

People



Thomas Sung, founder of Abacus Federal Savings Bank, stands in an aisle of the bank's safety deposit boxes with his two daughters, Vera Sung (left) and Jill Sung, who are executives at the bank. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

FILM EXPLORES LEGAL ORDEAL OF NY FAMILY BANK

By JIAN PING in Chicago for China Daily

A sold-out audience packed the screening of *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*, a documentary by Steve James shown at the 52nd Chicago International Film Festival on Oct 18.

When the lights came up at the end of the film, the entire audience gave a standing ovation.

Abacus documents the story of the Sung family, owners of Abacus Federal Savings Bank in New York's Chinatown, and their battle against the New York County District Attorney's prosecution on fraud charges.

The DA indicted the bank in May 2012 with a list of nearly 200 counts of charges, including grand larceny and mortgage fraud. After a four-month trial in 2015, the bank was exonerated. However, the Sung family paid \$10 million in legal fees and had immeasurable business losses.

The family-owned bank was the only one prosecuted after the 2008 financial meltdown despite its very low default rate. Meanwhile, as the film showed, big banks issued \$4.8 trillion in fraudulent loans and paid \$10 billion in fines, but no one was prosecuted.

"We were not given an option," Thomas Sung, 80, founder and patriarch of the bank, told China Daily. "It was to plead felony and pay fines, while the big banks were offered fines

and settlements and moved on."

Sung, who was born in Shanghai and came to the US as a teenager, served as an immigration lawyer in New York before he set up the bank, with the mission to help immigrants realize their American dream.

"I'm very proud that we have helped the Chinese community grow and many immigrants buy their homes," Sung said.

One of the accusations was granting loans to borrowers who didn't demonstrate sufficient income and selling some of these loans to Fannie Mae, "passing the risk to the federal bank," although the bank had "one of the lowest default rates in the entire country."

"It's hypocritical that all these large too-big-to-fail banks that hadn't had any kind of prosecution other than paying fines, and yet, they were trying to prosecute this bank," said Mark Mitten, producer of the film.

"That was a tremendous injustice," Mitten said, adding that it was the reason he decided to do the film.

"This film clearly has a point of view that is in sympathy with the Sung family," said director James, an Emmy Award-winning Chicago filmmaker.

James said by spending time with the Sung family, he felt compelled to tell the story by the characters and by the fact that they had discovered an employee was falsifying loan documents themselves.

"They had self-reported, they had



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Mark Mitten, film's producer

even gone a step further and hired an outside investigator to come in and see if there was any other fraud," said James. "They cooperated with the DA's office until the point that they themselves became the target."

"All the evidence was convincing that they were innocent," said James.

Although the filmmakers championed the Sung family, they also included the point of view of the prosecutors, including interviews with Cyrus Vance, the New York County District Attorney, and Polly Greenberg, chief of the DA's major economic crimes bureau at the time.

In one scene in the film, 19 indicted employees of Abacus were brought into the courtroom with their hands chained together to a long rope, even though some of them had already



Abacus: Small Enough to Jail filmmakers and those whose story was featured in the movie attend the 52nd Chicago International Film Festival. From left: producer Mark Mitten; Sung family members Vera, Thomas and Hwei Lin; and director Steve James. JIAN PING / FOR CHINA DAILY

been arraigned and released on bail.

"They were paraded in like criminals in handcuffs," said Vera Sung, Thomas' daughter and an executive at the bank. "That was a deliberate act to humiliate them, to generate the impression that they were guilty. They shouldn't have been treated like that."

"I sat through numerous days of the trial," Mitten said. "I couldn't rationally understand how you could find this

bank guilty. Certainly there were some wrongdoing by individuals, but the bank as a whole was doing a wonderful service to the community."

"This is a very strong movie," said Glenn Preibis, 64, from Chicago. "It's one of the best films I've seen over the years. It's so honest and true."

Preibis said he felt embarrassed by the DA's actions. "The film did a great job

demonstrating that even today Asian people can still be the victims of unfair prosecution and bias," said Hauwei Lien, 35, a Chinese American born in the US. "I'm glad the film was made. The story needs to be told," he said. "I hope the film will be shown in more places."

"There is a lot at stake here, more at stake than just their future and reputation," said James, the director.

Surgeon at Stanford takes on hepatitis B globally

By LIA ZHU in San Francisco liazhu@chinadailyusa.com

At the Asian Liver Center of Stanford University, a series of black and white photos on the walls tells the "untold story" of a middle-aged man in China's Henan province whose whole family died of liver cancer and he died of the same disease years later.

