronsavanh lived with her married sister. Sisouk, a Laotian friend of her brother-in-law, was visiting on vacation. They saw each other for two days and then spoke on the phone for about three months.

"In Laos it is traditional for the man to pay a dowry to the family, but because when Sisouk proposed, he had no resources, I accepted anyway."

Pronsavanh joined her husband Sisouk who was a chef at the Thai restaurant in Ellsworth. They have been in the restaurant business together in Maine for twenty years now, buying the restaurant from an American owner. They've moved to three different locations over the years and have a loyal customer following. They take turns in the kitchen and work seven days a week. Growing up, their three children all helped out in the restaurant. Their oldest daughter finished college and is now a manager of a furniture store in New Jersey. Their second daughter is in the liberal studies program at Eastern Maine Community College and their youngest is still in high school.

"They say, 'Mom, I don't want your restaurant. You can have it.'" But Pronsavanh loves the people she serves and the business community.

"I don't speak very good English. But people are so helpful. And the customers are very, very nice. I am lucky. I have all cute customers. The grumpy ones, we send away!"

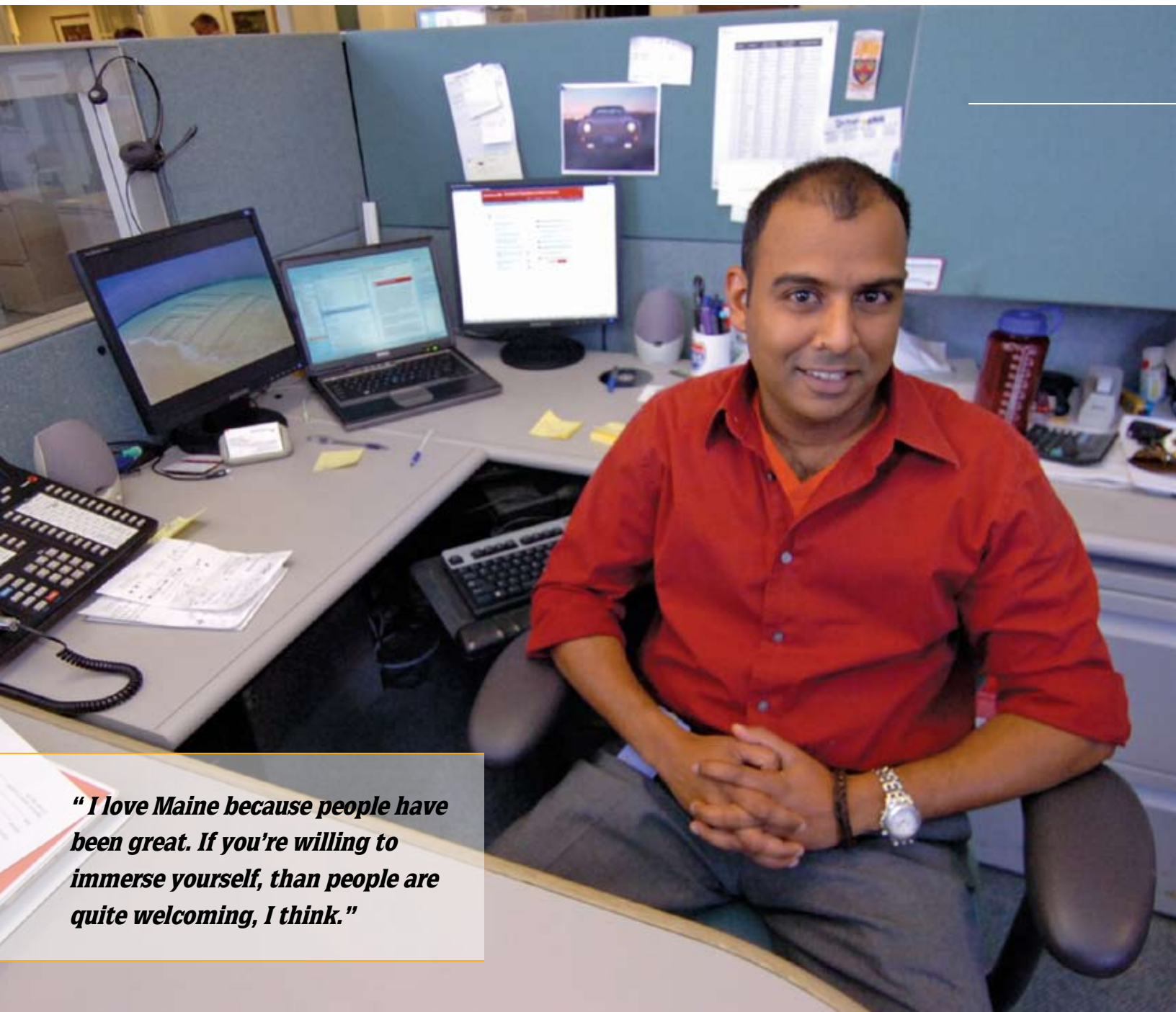
Despite virtually working non-stop every year for the past fifteen years she and her husband have managed to return to Laos to visit.

"We've built a brand new school for the children of Laos. And we also have helped build two or three temples there. My parents always teach us, it doesn't matter if you're Buddhist or not. If you do good things, good things always come back to you."

From: **Laos**  
Lives: **Lamoine, Maine**  
Occupation: **Owner, Bangkok Restaurant**







***“I love Maine because people have been great. If you’re willing to immerse yourself, than people are quite welcoming, I think.”***

**R**uky Somasundera is a computer systems engineer at Bank of America in Bangor. He was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1974 and came to America in 1997 to study at the University of Maine at Farmington. He is single with a large network of friends. He is an avid tennis, golf and cricket player. Last year he bought a house in Maine.

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, is an island off the southeast coast of India. It has held a strategic trading position for Europe and Asia throughout history. The Portuguese arrived on the island in 1505, the Dutch arrived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the British East India Company took over the coastal regions in the 1800’s. During World War II, the island served as an important Allied military base. In 1948 the country achieved independence.

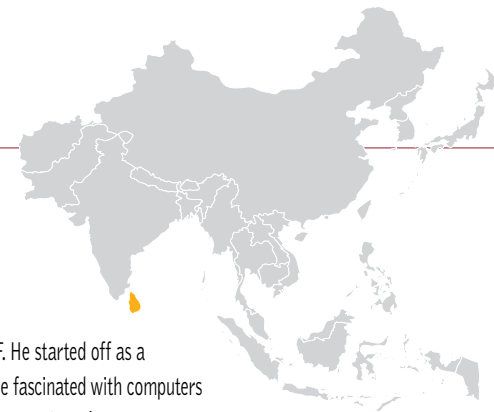
“English was my first language. It remained the first language of the country up until the late 1960’s. When it was time for me to start my elementary education, Sinhalese was the official first language, and I had to learn it in order to go to school.

English is still the main language used in commerce and is widely used and understood by most Sri Lankins. Tamil is the third language. The country is about 70% Buddhist, then Christian, Hindu, Muslim. My family was Catholic.”

Ruky’s dad passed away when he was an infant and his mother re-married when he was three years old. He has an older sister and two half-brothers. His stepfather managed coconut and coffee plantations that he inherited from his father and grandfather. In 1979 when fuel prices started to rise, the family moved from Colombo to Kandy so his stepfather could be closer to the estate. His mother was a seamstress by profession and also worked for her brother-in-law producing cloth tea packaging for export. Ruky received his primary and secondary education at Trinity College, a private Christian boarding school in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

“Schools are single-gender in Sri Lanka, except in the rural areas. Trinity is a big

# Ruky Somasundera



school, a big campus and one of the prominent schools in the country. We have 13 grades, so you're in school till about age 19. There's a junior school, a middle school and an upper school. The different schools are separated by cricket fields, rugby fields and dormitories. It was established by an Anglican priest, Rev. Ireland Jones, in 1857, so Christians get first preference admission to Trinity."

"There's a lot of pride being at Trinity. I have a lot of good memories of school. Playing cricket and rugby with my friends, the camaraderie amongst all the boys the same age – things I'll cherish forever."

From: **Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
Lives: **Bangor, Maine**  
Occupation: **Computer Systems Engineer,  
Bank of America**

It was an expectation of middle and upper-class families that their children would be professionals, so Ruky's parents didn't need to push him to do well at school. Students choose a professional course of study at the age of 16 when exams are held. The outcome of those exams will

determine advancement to the next level in high school.

"Everybody wants to be an accountant, engineer, lawyer or doctor – maybe because they are the only jobs that pay in Sri Lanka. You really can't be a mailman and make a living or get far above the poverty line. My granddad was a very decorated doctor and I kind of wanted to take after him. I started off in biology but I eventually chose accounting."

