

Bridging the gap

Alice Mong, who graduated from the inaugural class of an east-west tie-up executive MBA course, now applies her skills to improve US-China relations. By **Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson**

E DUCATION HAS ALWAYS been a great bridge builder. We forget – we think it's a recent thing," says Alice Mong, director of the Museum of Chinese in America, as she shows a visitor around an exhibition charting the century-long history of the Yale-China Association.

The black-and-white images of Yale's missionary brand of educational exchanges fill one room of a slick new building, dedicated to the history of the Chinese-American diaspora, from early traders and 19th-century railway builders to Steven Chu, US energy secretary, and Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo.

Mong's own journey to the heart of Manhattan's Chinatown took her through

another pioneering cross-cultural programme. In 1998, she joined the inaugural class of the Kellogg-Hong Kong University of Science and Technology executive MBA programme, set up by Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and the HKUST's Business School.

Born in Taiwan 47 years ago, Mong moved to the US aged 10 and grew up an hour from Columbus, Ohio, in a town of 55,000 people. There were just three Chinese families and one Szechuan restaurant – run by her father.

After graduating from Ohio State University with a degree in international relations, Mong found herself working for the state of Ohio's department of development, helping local companies do business internationally.

Building cultural bridges: Alice Mong, director of the Museum of Chinese in America



With no business background, she wanted an American MBA, and had her eyes set on Kellogg in nearby Evanston, Illinois.

"Either I was not good enough or I didn't have the right experience, but I didn't get in," she recalls, "so I asked my boss to send me to Hong Kong" to promote Ohio companies' trade with south-east Asia.

Fluent in Mandarin, she soon moved to Hang Lung Properties, a Hong Kong group, where she spent five years working for Ronnie Chan, its chairman, and organising the 1997 handover festivities for guests of Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong's chief executive designate at the time.

Her desire to complete a US business degree remained, even in this corporate setting, Mong says, but adds: "I could not see myself giving up the network I had built." When she went to hear a talk by Donald Jacobs, then Kellogg's dean, about the school's plan for a joint degree with HKUST, she realised that she need not sacrifice either ambition.

Sponsored by Chan's family foundation, on the condition that she stay with the company for at least two years, Mong became one of 35 guinea pigs in a programme that topped the FT's EMBA rankings after only a decade.

The Kellogg-HKUST tie-up, the first of its kind in Asia, is no longer unique. Tsinghua and Insead now run joint EMBA programmes, as do Fudan and Washington University. Last year, the University of Hong Kong, a rival to HKUST, teamed up with Columbia Business School and London Business School to launch EMBA-Global Asia.

In 1998, however, Kellogg-HKUST was able to offer Mong something she would not have found in Evanston. "What I found striking was the 'Asian-ness'," she says. With many of her classmates from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, "it was pretty equal. I would not have had that had I gone to Kellogg."

Mong had been picked as senior investment manager for Hantak, a non-property investment subsidiary that Hang Lung set up in the

middle of the dotcom investment boom, and the entrepreneurial mood of the time lit up the classroom. "In 1998 and 1999, a lot of exciting things were happening in the international business world, so we got to practise at work some of the stuff we were learning. It was really timely," she says.

Classmates as diverse as one working on Hong Kong's new airport, a Morgan Stanley managing director and an executive for a cake-shop chain also brought their own dilemmas to the classroom, Mong adds. "We would sometimes learn as much from our classmates as from the faculty," she says. "It meant we got our hands on real situations."

The 18-month EMBA programme now covers 11 modules, from organisational design to building consumer brands in China, packed into two weekends a month. Students live on the HKUST campus from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. Half the teaching is by Kellogg faculty members, but all the modules are taught in Hong Kong, except two live-in weeks in Illinois.

Mong remembers her months at the campus overlooking Hong Kong's Clear Water Bay as being "pretty intense", working 13- to 14-hour days. "You had one weekend to recover,

but you still had to do the homework," she says. Small groups of five or six students would set up evening conference calls to get their assignments done.