"This [photo gallery] is a reminder of why we are doing all of this, why we are helping to educate the public, and trying to change the laws to improve awareness of prevention and treatment of hepatitis B," said Samuel So, founder and director of the Asian Liver Center.

"Sometimes when people talk about statistics, we tend to forget people," said So, a professor at Stanford's School of Medicine and a transplant surgeon.

Though he could make more money in the operating room, So spends much of his time traveling between Chinese mainland, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, and recently Indonesia and the Philippines, spreading the word about hepatitis.

"How many lives can I save by cutting out liver cancer? Very few. But

millions of lives can be saved if children are vaccinated and many more people are treated," said So, who also serves as a special adviser on viral hepatitis to the World Health Organization.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, So came to the US for higher education. After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1973, he went back to Hong Kong and continued his medical studies at the University of Hong Kong until 1978.

After serving as a medical officer of the Hong Kong government, he returned to Minneapolis in 1980 and worked as a transplant surgeon.

At the time, the Midwest did not have large numbers of Chinese or Asian people, and almost no one was infected with hepatitis B. It wasn't until he moved to San Francisco, home to a large Asian community, that he realized the extent of the hepatitis B and liver cancer problem.

The reason is chronic hepatitis B infection is uncommon in white Americans, said So. About one in 1,000 white American adults has chronic hepatitis B, compared with about one in 12 Asian-American adults, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"I looked around the country and no one was doing anything about it. It seemed no one cared about hepatitis, a disease that kills so many people in Asia," said So.

He found that immigrants from Asia were not aware of the disease's risks, the importance of testing and treatment and the link between hepatitis and liver cancer.

"Chinese people don't like to talk about cancer and hepatitis because of discrimination," said So. "Then we found that doctors in the US didn't realize the importance of testing and how to care for the patients, because it's not well taught in medical school."

So founded the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University in 1996 to put an end to the high rates of chronic hepatitis B and liver cancer in Asian-American communities and Asia.

In the past 20 years, the center has spearheaded advocacy and education efforts to improve the capacity of the US health care system to prevent and control hepatitis B and liver cancer through a strategy called CARE (collaboration, advocacy, research and education).

They partner with the CDC, the Department of Health and Human



Samuel So, founder and director of the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, tells the story of a Chinese man who lost his entire family to liver cancer before dying of the same disease himself. LIA ZHU / CHINA DAILY

Services (HHS) as well as policy makers to increase national awareness and national policy changes.

In 2008, the HHS for the first time recognized hepatitis as a disease with one of the greatest healthcare disparities in the US.

In 2010, So received a CDC Honor Award for mobilizing people and resources in ways that have changed global public health policies related to hepatitis B. He was recognized in 2014 by the White House for global and national leadership.

During his service on the board of

the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, So's research caught the attention of US policy makers.

As a result, HHS released a national action plan in 2011 for prevention and control of viral hepatitis in the US, leading to screening and vaccination being covered by health insurance as of 2016. For the first time, the hepatitis B vaccine for adults is free.

Currently in the US, two in three people living with hepatitis B don't know they are infected. Of those testing positive, only one in three is connected to a doctor; and of those

under a doctor's care, only half get treatment.

"The key message in the US is to get more people tested and treated. Over time, you can cut down the deaths of liver cancer and cirrhosis by over 50 percent," said So.

But the problem will not go away if people infected in Asia are not treated or protected, said So.

About 75 percent of Asian-American adults are foreign born, many from countries with a high prevalence of chronic hepatitis B infection, according to the CDC, which estimates that 95 percent of chronic hepatitis B in the US is imported.

China has the biggest burden of chronic viral hepatitis in the world — around 100 million people (93 million with hepatitis B and 8 million with hepatitis C), or 25 percent of all people living with chronic hepatitis in the world.

Without monitoring and treatment, 15 percent to 25 percent of those living with chronic hepatitis B, and 10 percent of those living with chronic hepatitis C will die from liver cancer or cirrhosis, he said.

In 2006 to 2008, the Asian Liver Center provided a province-wide free hepatitis B vaccination program in Qinghai province, the first of its kind in China, to immunize more than 500,000 children.

"It's so sad so many people die at a young age. Liver cancer is among the leading causes of death for middle-age people in China, the productive people who could have been supporting their families," he said.