After high school, Ruky did additional accounting studies and eventually got a job with the Bank of Ceylon in the Treasury Bill and Bond division marketing fixed income securities. At this time, his sister's best friend was an education major at the University of Maine at Farmington. When she came back to Sri Lanka one summer she told Ruky, "I know you want to go back to school, but you're not doing it because no one is giving you a push. So here's a set of applications that I'll hand deliver."

"I had nothing to lose. So I filled in the forms and she took them to Anthony McLaughlin, the admissions director at UMF at the time, and within a month everything came through. I got my student visa. Since I was working, there's a requirement to give your employer at least two months notice. I wanted to have good relations with my employer in case I wanted to come back, so I asked to defer my admission to the next semester. There was no problem, so in November of 1997, I flew here."

Ruky stayed first with an uncle who lives in Framingham, Ma. for two months as a way to get acclimated to American culture.

"Everything is rupees in Sri Lanka so I remember stopping at a convenience store to get a cup of coffee and it was 89 cents. So I'm looking for dollars, like you know, trying to pull out 89 dollars. The clerk behind the counter laughed and helped me."

"But culturally, it wasn't a whole lot of shock. I knew what to expect because the rest of the world is so influenced by U.S. pop culture. As a teenager, I watched the *X-Files* and *Beverly Hills 90210* on television. We had Sinhalese tele-dramas during prime time and then at nine the American shows came on. There were a few adjustments like we don't do dating in Sri Lanka, but I knew all about it. Some behavior things I had to learn because we have a lot of class and social grouping in my country. People here have a lot more respect for each other. It's more fair."

Ruky thrived at UMF. He started off as a business major but became fascinated with computers and changed his major to computer science.

"The faculty, the friends I met there, I just absolutely loved it. I was very involved with the school. I was vice president of the Student Senate for two years. I was on the New England Association of School and Colleges committee. I had a job at the computer center. I was a research assistant. It was just a great four years of my life."

During the summers, Ruky worked at U.S. Trust in Boston and when MBNA, the credit card company, opened up offices in Farmington he worked there. The day before he graduated, MBNA offered him a job. In 2002 he became a LAN (local area network) administrator for MBNA in New Hampshire. As the company began cutting back, Ruky was asked to return to Maine and work in Orono. By this time there were a lot of layoffs and MBNA was in merger talks with Bank of America. In 2007, his position was eliminated. Ruky immediately got on the phone.

"Many people who knew me when they were in management at MBNA were now working at other banks. They were willing to offer me a job in a pinch because they knew I needed to have a job that would sponsor my visa so I could stay in the country. In a day and a half, I was offered a job from Bank of America. They were looking for people to cover a certain function in the Unix area."

Ruky's computer skills are in demand. As he manages telecom functions up and down the East Coast, he's often on call nights and weekends. Because of these specialized skills, he can continue to live and work in Maine on a work visa.

"I love Maine but it is hard to be single here, especially in Bangor. Winter is not all that much fun – although last winter was great. I have so many friends here. I play a lot of golf and tennis. I play in tournaments sanctioned by the United States Tennis Association. We have a local team here and last year we actually made it to the regionals. I've had no problems at all here. Things have been mostly amazing."



***“My advice to new immigrants is to work hard and just don’t give up.”***



**D**olores Atienza Barcebal was born in 1952 in the Philippines and came to Maine in 1976. She is a nurse and has been working at Maine Medical Center for 33 years. She has nine sisters and two brothers. Seven of her siblings also live in Maine. Most of the family has gravitated towards health care professions. One sister is also a nurse at Maine Med and another is a medical technologist. Another sister is a dentist, who with her oral surgeon husband, has set up two dental practices in Maine. Her brother runs a home health care business in Buxton; his wife and daughter are also nurses. Dolores’ husband is a master electrician at Maine Medical Center.

Dolores grew up in Puerto Galera that has since become a major tourist destination in the Philippines known for its beaches. When she grew up, her grandfather was mayor of their barangay (district) and her father was station commander of the local police station. Her mother was a homemaker.

“My mom always made our clothes and we were all matching. Our bows are matching, our socks. Mostly it’s hand-me-downs because it’s a big family.”

It was also a strict Catholic family that regularly attended church.

“Grace before meals, grace after meals. Lots of chores. We had a big farm – all kinds of fruit trees, vegetables and flowers. We had poultry, goats, pigs, a cow. It’s a tropical climate and very nice.”

After Dolores finished secondary school, she went to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, to study nursing.

“When I was in fourth grade, we had a play at school and I volunteered to be a nurse. My mom made me a white uniform and my sister made a cap out of cardboard. And then I said, ‘When I grow up, I want to be a nurse.’”

While Dolores was in college, her oldest brother was in the U.S. Coast Guard, having



# Dolores Atienza Barcebal



joined up and received training in the Philippines. He ended up in Maine and petitioned for his mother to come to the U.S. Her dad remained behind to watch over the remaining children's education. Slowly but surely as the sisters completed college, they too came to Maine.

"I worked as a nurse's aid at Maine Med at first, while I'm waiting for my paperwork and to take the board exam. The equipment was different here. Maine Med was just starting to have computers. But everyone was very supportive."

She lived with her brother in South Portland but soon she and three of her sisters rented an apartment on Brackett Street in town.

"Portland is very quiet. My sister and I could just walk at night to work at Maine Med."

Dolores began working in rehab but quickly moved to pediatrics where she has worked every since.

"Now it's the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital. There are a number of sections for children up to age 18 – basic sicknesses, injuries, cancer, babies from neonatal intensive care. I like taking care of the babies and helping parents feel comfortable. And I like to learn new procedures."

It was Dolores' older sister's husband that introduced her to her future husband.

He is a relative of her brother-in-law, from a nearby town in the Philippines. For two years, they wrote back and forth. Without ever having met face to face, Dolores returned to the Philippines to get married. Unfortunately her husband couldn't return with her to Maine.

"You have to have five years residency in America before you can take your citizenship. I was not a citizen yet. I was without my husband for two years and my daughter was born. It was very hard. After I became a citizen, I went back home and changed my petition to first priority, but he still had to wait for the paperwork."

In 1982, Dolores' husband came to Maine. He was a chief electrical engineer for the power company in the Philippines, but when he got to Maine he had to start from scratch and log hundreds of hours of experience before he could sit down for the board exam. He applied for an apprenticeship at the S.D. Warren paper company and was chosen over hundreds of applicants. He worked there for 13 years before he completed the exam and received his license, but soon after that, his department in S.D. Warren closed down.

"Luckily, Maine Med was looking for an electrician and he has been working there for the past ten years."

Their first house was in Westbrook and then they moved to Gorham where they continue to live.

"It's easy to be friends with people here in Gorham. It's a small town and when my kids were in elementary school, I used to volunteer at the school and the church. It's important to give back to the community. Also my two daughters, they both volunteered at Maine Med when they were in high school."

Raising two daughters in a culture very different from Dolores' own upbringing was challenging.

"My parents, when we are young, were always pushing us. 'You have to study

this, you have to go to medical school or college, otherwise you're staying home!' Here it's so free, girlfriend and boyfriends at young ages, kissing each other on the street! My oldest one did not experience teenage life, I think, because I was very strict with her. But my youngest one, I did lay low with her. Of course it made my older daughter mad!"

Today, Dolores' oldest daughter is 29. She graduated with a degree in dental hygiene from the University of New England and is working at Aspen Dental in Biddeford. Her younger daughter is 24, a graduate of Boston College and currently attending Le Cordon Bleu culinary arts program in Cambridge.

"I want a close family. I want them to have a good life and I hope they have good husbands also – like my husband – nice, hard worker, understanding and willing to help out. I want my future grandchildren to be close to me. And I hope they will raise their children to be close to God. And I want them to remember their Filipino heritage, that's number one of all."

From: **Philippines**  
Lives **Gorham, Maine**  
Occupation: **Nurse, Barbara Bush Children's Hospital**



***“Home is where your heart is. My home is in the United States, but I have a lot of Chinese values. I thank my parents for that.”***

**W**ei-Teh Tai is 87 years old. Karen is her youngest daughter. Dr. Tse-Wu Tai was a doctor at Rumford Community Hospital for seventeen years. He died in 2008, but remains a focal point for the Tai's life experiences.

“My father's primary goal in life,” says Karen “was to save lives and to keep his family safe. His parents both died of curable diseases when he was very young. He narrowly escaped communist China and fled to Taiwan. But with Taiwan just being across the strait from China, it wasn't far enough. He was driven to keep his loved ones safe and save other people.”

Karen's father served as a surgeon in the Chinese Air Force. He struggled during the Chinese Civil War and the Chinese-Japanese War to earn his medical degree. As a child of the feudal landowning class in China, he barely escaped two kidnapping attempts.