"All of us really learned time management," she says. When she finished, she says, she was "better at working, more empathetic with how other people think, and more familiar with different sectors. [Hang Lung] wasn't just investing in property any more. It allowed me to broaden out, to help build that new division."

Other Hang Lung executives completed the Kellogg-HKUST EMBA after Mong, who recommended it to friends for several years after she graduated. But by 2002,

Growing ambition: the museum hopes to move from its rented premises to a larger and permanent location

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dotcom fever had subsided and Hang Lung disbanded its non-property arm.

Mong thought her next job would be in China, but she was approached about the executive directorship of the Committee of 100, a group of prominent Americans of Chinese descent focused on improving US-China relations.

She had not planned to work in the non-profit world, but a period of "soul-searching" changed her mind. Her parents were ageing and the country where she had spent half her life was still reeling from the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001. "I think 9/11, as a Chinese-American, made me think, 'Where is home?'" she says. "The business sector didn't seem as glamorous to me any more."

Concerned at what she saw as widespread misunderstanding of China in the US, Mong regarded the committee – whose members included I.M. Pei, the architect, and Tan Dun, the composer – as another bridge builder. Years after she had first itched for a corporate position, she also found herself unfulfilled by corporate life.

"Maybe I was not cracked up to be in the business world," she says, but with her Kellogg-HKUST training, she set about running the non-profit organisation like a small business, opening its Hong Kong office, managing conferences in Hong Kong and Beijing, and raising more than \$3.5m in five years.

One of the committee's goals, of championing the achievements of Chinese in the US,

intersected closely with that of the Museum of Chinese in America that Mong now runs. By the time she was recruited in 2009 to succeed the museum's director (also its co-founder), she had been a member and helped with its fundraising for several years.

The museum – originally called the Chinatown History Project, offering modest local exhibits on an upper floor of a former school – was already entertaining bigger ambitions. Mong started work two months before the museum was due to move into new premises. At the time, it was \$13m into a fundraising programme that aims to raise \$15m by next year.

This year, 35,000 people will visit the museum, up from 20,000 at its old location. Among them have been high-profile guests such as Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York. But Mong's task is to expand the museum's profile and budget, and one day move it from its rented premises to create a larger, permanent national museum about Americans of Chinese extraction.

Here, she says, the Kellogg-HKUST training has been invaluable. "I just finished my five-year strategic plan in June," she says. "All of the stuff I learned in my EMBA came into play. I dug out my papers from my class."

With an operating budget of \$2.5m, a staff of 10 and a host of volunteers and interns, "fundamentally, it's still a business," she says.

In this environment, Mong has found her network of EMBA classmates invaluable. One of them, Michael Ducker, president of FedEx's

Learning curve: this year, the museum expects 35,000 visitors



“Most people destroy value when they negotiate. They try to squeeze every dime. But you have to know to squeeze”

global business, is a supporter of the Committee of 100 and of the museum.

“That network is still quite strong,” Mong says. It is sustained by monthly gatherings for those still in Hong Kong, alumni magazine updates and frequent visits from those scattered as far as Europe and Australia.

The museum does not shy from harsher times in Chinese-American history, such as the violence around the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. A poster from that time reads: “Shall we have Chinese? No! No! No!” Mong remarks:

“A lot of the anti-immigration rhetoric we’re hearing now you saw back then.”

But amid the replica opium balls, restaurant menus, laundry signs and Charlie Chan film posters, a strong educational theme emerges, in profiles of Tsien Hsue-shen, the US-educated “father of Chinese rocketry”, and Zheng Ji, the Nanjing University professor who earned his biochemistry degree at Ohio State University and lived to almost 111. Mong and her Kellogg-HKUST peers are following in their footsteps. ■

Educating through history: artifacts in the Museum of Chinese in America