Wei-Teh grew up in Jianguyin, a town north of Shanghai. Her grandfather and father were portrait painters. With the advent of photography, her father switched to hand-tinting photographs. They lived at the entrance to the public park, where the portrait studio was located. When the Japanese invaded, Wei-Teh had just finished middle school. The high school closed so she went straight to nursing school where she both studied and worked. She graduated in 1944 and went to Shanghai to work in the Air Force hospital.

There she met Dr. Tai. They were married in late 1948, a year before the official founding of the People's Republic of China.

“At that time the Communists were winning the civil war and many people were trying to flee the mainland to go to Taiwan with the Nationalists. My husband had already fled. I left Shanghai on the very last boat and they told me I had the very last ticket.”

They stayed in Taiwan for fifteen years, but it was difficult times. Food was rationed.

“My father thought life was too hard academically. My parents spoke Mandarin, but no Taiwanese, so they could not get ahead no matter how hard they worked. That was another reason he wanted us out of Taiwan, because he wanted a better life for his children.”

Mrs. Tai had her own reasons for not feeling safe anywhere near the new China, but it was a secret she kept from her children until just a few years ago.

“I am a 36<sup>th</sup> generation descendant of the King of five dynasties and 10 kingdoms of China, Qian Liu, who ruled from 907 to 932. A.D. My children were shocked that I held this secret for their entire lives, but I feared for the lives of my family because I was never sure how far the Communists reach would be. I never thought of sharing my heritage till I read about Roger Tsien, A Noble Peace Prize winner, who was 34th generation descendent.”

# Wei-Teh Tai & Karen Morency



Working as a ship's doctor, Dr. Tai earned enough money to emigrate to the U.S. In 1964 he left Taiwan and took a job at the only hospital that would accept his credentials – an African-American hospital in Baltimore. He re-trained as an anesthesiologist and continued to send money home to his family. Karen's older brother, then 17, soon joined his father. Karen, her older sister and mother remained in Taiwan. When her brother's one-year visa ran out, they moved to Canada.

"Five years later in 1969," says Karen, "we came to Canada. We sold our house in Taiwan for three one-way airline tickets. I think it was like \$18,000 – that's how much tickets cost back then."

They lived in St. John, Newfoundland and it was a dramatic change for Karen.

"I didn't realize until I was older, how traumatic it all was. It's not that cold in St. John, the Gulf Stream brushes by, so it's temperate. But

both my sister and I were very sick that first year with fevers and colds. And my mother as well."

"But the biggest thing I remember was all the white people. I couldn't tell them apart! We all wore uniforms, it was a Catholic or Christian school – so everybody looked alike to me except for their hair color. And I realized, when you're used to certain features – like Asian features, they all register. But Caucasian features, they weren't registering yet. It takes time and it's funny because white people say, 'No, no. Asian people look the same.' But of course we don't."

"It was all a culture shock, the Canadian and American values versus Chinese values. We're so reserved and orderly and everything has a hierarchy and they're just, you know, blabbing, talking, it seemed disrespectful, but the adults allowed it. And we don't share our food, but here it's like – do you want a sip, do you want a bite? I hadn't learned English yet. I remember being so frustrated at not being able to communicate."

Dr. Tai continued to look for a position back in the United States and eventually one opened up in Rumford, Maine. The family moved south to Maine while Karen's older brother stayed in Newfoundland to finish medical school.

"It was my father's wish that my brother become a medical doctor so he basically had no choice. I remember once they had a big argument. He didn't want to continue, but my father put his foot down. 'No, absolutely not.' So my brother completed school and is a medical doctor and has been one for over 30 years now. And it is his passion too, just like it was my dad's."

Except for the owners of the local Chinese restaurant, they were the only Chinese people in Rumford.

"People think you're all the same, but they spoke Cantonese, we spoke Mandarin. We couldn't communicate. When I kept bringing home American boyfriends, my mother would say, 'why can't you find a nice Chinese boy?' And I was like, 'Mom, look around.'"

In Rumford, Dr. Tai immersed himself in his work. Mrs. Tai stayed at home and raised the girls. She learned a little English from her neighbors.

"Rumford is a mill town, so there's not much to do. And being the daughter of a doctor and being a Chinese family, education is always a priority. When I was a teenager, I

never thought I was Chinese. I thought of myself as American. I looked different but I didn't feel different, but my dad really struggled with me. My brother and sister were pretty obedient. I liked to socialize. I remember I wanted to be a cheerleader and that was a big decision for my dad. He said, 'What if she falls and embarrasses herself? You know, she represents the whole Chinese people.' This was unfair pressure. But he didn't want anything we did to reflect badly. It's only now that I truly appreciate all the sacrifices they made for us. And it's only since I've had my own family that I've realized that all these Chinese values are also in me."

Karen and her sister went to college at the University of Maine. Her sister studied accounting and Karen went into mechanical engineering. Her future husband, Dan, who was born and raised in Auburn, Maine, was in the same program. Karen and Dan now live in Freeport where they own an ergonomics business. Karen also teaches Chinese dance through the Chinese-American Friendship Association and Tai Chi at the local YMCA.

Dr. Tai retired at 68. As he got older and his health began to fail, Wei-Teh nursed him at home.

"They were married for almost sixty years. They were always together. Writing his obituary I wanted to find the one word that would describe my father and Dan said 'selfless' and that's it. He always put the other person first, his family, his patients, even the hospice people – he worried if they'd eaten enough, whether he was disrupting their schedule. He didn't want a funeral because 'all my friends are old, like me and I don't want to make them travel.' He put that in his will so we couldn't argue with him."

Wei-Teh now lives in Freeport. She has five grandchildren. One grandson works for a Swiss company that is based in China. He's brushed up on his Chinese and has fallen in love with the country. Karen's oldest son is attending college at Rochester Institute of Technology where he is studying biomedical engineering.

Karen believes her children have inherited the best of her parents and grandparents genes – they are artistic, interested in medicine and first and foremost, compassionate. Mrs. Tai likes to say that she has lead an ordinary life, but many would disagree.

From: **China and Taiwan**  
Live: **Freeport and Rumford, Maine**  
Occupations: **Physician's wife; Owner, R&D Ergonomics, Inc. and KTM Services**





***“People from Seoul and New York City come to Maine and say it looks like the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. But I tell them, live here two or three years, you’ll love this place.”***

# Se Chung



Last year Se Chung retired from Fairchild Semiconductor after a 31 year career. He came to this country in 1978 from South Korea and lives in Cumberland with his wife.

"I was born in 1949 in Seoul and ten months later the Korean War broke out. My father was a policeman and my mother was a housewife. There were seven children."

Se Chung was too young to remember the war except that it was a very hard time for his family.

"During war time, there is not much food. Also because my father is a policeman, my family was almost killed. Also a lot of kids were injured – they lost fingers and then

the foot, leg, all kinds of handicapped people my age, you know."

The Korean War ended in 1953."Seoul was not so industrial or modern then. We would play outside, fishing, catching butterflies. In Korea family values are very important – respect for parents, and education

of the children. I think that's why South Korea has done so well."

After completing high school, Se studied electronic engineering in college, which was a very new field. Only a few companies made small transistor radios at that time. Se Chung then went on to earn a master's degree. He joined the Korean army for three years of mandatory service.

"After that, I wanted to go to an American college because at that time, America was the best country for high technology. Korea was just starting and I wanted to learn more about the best technology. But my parents don't want to send me alone. I had a girlfriend, so I asked her, 'So, you want to marry me?' She said yes. Her sister was living in Raymond, Maine. I wanted to go to California. But she wanted to be near her sister." They arrived in the rural town of Raymond in April.

"I thought, wow, this is so small, this is not America. This is like farm country, you know. I thought we were going to a city. I'm very depressed. The first day I wake up, I looked outside and it's all trees. How could I survive here? And I didn't see any people, only a few houses. I have no background in this kind of life. It was very depressing."

They needed money so school was put on the back burner. A friend of his sister-in-law suggested he apply for a job at Fairchild Semiconductor in South Portland. They offered him a bottom level entry job as a mechanic.

"It's a difficult decision. I have a Master's degree. This job requires only a high school education. But this is not my country – so I started there and I liked the environment. Korea is more about the organization – you do what your boss or manager tells you. Here it is more creative, open to questions and ideas."

Fairchild Semiconductor's South Portland site, founded in 1962, is one of the longest continuously operating semiconductor manufacturing facilities in the world. Today Fairchild has four plants in the United States and six plants in Asia.

"They're really the father of the semiconductor industry in America. Step by step, I was promoted. Engineering manager was my last position when I retired. I managed two test engineering groups. Fairchild is a worldwide company. So I got to work with and meet a lot of different people from different countries. They have facilities in Penang so I dealt with the Malaysia plant. Three times I visited there."

"Ten years ago, Fairchild bought one of the semiconductor plants from Samsung. So, finally we have a connection with Korea. At that time, nobody knows about Korea. Communication with Korean engineers was very difficult. So, I had a lot of liaison with them and helped a lot of people on both sides in understanding and adapting."

"When I came here in 1978, they didn't trust my education because at the time Korea was not that developed. Today, we hire many people from the Korean plant to work over here. They are some of the best engineers."

During the thirty-one years Se Chung worked at Fairchild, he and his wife raised three children, moved from Raymond to Portland to Cumberland where they now live, started a small Korean school, and tried to maintain their heritage as much as possible.

"Back then, Maine only had a few Korean people. There was no Asian food stores. Food was a problem – maybe one or two things in the natural foods store, but way too expensive. Keeping the Korean language was a problem. So with a few friends, we started a Korean language school for a few hours every Saturday. It was for our children and maybe five or six other families. My wife would teach the class up until they all graduated from high school. We also helped start a Korean American Association in Maine."

When the children were grown up, Se's wife took a job at L.L. Bean. After retiring last year, Se decided to go back to school part-time to study finance and accounting. He has also become very interested in photography.

"I don't like the city anymore. I like nature. Maine is great for nature. My whole life is engineering. My brain is tired. I want to be more physical. Travel more to places up north. I want to introduce Maine to outside people – maybe a blog or a home page on the internet and provide some pictures and history. Asian people don't know much about Maine. They know California, New York, maybe Boston. I'd like to be an introduction to Maine for Korean people from the outside."

From: **Seoul, South Korea**  
Lives: **Cumberland, Maine**  
Occupation: **Retired Engineering Manager, Fairchild Semiconductor**



***“I love Maine, it’s so quiet, so friendly and I love the four seasons here.”***



Thao Duong was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1967. She is a fund administrator at CEI Ventures in Portland. Her husband, Lap Duong is an electrical engineer at Bath Iron Works. They have a twelve year old daughter and live in South Portland.

Thao Duong’s father was a member of the South Vietnamese Army during the war fighting alongside the Americans against the Viet Cong. When Saigon fell in 1975, they quickly moved out of the city and into the countryside.

“Up until then, compared to many of my childhood friends, my memories were happy. I was seven years old when the tanks came into the city. It was April, 1975 and I remember clearly standing on the balcony of my house and looking down and seeing all these people in Viet Cong uniforms. It was a very scary moment. They were checking all the houses and I knew if they found my father, he would be tortured.”

For the next year, the family split apart. Thao lived with an aunt. Her brothers lived with grandparents. Her parents went into hiding. In 1976, the family was re-united on their grandparents’ farm in the countryside where they stayed until 1981.

“It was rough for us because we were city people. We raised ducks, animals for food and my father made three ponds to raise fish. He worked day and night to build us a house. He pretended to be just an ordinary worker, but the communist government kept

checking up on our family unexpected, uninvited all the time. We were afraid. We tried to escape Vietnam at least three or four times, but we failed. We were put in jail – I remember that I was in jail for almost a month. When you get caught like that, you lose a lot of money, because you have to pay in gold to be let out. My father had some gold saved, but every time he was caught he would have to use more of it.”

In 1982 there was just enough money left for one more attempt. Thao, her father, one older and one younger brother, along with approximately forty other people purchased a fishing boat to escape the country.

“My mother and two other brothers stayed behind. We didn’t have enough money to cover everybody. It was this small fishing boat and we went out to sea at night. There were so many people on the boat that the water came right up to the railing. And the boat owner didn’t prepare enough food for us – maybe five gallons of water for forty people. It was a rough five days and four nights at sea. Everyone was seasick. We could have maybe two or three ounces of water a day – just a capful, not a glass, with maybe a sprinkle of sugar in it.”

“The very first day we were robbed by Thai pirates. A couple of them jumped on our boat and maybe got a couple bars of gold, but not a whole lot. Most of the women



# Thao Duong



and children were so seasick, we weren't even conscious enough to know what was going on. Luckily, the sea was pretty calm, because even with a small wave our boat was like sinking in the ocean. Three times we were attacked by pirates. They come up in speedboats. We were so afraid they would crash into us."

They had no compass and did what little navigating they could by the moon and the stars. Luckily, on the fifth night they were rescued by an Australian oil tanker.

"The captain could only see a few people on the boat because most of us were in the hold, where they keep the fish – no windows, just packed together, like sardines. So

this captain from this huge ship looks down and sees maybe four or five men so they help them up to the ship and feed them. But then more and more people start coming up. The captain was so surprised, all these people from this tiny boat."

"We all came up to the tanker

and they gave us food and water and some clothes and the captain was so worried. 'I can't put you guys back in the boat and give you directions because our ship is only ten of us and it's huge, but your boat is so tiny for so many people.' So he kept us on the tanker and called all the refugee camps in Malaysia. We were close to Malaysia. But the Malaysia refugee camps said that if our boat was still running, they could not accept us. He kept pleading with them. So the next day he says that the only thing he can do is sink our boat. So that's what he did. He hit our boat, everything went floating in the sea, but we were so happy that we could arrive at the refugee camp."

Pulau Bidong is an island off the east coast of Malaysia and was one of two large refuges for Vietnamese boat people.

"You can find photos and stories about Bidong on the web. Many Vietnamese still go back there to visit because they have loved ones buried there or just to keep in touch with other refugees. We often check in with the website."

Because Thao's father had fought alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War, they were given priority status. Once they were accepted to the U.S. they were sent to the Philippines for three months to learn English. Their uncle who had also escaped by boat in 1979 and was living in Virginia, found a sponsor for them in Maine.

Thao was fifteen years old when they arrived in Maine in December 1982. As the only female, she felt it was her duty to act as surrogate mother, taking care of her brothers, cooking for the family, and managing the household.

"We only had two pairs of clothes. We'd wear one, wash the other, hang up to dry and wear the next day. I didn't have any boots or sneakers. I wore sandals to King Middle School – from Chestnut Street to school and it was December. My teacher gave me a pair of her boots, but they were so big. Catholic Charities gave us each a jacket. I remember walking across the pond in the park and I slipped on the ice in my sandals. And my father says, 'we only have \$10, that's not enough to buy anything.' Our sponsor brought us all kinds of clothes, but we are so tiny, these clothes were like for giants!"

At this time they were living in a one bedroom apartment with four bunk beds. The apartment wasn't very warm so they would put a big pot of water on the stove and let it boil all night for the steam. Her father went to work right away.

"Our sponsor wanted my father to learn English first, but he said, 'I can't live like this with not enough money for rent or food.' So he worked at a restaurant within walking distance on Congress Street, went to school during the day, and eventually saved enough to buy a \$300 car."

The car lasted for a few weeks before it broke down. Thao's father learned how to fix the car himself and everybody tried to work as much as they could. Her older brother worked at a restaurant on weekends. Thao got a summer babysitting job at the YWCA. Her youngest brother, who was twelve, got a job delivering the newspaper. Once Thao was in high school, she worked weekends as a dietary aide at New England Rehabilitation Hospital. Throughout this time their only contact with their mother was through telegrams and letters. It was in this way that they found out that one of the two remaining brothers in Vietnam had died of tetanus.

When Thao's father became a U.S. citizen, the rest of her family were allowed to emigrate. It was 1991 and nine years since Thao had seen her mother. Thao was now in her third year of college at the University of Maine at Orono.

"It was a happy moment. I think she was the age I am now, in her early 40's. But she looked so much older and thin."

By this time, Thao's father had a permanent job at the J.J. Nissen bakery. Her mother got a job at a shoe factory in Westbrook. Eventually, she took a job at American Tools Company. Today they are both retired and have moved to Virginia.

Thao's older brother also went to the University of Maine and studied mechanical engineering. Her younger brother studied IT engineering at Worcester Technology Institute. Thao studied business accounting. She met her future husband in college.

"Back then the Vietnamese community was so small that everybody knew everybody. So it was easy to make friends and meet each other."

After graduating from college, Thao worked at Catholic Charities in the Amer-Asian program for people born of American servicemen and Vietnamese or Cambodian women during the Vietnam War. In 1994 she began working for CEI Ventures (Coastal Enterprise, Inc) in Portland.

"You're learning every year so it's always new. The department where I work is venture capital, so I manage the funds and do most of the bookkeeping plus office and accounting related things."

Her daughter is twelve years old. They try to keep the Vietnamese culture alive as much as possible.

"She's surrounded by American friends all day so we speak Vietnamese at home and I try to cook Vietnamese food. My husband speaks Chinese and Vietnamese and she picks up languages easily. When she was in first grade, she tried to speak English at home, but I would just ignore her. So that's how I kept up her Vietnamese."

Thao has been back to Vietnam four times, but considers Maine her home.

"I love Maine, except the weather. I feel the cold more now – not like when I first came here and walked to school with sandals! Now I have so many layers on and I still feel cold. Maybe in the future, when I have more time to relax, I would like to garden more, grow lots of flowers and do something to give back to the community."

From: **Saigon, Vietnam**  
Lives: **South Portland, Maine**  
Occupation: **Fund Administrator, CEI Ventures**



***"I'm in Maine because I feel I can add more value here than anywhere else."***

Sheena Bunnell was born in the cosmopolitan environment of New Delhi, India. She teaches business and economics at the University of Maine at Farmington and directs the Maine Health Research Institute.

"My parents were divorced which was unusual. My dad lived in Virginia and my mom lived in New Delhi. My mom remarried, so I lived with her. We spent every summer in the Himalayan mountains to escape the Delhi heat, which was often 120 degrees. Up in Kashmir and Shimla, the mountains are surrounded by lakes and it is just gorgeous. A lot of people from Tibet settled in Shimla, the border was very close. It was just good family time."

When Sheena was in the fourth grade, she was sent to a private boarding school in the Himalayan Mountains.

"The school I attended was a very good, hard to get into school. I had good experiences there and I believe the school prepared me well for my unexpected life in America. The school was very much focused on discipline; they didn't want children to be spoiled and not grow up with a proper work ethic. In New Delhi if you are fortunate and have lots of maids, servants, gardeners and drivers, it's possible not to have to do anything growing up."

After boarding school, Sheena completed college in India.

# Sheena Bunnell



"I didn't want to get married. The only way to escape marriage was higher education. So I came to the States in 1988 to pursue my education and got a masters in business. My family was very supportive of education, although there were a lot of mixed feelings about my going to America. My grandmother was very adamant against my going. She was worried that I wouldn't come back. In our family, in our culture, you do not export the women. You don't send them overseas. You'd rather keep them in India."

She attended college in New Hampshire which was very different from her experiences visiting her father in Washington and New York.

"I liked it. It was a smaller environment. Of course, it was hard not being with my family. I didn't have a profession in sight. My mission or vision, the one thing I wanted was financial independence. Coming from the social class that I come from you get married into a very wealthy family

and then everything is taken care of and you basically end up doing not very much. I knew that was not what I wanted."

After New Hampshire, she continued her education in Florida receiving another masters degree and a Ph.D. in economics. She began teaching at the University of Maine at Farmington in 1992.

"I liked New England. I wanted something reminiscent. I like the mountains. So I live in Wilton, where we have lakes and mountains and it reminds me of my childhood."

Sheena is a professor and is also the director of the Maine Health Research Institute. The goal of the institute is to provide healthcare research services to MaineCare and internship opportunities for students.

"It started as a collaboration between our university president, the president of Franklin Memorial Hospital and the Medicaid director. Our university leadership was instrumental in moving that forward because we needed a presence here in rural Western Maine, Franklin County."

As a business health economist, Dr. Bunnell sees many opportunities in the future.

"I deliberately chose not to do a Wall Street type of job even though I'm qualified. My core model is to teach, add value to society, engage students, help them get jobs, and establish internships in various companies and agencies across the state. I find a great amount of satisfaction in doing what I do, especially in Farmington where a lot of students don't have economic opportunities. Our students are excellent students and we really need to be able to provide them with more opportunities."

"In the future, once my own children are out of school, I would like to continue teaching and do more consulting, traveling, and more activities in the area of health economics in developing countries."

Sheena has two children, a 12 year old son and a 14 year old daughter. Every winter break she takes them back to India. Her mother also comes to visit once a year.

"Making sure my children have access to their heritage is a very important goal in my life. It's hard, we're definitely in the minority here, but I don't think of it like that. The Maine people are extremely kind and generous and I like the sense of strong community we have. The nature of my business is such that I could work just about anywhere. But I

choose to stay here. It's important work."

"I enjoy my job at the university. I like my environment. I like my friends. I see my family enough, so I'm in equilibrium in life. I follow the path of moderation and I feel I have a good balance."

"Maine has a very hard working and ethical labor workforce and this is our competitive advantage. We need to attract more businesses to Maine so that our workforce can be productively employed at sustainable levels. My mission has been to educate the Maine students and assist them with getting better jobs and living a good life. It is very satisfying for me because a lot of my students have done very well. So, at the end of the day, that's what really matters."

From: **New Delhi, India**  
Lives: **Wilton, Maine**  
Occupation: **Professor, University of Maine Farmington**





***“We are citizens of Bangor and we are Chinese. Nowadays, everybody should try to be global citizens.”***

Jing Zhang and her husband Suzhong Tian grew up in Inner Mongolia, China. Suzhong has a Ph.D. in forestry and a Master’s degree in mathematics from the University of Maine. Jing went to Husson College. Together, they started a Chinese school in Bangor. Their Chinese Learning and Cultural Center (CLCC) recently received a U.S. National Security Language Initiatives grant designed to support the teaching and learning of strategically important world languages that are not widely taught in American schools. The tag line on the CLCC website reads: *The Future Speaks Chinese: If you speak Chinese, you could communicate with one-fourth of the population in the world.*

“We were lucky,” says Jing, “that we were born after the Cultural Revolution, so it didn’t affect us that much. For us it was just work and study, but my older brothers suffered a lot from that event. Much disruption. Chaos time.”

“My family,” Suzhong explains “were considered rich and you couldn’t be rich, so my father was sent far away to the Northeastern province of Mongolia after he graduated from college. During the Revolution, it was to make us even. Knowledge was for the group not the individual, so many college students, teachers and professors were sent to rural places.”

Suzhong had a large family – six brothers and sisters and Jing had three brothers.

Her father was a farmer who later became a veterinarian. Suzhong’s father was a high school math teacher. His salary wasn’t enough to support the large family so the older children worked with their parents planting crops in the summer and collecting firewood in the winter. Jing’s childhood memories are all focused on school.

“I remember always studying hard. I was always number one. Student leader. Winning big prizes. If you don’t study hard, you don’t have many chances. My father was also working hard. He was a leader in the community, plus being the animal doctor so he never had time to enjoy things. I didn’t want to be in the countryside for my whole life – always working on the land. I wanted to do something different. That was my big goal when I was little.”

“In China,” Suzhong adds, “not every child has a chance to go to college. If you have a chance then your life might dramatically change. So parents always encourage the student to study hard, otherwise you will just stay local.”

Suzhong, who is a few years older than Jing, was one of those academically successful young people. He passed the national college entrance exam and went to Beijing Forestry University. Jing attended Remnin University in China and graduated first in her class. After college, she was sent to Beijing Forestry University to work in the

# Jing Zhang & Suzhong Tian



President's office while she also pursued a master's degree.

"Suzhong was in the second year of graduate school. His professor knew my mother and he knew that I did not have a boyfriend so he said, 'I have a wonderful student. Maybe you want to visit with him.' And I said, 'Okay, let's give it a try.'"

Jing ended up working for ten years at the University in administration and teaching courses. After completing his master's degree and working for a few years at the Beijing Forestry Bureau, Suzhong entertained thoughts of continuing his studies in the U.S. or Europe.

"I wanted to try and see what it looked like in other countries. I began searching for other forestry schools and the University of Maine was ranking about 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> in the top forestry schools – so that's the reason I came, to get my Ph.D. This was 1998."

By this time they had been married for about seven years. Jing wasn't interested in leaving China.

"I loved my job and I was making a big contribution to the university, not only the forestry systems but for the whole country. I was involved in a lot of projects and that meant my future would be very bright. If I came here I would lose everything I had built up. When we sent him out of the country, it was very hard."

In the summer of 1999, Jing came to Maine to visit her husband. She was very impressed with the campus.

"It was only ten or twelve years ago, but in China no-one knew about the internet. At the University of Maine there was a computer lab and the classrooms are so bright and beautiful. And the library is open so many hours. You can reach all the books you need. Oh my god. So I called my boss and said, 'I've found this very nice place to study and learn something more before I come back.'"

Jing enrolled at Husson College to study computer information systems. By now they were in their mid-thirties and wanted a child. Their first daughter was born while Jing was still in school.

"At first," Suzhong recalls, "Maine was all about school – the school and the library. But the people are wonderful too. Before we moved here we heard news reports about the U.S., crime and gunshots, but that's probably like Chicago or New York, not here. Here there is this vast land covered by forest and very few people – all of this is impossible in China. It's so safe, so quiet – a dramatic difference from what we hear about the U.S. in China."

"It is also a motivation for us," adds Jing, "for what we did later. We set up the Chinese School to teach language and to have people know each other – USA and

China. Otherwise, it's all based on the news, very misleading to people. American people still think that China is in the 1920's. Do we still have the long braid, do we still all wear the same clothes? It's funny the questions people ask."

Suzhong finished his Ph.D. in 2002. Since much of his work involved data analysis, he also took statistics and math courses and ended up with a Master's degree from the math department as well. There were few forestry jobs available locally, so he ended up teaching math at Husson College and then at the University of Maine.

After receiving her MBA from Husson University, Jing worked for Fiber Ion Technologies where the company helped her obtain her green card. Now Jing teaches part-time at the University of Maine and at Orono High School and is the director of their Chinese Learning and Cultural Center which opened in 2005.

"The local schools need cultural programs, Chinese programs, ancient studies programs – whatever they need they call us. We try to meet all the need for Chinese language and culture in Maine statewide so we're very busy and then, in the summer, we have an intensive summer program. We also have several part-time teachers."

In a regular semester they have about 80-100 students. They also offer teacher-training programs. The school is run out of their home but they rent classroom space at Husson for bigger classes. They provide summer programs for children and programs geared for adults. They also run a satellite program and hope to expand to other parts of Maine.

"Most students are American. The Chinese population in Maine, as you know, is very small. There are Chinese children – maybe 7 out of a class of 50. Because we are a small school, we have a close family atmosphere. Most students are good friends and help us do a better job and create more opportunities. We have an annual trip to China and this year we brought middle and high school children to China."

In June, Bangor announced a new cultural, educational and trade exchange with Harbin, China. City officials worked closely with Jing Zhang and others at the CCLC in Bangor to forge the cross-cultural relationship. This is just one of the many ways Jing and Suzhong are bridging the distance between their past and their future. Their goal is to purchase a permanent building for the school in the not too distant future and add smaller program sites in Maine.

"Since we are living in this country, our goal is to have people understand each other. This school is a collaboration with the whole community. We all work together to get good things done."







***“Maine is a decent state. It’s a decent place to work and to raise a family.”***

**R**otha Chan is a VP, Senior Credit Manager at Camden National Bank and works out of the Kennebunk and Rockport offices. He is a survivor of the ‘killing fields’ in Cambodia. His earliest memory is of the forced evacuation of Phnom-Penh in 1975 and the long march of nearly two million people from the capital to the countryside. He was four years old.

“I remember this huge crowd of people walking to nowhere. Our family was separated and it was just me, my mom and only a few brothers and sisters. I was crying and my grandmother pinched me to keep me quiet. And then the memory of her just disappeared. Much later, I was told she didn’t survive the march.”

After the capture of the capital by the Khmer Rouge, all foreign media were expelled from Cambodia. The people in the city were forced to take to the roads and become rice growers in the countryside as part of Pol Pot’s agrarian revolution. Twenty thousand people died on that march.

“We were told, incorrectly, as part of the propaganda that the United States was going to bomb the hell out of that city, so people were scared.”

Over the next few months they were shuffled from one village to another. His father was in the military and he never saw him again. His older brothers were already old

enough to be on their own and he never saw them again either. They marched for a few months and were eventually settled in a worker’s commune which was really a forced labor camp.

“The world got turned upside down, but because I was so young I didn’t know what was normal. It didn’t seem right, but it’s all I knew. They abolished everything. Money is the basis of capitalism, so they burned money. And everybody is required to go to work.”

In the commune the adults went to work in the fields and the children were divided into jobs based on their age and capacity. Except for breastfeeding infants, all children were separated from their parents.

“Divide and conquer. I was four years old, what could I do? I was assigned to pull weeds. No herbicides, we were the weed killers, the children. No school, no schooling. They abolished school. Just work, seven days a week. We were in that first commune for two years.”

Food was rationed and Rotha remembers always being hungry. Adults got more food than children and heavy laborers got more food than field workers. At the time, his mother’s job was digging canals. She would hide food in her sarong and come down to Rotha’s hut in the evenings and give it to him.



# Rotha Chan



"She would be beaten if she was caught. I didn't realize that giving me food meant less food for her."

When he was five, he was given a different job tending cattle and buffalo."That was the best job ever because you just had to make sure the animals didn't wander off so I could take a nap under a tree."

Many people didn't survive the worker communes but Rotha's mother had been a peasant farmer before moving to Phnom Penh. She was resourceful and taught Rotha how to catch crickets and frogs to supplement his meager diet. Two sisters, three brothers, his mother, grandmother and Rotha were on the march together. His youngest brother got sick a year later and died. His two older brothers were sent to another camp and died from starvation and overwork. His sisters were also sent away, but managed to survive.

From: **Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

Lives: **Saco, Maine**

Occupation: **VP Senior Credit Manager,  
Camden National Bank**

"Because I was the only boy left, she was determined to keep me alive. So that's the only reason I'm here. Not because of any stroke of luck, but because of my mother's resourcefulness."

After two years in the labor camp, the Khmer Rouge decided to permanently separate children from their parents. Up until then children and adults would return to the same camp at night. Before Rotha was to be sent away, he fell down on broken glass and cut his knee to the bone.

"They abolished modern medicine too. So I was on my deathbed from infections because I wasn't treated. They thought I was going to die so why take me. I was left on my own for a year. That's another reason why I survived because most of the young children who were taken away from their families didn't make it."

Around this time the Khmer Rouge were at war with Vietnam and life got even harder. There were dead people everywhere. The bodies would be wrapped in grass blankets and left to decompose in the huts. All the adults and well-bodied children would go off to work and Rotha was left alone.

"I was so terrified. I wouldn't stay in the huts."

Rotha's mom decided to try and escape. She had great grandparents who were Vietnamese and by now the Khmer Rouge were beginning an ethnic purge against anyone with Vietnamese ancestry. A Khmer cadet at the camp warned her that it was only a matter of time before she was going to be picked up and killed.

"The Khmer cadets are very hard people. They fought brutal wars. For him to take an interest in my mom, he must have had some sort of feeling. He wanted to make sure she made it. He arranged for us to get out through a boat."

They traveled toward the border of the war torn area between Vietnam and Cambodia and were told there would be enough commotion so that their presence would be less noticed. From a family of twelve, they were down to a family of four – mother, two sisters and Rotha, who was now six years old. It was a dangerous journey that brought them ultimately to the edge of the Thai border. They stayed there throughout the Vietnamese/Cambodian war.

"Full force invasion started in late 1978. Vietnam and Cambodia were both

communist countries fighting over territory. The Vietnamese were supported by the Soviet Union. The Khmer Rouge were supported by the Chinese. The whole country was in chaos again. You have five years of civil war and then you have this brutal regime that just terrorizes everybody, kills 20% of the population, and then you have war again. It's just one constant tragedy after another. One constant tragedy for me personally, but also for the whole country."

The family survived smuggling goods in from Thailand, an ally of the U.S. that wasn't allowed to engage in trade with Cambodia."I'm not talking about smuggling weapons here, I'm talking about stuff you could buy at any convenience store – candy, soda, you know. The Cambodian economy had collapsed. You couldn't do any farming. There were landmines everywhere. We were desperate, literally starving to death."

Getting across the border to Thailand through the jungle made it possible for Rotha's family to buy candles, fishing nets, and lightweight popular items that they would then carry in backpacks and sell for two or three times as much back in Cambodia.

"Of course there was danger. It was awful. I was maybe nine years old now. All I had were rubber shoes, like flip flops and you have to walk all night. There are robbers, land mines. The other smugglers are armed. Life expectancy is very low. We are seeing our comrades disappear one after another. They died. They got injured."

The family made these runs across the border once or twice a month for almost three years. Then his mother was injured by shrapnel and they were evacuated to a refugee camp inside Thailand. They applied for political asylum. Because their father, now dead, had been in the military and fought on the side of the Americans, they were eligible. They spent the next four years in the Thai refugee camp and for the first time in his life, Rotha went to school. In 1985 they came to the United States and were resettled in Biddeford, Maine.

"It's irrelevant where we were sent. We were just too happy to leave. I arrived in April and it was snowing. It was the greatest thing ever. In Cambodia, it was very expensive to buy ice or crushed ice. Here, like damn, I loved it."

Father Belanger at Saint Joseph Church in Biddeford helped the family obtain initial housing and food. That fall, Rotha was placed in the seventh grade despite only three years of rudimentary education and minimal English.

Rotha says he's still not comfortable with his English abilities although he is a senior manager in a bank and has to work assessing complex financial and business issues, and write and review lengthy proposals.

"Think about it, the reason you get to seventh grade is because you have kindergarten, first, second grade – there's a fundamental building block of learning to prepare you for the next level. You uproot somebody from a different country, they're not only missing all those classes, they're not learning the same language, they're not learning the same way of thinking. It's terrifying. I wasn't prepared. The community wasn't prepared."

Nevertheless, Rotha made it through public school and college. He majored in political science at USM and then transferred to international relations at Boston University. He graduated in 1997. Every summer, he came back to Maine and worked. At a summer job at Funtown USA, he met his future wife Sophy. Sophy is also Cambodian. Another summer Rotha got a job as a teller at Key Bank. Six months before he graduated,



who knows what America would have become? During the struggle, as the Khmer Rouge came to power, there were people who were trying to overthrow Pol Pot. They didn't want the society Pol Pot wanted to build. They were not successful. Cambodia is a beautiful country. Two million people killed and nobody noticed a thing."

the bank let him know there was a job waiting for him as a credit specialist should he decide to apply. He didn't know anything about finance, but applied anyway. Today he is in charge of commercial underwriting at Camden National Bank and his wife Sophy, works for the federal government in the social security department.

"My job is to manage the underwriters, to make sure we underwrite loans in a sound way and manage risk. Hopefully, we make enough good decisions so we can be profitable and continue to lend money to people and businesses in need."

Their son Alex is now four, the age Rotha was when he went to work seven days a week in the labor camps. Rotha's dream is to buy his own business – a small motel or hotel in Midcoast Maine, where he could put his handyman skills to work, play with his son, and enjoy life. But as a banker and risk assessor, Rotha knows the time isn't right.

"For me, getting the financing isn't a problem because I know the structure. As an analyst, I know leveraging is only good on an upswing but this is a downswing so I've put the idea on the shelf for now. It's not about making money. For me, it's a lifestyle change. It's not a good financial calculation now but when the economy turns, it will be okay."

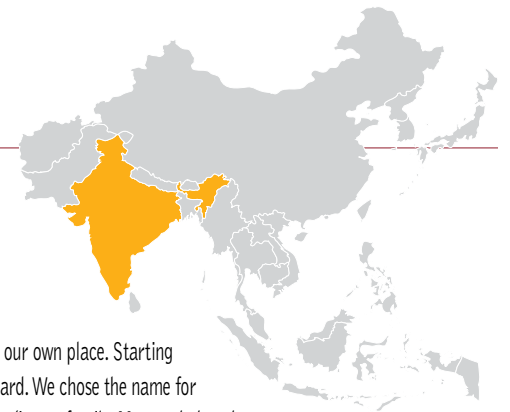
Unlike other refugees from war-torn countries who want to forget the past and focus on the future, Rotha is haunted by what happened in Cambodia. He has been back to Cambodia a number of times.

"The majority of the people my age – they don't exist. It's the strangest feeling. Either people in Cambodia today are older than me or younger. I really want to understand what happened in Cambodia – how it got itself into such a mess in the first place."

By the end of the war in Cambodia, one-quarter of the population had died from starvation, deadly purges, executions and overwork.

"A lot of things have to fall in place to make sure genocide occurs. It had to be just the right formula, the right time, the right personality to make it happen. Most people are not bad. Most leaders are not dictators. All the cards have to fall in place. Like they did for Hitler and the Holocaust. Despite all the accidents of geography, despite all the scenarios that made it possible, there was one final ingredient, the person in charge, Pol Pot. Had George Washington been different, or if he had people around him who were different,

# Prem Sharma



**P**rem Sharma owns two *Jewel of India* restaurants; one in Biddeford and the other in South Portland. Like many restaurants, this is a family affair with many relatives working together to create a successful business. Prem lives in Saco with his parents, wife and three children. Not too long ago his older brother, wife and two children came to Maine to be part of the business. Prem Sharma was born in the district of Gurdaspur in Punjab, India in 1970. Punjab state is located in northwest India and is the major wheat supplier to the rest of India.

"My father and his three brothers lived all together with their families, so I grew up in a family of over 60 people. The family had a farm where we grew wheat, rice, sugarcane, mustard, and other things."

In addition to farming, the family were great cooks and often catered weddings and large parties.

"In 1989, my father won the green card lottery. It took two years to

process our immigration papers."

They came to New York City and lived with a cousin who had helped with the paperwork. Prem, who was now over 18, came to Maine shortly thereafter to work in a restaurant. To him New York City was too big and too noisy. Maine, like the Punjab, was more quiet and peaceful. Soon his father and mother joined him.

Meena, his wife is also from Punjab. Her sister, who lives in New York, arranged their marriage. They were engaged for three years carrying out their courtship via long distance phone calls to India. Meena's parents still live in India where they own a small grocery store.

"In 1999 we opened our own place. Starting a new restaurant is very hard. We chose the name for the restaurant, *Jewel of India* as a family. Me, my dad, and my wife worked very hard. At that time we had only one child – Jessica – who was only four months, so my mom babysat her. There was no Indian restaurant before ours in Biddeford, so people really liked it. My dad and I are the cooks."

The restaurant has a strong following and an excellent reputation." People think the food is very good and fresh. And I always say, 'yes I know,' I make everything fresh.' And my dad has special recipes of his own from my grandfather."

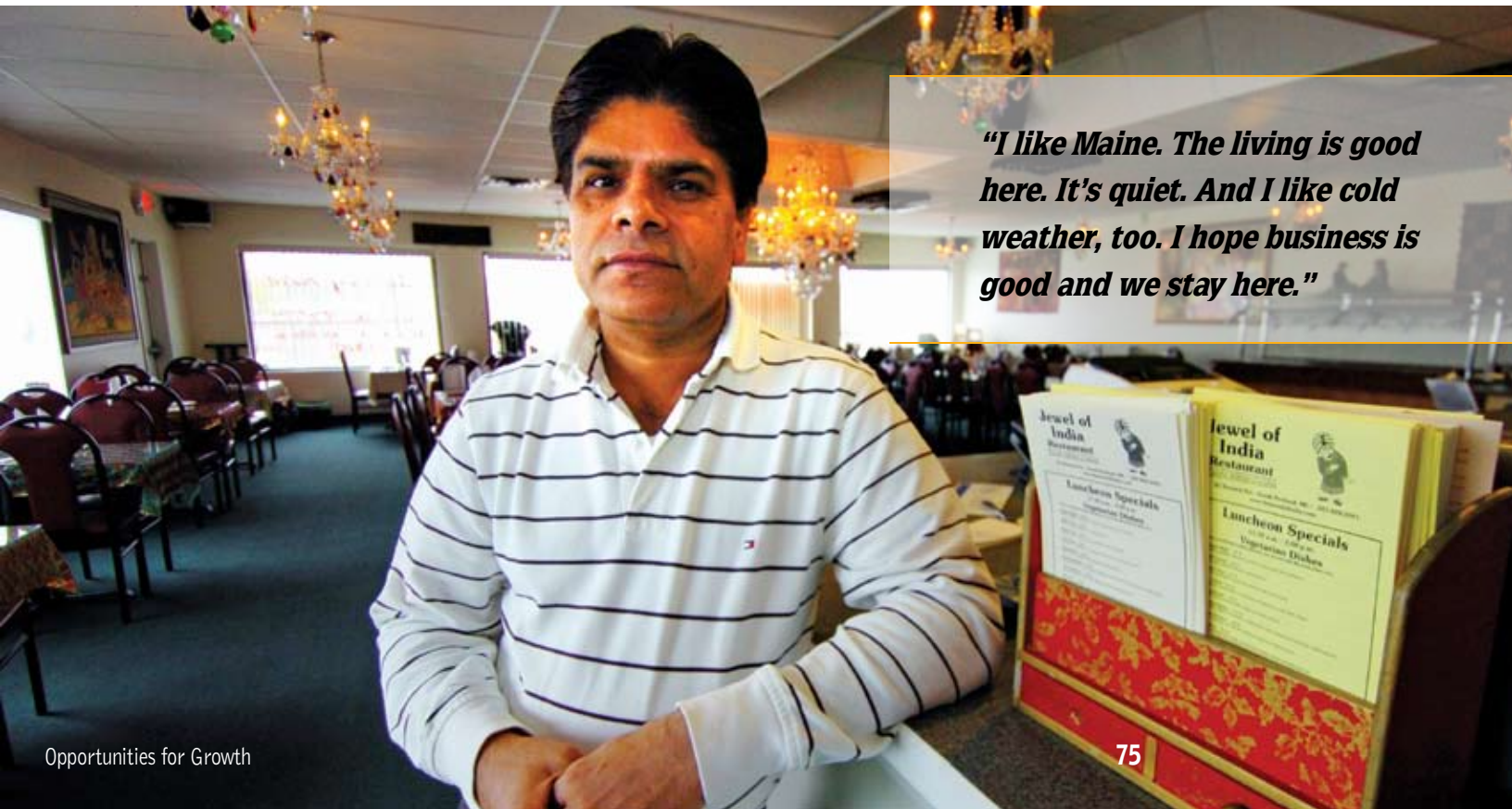
Most of the specialty items they buy wholesale from New York or Boston. Last year, they opened a second restaurant with the same name in South Portland. Prem's oldest brother, Mohan came from India with his family two years ago to join the business.

"So, now, my dad, my wife, and my nephew take care of the restaurant in Biddeford, and me and my brother work in South Portland. In South Portland, we also have two employees."

Sharma and Meena have three children. They rarely get to travel much because the restaurant is open six or seven days a week. Meena's family has come to visit from India a few times. In a few years, if the business continues to grow they hope to return to India to visit.

"My mom and dad are happy we are successful. They had nothing here, you know. They do not speak English. They never went to school. So we make it together. We have a big struggle with the language, but my girls, I tell them they are lucky to be born here. 'English is your own language and whatever you want, you can go for it.'"

From: **Gurdaspur District, India**  
Lives: **Saco, Maine**  
Occupation: **Owner, Jewel of India Restaurants**



***"I like Maine. The living is good here. It's quiet. And I like cold weather, too. I hope business is good and we stay here."***



# Conclusion

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The face of Maine is changing. As Maine's Asian and immigrant communities grow, so too should interest in their success. There are many opportunities for Maine to grow dynamically in the 21st century. Supporting new Mainers is certainly one of them.

America is a land of immigrants and Maine is no different. Throughout history our country has experienced periods of open door policies and periods of anti-immigrant fervor. Immigration reform is once again on the national agenda. Public sentiment, policy proposals, reports, research and analysis all point to different ways forward.

Decades of anti-immigration policies and fear against Asians in the twentieth century have proven to be completely misguided. Asians in Maine and elsewhere are economic and cultural assets. Their achievements in science, technology, art, finance, education and medicine are well-documented. From being an excluded immigrant race, Asians are now courted by prestigious colleges, by science and industry, and by Fortune 500 firms. But as this report shows, Asians do not fit a single stereotype. Asians in Maine are a diverse people, work in a variety of jobs and professions, and contribute to the economy in multiple ways.

Maine's Asian population, by national standards, is small. While there have been a few Chinese families in Maine since the late 1800's, the most significant rise in our Asian population came as a result of refugee resettlement policies following the Vietnam War. As population density and economic competition grew, particularly in the restaurant and service industries in areas like New York and Boston, other Asians moved north to Maine. The presence of high-tech industries and institutions of higher learning in Maine also serve as magnets. Family re-unification policies, marriage and adoption also contribute to our small but growing Asian population. Today it's likely you can meet someone with Asian heritage anywhere in Maine; a phenomena that didn't exist forty years ago when we had a total population of approximately 1,000 Asians versus nearly 12,000 today.

Brazil, China, Japan and India are four of the top ten economies in the world and are expected to change the world economic order even further in the next decade. In the grand scheme of things, when so much of the United States is more ethnically and racially diverse and can count population in terms of millions versus thousands, the story of Asians in Maine may seem of little consequence. Maine is not a melting pot, but it is a microcosm.

Many small, predominately white, low population, low median income, historically resource-based, aging workforce places like Maine are trying to figure out how to navigate an increasingly globalized, multi-national, young and dynamic world economy. States are also trying to figure out how to make the best use of the talents within their borders. Recognizing the drive, skills, creativity, hopes and aspirations of Maine's new immigrants is a starting place. Maximizing opportunities and supporting strategies for Asians and other immigrants in Maine to thrive is in the best interests of all citizens. It is certainly in the best interests of our state and our economy. ■

# About the Authors and Consultants

**Neil Amalfitano, Graphic Designer:** I was born in Waterville, Maine. My mother's family came to the United States from England and Scotland in the late 1800s, while my father's emigrated from Italy in 1919. From a young age I have always had a passion for visual arts and the creative process. After receiving a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 1987, I began my career in design working for a graphic artist from Chile and later a prominent Maine advertising agency before my current position as a graphic designer and pre-press technician for R.N. Haskins Printing Company in Oakland. I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from, and work with many talented and diverse people during the past 24 years.



**Abe Dailey, Research Assistant:** I grew up in Raymond, Maine. My father's family originally emigrated from Denmark in the 1760s and settled in Eastern Maine. My mother's family emigrated from Scotland to the U.S. in the late 1800s. I have a bachelor's degree in economics and certificate in applied GIS from USM. I'm currently working on my master's degree in community planning and development at the Muskie School of Public Service. I grew up in a small town in Maine with very little ethnic diversity, so I am always fascinated to meet people from other parts of the world. They bring a fresh perspective as well as much needed creative energy, optimism, and enthusiasm to this state.



**Victor Damien, Photographer:** My grandfather, Xu Wang, was born in 1901 in Guangdong Province in mainland China. He, like many Chinese, traveled around the world in search for his future. That journey landed him in a small fishing village off the coast of Peru where he opened a grocery store. In the late 1930's he met my grandmother. Their first daughter, my mother, was born in Peru's capital city, Lima in 1944. I am my grandfather's first grandson and was born in 1965. My grandfather was a person of few words. I remember him always looking out



at the horizon silently from the inside of his store. My mother and aunts always described him as happy and strong, singing as he cooked for them at their home. My grandfather died in my house in Peru in 1982. I came to the United States in 1984.

**Deborah Felder, Project Manager:** My husband and I came to Maine in the 1970's during the great 'back to the land' migration. My father's family came to this country around 1918 to escape religious persecution in Russia. My mother's family came to the United States in the 1800's from Germany and Ireland. I was the first generation to go to college and have an undergraduate degree in telecommunications from the University of Southern California and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Maine. Growing up, my uncle was the president of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and travelled around the world on Jewish rescue missions including resettlement of Jewish people living in what was then the communist countries of the Soviet Union and China. Writing the stories for this report, I am once again reminded of the triumph of the human spirit.



**Dolgormaa Hersom, Interviewer:** I was born in Mongolia and spent my early childhood in North Korea where my father worked in the Mongolian Embassy. My dad has a Ph.D. in Korean studies and has been working in international relations for over 40 years, while my mom a French language teacher and interpreter, worked for the Institute of Traditional Medicine in Mongolia. I studied sociology in Ekaterinburg, Russia and Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and then came to the University of Maine at Farmington to study political science. Since 1998 I have lived in Southern Maine and worked for Catholic Charities Maine Refugee & Immigration Services and now as a Project Manager for Language Access for New Americans at the United Way of Greater Portland. I met my husband Rick at UMF and have two daughters – Unuzul and Altanzul.





**Robert Ho, Consultant:** I was born in Tienjin, China, emigrated to the United States at the age of 13, and became a naturalized citizen while serving in the U. S. army during the Korean War.

The fields of my university studies were political science (BA, Oberlin College) and history (MA, Columbia University). Before my retirement in 2003, I was a Rural Economic Development Specialist at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension and served as the founding executive director of the Maine Rural Development Council. One of my previous lives was spent working in the community development field with Maine Indian tribes after their land claims settlement. My wife, Nancy, and I have two children and four grandchildren. In my retirement, I am actively involved in my wife's retail business on Mt Desert Island, The Kimball Shop and Boutique. Together, we try to find time each winter traveling in Asia.

**Vaishali Mamgain PhD, Researcher:** Born in Ootacamund, India, I came to the United States to do my doctoral studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1997 I moved to Portland Maine to teach in the Department of Economics at the University of Southern Maine, where I am a tenured professor. My research interests include immigrant issues, contemplative pedagogy, and behavioral economics. Looking at demographic data has further increased my awareness of the vital importance of immigrants in filling Maine's labor needs.



**Garrett Martin, Editor:** A child of the south, I came to Maine with my wife and children in 2003 from Mississippi. My wife's family lives in the state and traces their roots to some of our nation's earliest settlers from England. My ancestral heritage is less clear and includes a melding of English, Irish, Scottish, and Cherokee though I most identify with the red clay of North Carolina and the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.



As a child, my family hosted exchange students from Japan and Europe sparking my interest in other cultures at a young age. My first experience abroad was as

an exchange student in Japan. Since then I have been fortunate to work and travel abroad many times. Some of my most poignant experiences occurred while working with women's banking groups in south India. As MECEP's associate director, I appreciate working for an organization that celebrates and recognizes the importance of Maine's increasing diversity to our economy and quality of life.

**Connie Zhu, Project Coordinator:** Like many Asian immigrants featured in this report, I was astounded by the "utter lack of people" in Maine. I was born and raised in Shanghai and enrolled at the University of Southern Maine (USM) in 1988.

The Office of International Programs at USM, led by Mr. Steve Simonds and Ms. Domenica Cipollone, was instrumental in recruiting the first wave of Chinese students in the late eighties thru the early nineties. The Chinese-American Friendship Association of Maine also helped welcome many of us into the community. They have organized many traditional Chinese holiday celebrations that attract both Chinese and locals. Twenty-some years later, I am glad to see so many new faces at these celebrations, not just Chinese students, but also Chinese professionals in education, healthcare, IT, finance, biotech and many other fields. Like me, a lot of them have also learned to appreciate what Maine has to offer – its unique beauty, peace, and genuine, nice people.





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