Biography of Samuel Tinsing Mok



A Chinese-American Federal Chief Financial Officer's Journey of Public Service

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Introduction



On 25 January 2002, the United States Senate confirmed President George W. Bush's nomination of Samuel Tinsing Mok as Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Labor by voice vote. Nearly forty years had passed since he first arrived in New York from Hong Kong in 1963 and worked as a waiter in Chinatown.

Mok was described as the first and only Chinese American to serve as a federal Chief Financial Officer at the deputy secretary level in United States history. During his distinguished career, he held senior financial management positions at the United States Department of the Treasury, including Comptroller and Chief Financial Officer, before

becoming the Department of Labor's Chief Financial Officer at deputy secretary rank. After leaving government service in 2007, he founded Condor International Advisors and devoted considerable attention to the National China Garden Foundation, serving as its Chairman and promoting cultural exchanges between China and the United States, as well as political participation among Chinese-American youth. On 21 September 2022, he passed away following a brief but courageous battle with cancer, aged seventy-seven.

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Chapter 1
Early Years: From Shanghai to Hong Kong and New York

Samuel Tinsing Mok was born in Shanghai on 30 December 1944 to Mok Kwok and Mok Kola. He spent his childhood and adolescence in Hong Kong, where he attended La Salle College, a prestigious Catholic boys' school. During his youth, he was an enthusiastic explorer who frequently hiked through the hills of the New Territories and wandered through the neighbourhoods and streets of Sha Tin. He attained the rank of Queen's Scout, the equivalent of Eagle Scout in the United States, an achievement of which he remained proud throughout his life.

In 1963, Mok emigrated to New York with his family. He enrolled at Fordham University to study accounting and joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). While living in New York, he held several jobs, ranging from waiting tables in Chinatown to working as a stock runner. He later recalled his years in New York with great affection, particularly because it was there that he met Nancy, the woman who would become his wife.

After graduating from university, Mok began his career in the private sector in Manhattan. He worked as an auditor at Main & Hurdman, now part of KPMG, and subsequently as a senior

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auditor at Pannell Kerr & Forster. He later entered military service, serving with the United States Army's 7th Psychological Operations Group. Stationed in Tokyo and Okinawa, he was responsible for overseeing military intelligence reporting and analysis concerning China, Vietnam and North Korea. He completed his military service with the rank of Captain at the First United States Army Readiness Region at West Point.

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Chapter 2
Private Enterprise and Public Service: From Time-Life to the Treasury Department

Following his military service, Samuel Mok became Controller of Time-Life Books. He subsequently served as the first Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Treasurer of U.S. News & World Report.

However, he eventually decided to return to public service. He joined the United States Department of State as a senior Foreign Service officer responsible for matters involving the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. He later became part of the senior management team at the Department of the Treasury, where President George H. W. Bush appointed him as the department's first Chief Financial Officer. At the time, Mok was among the highest-ranking Asian Americans in the federal government.

During his years at the Treasury Department, Mok served in the mid-to-late 1990s as an American adviser to a working group responsible for drafting legal and regulatory provisions for China's National Audit Office. He made numerous trips between the United States and China, providing advice on auditing practices and legislative matters to relevant ministries and agencies under China's State Council. He also assisted in

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arranging the reception programme for a Chinese presidential delegation visiting the United States in the autumn of 1997.

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Chapter 3
Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Labor: The Pinnacle of His Career

On 17 October 2001, the White House announced President George W. Bush's intention to nominate Samuel Mok as Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Labor. The nomination was formally submitted to the Senate on 18 October. On 25 January 2002, the Senate confirmed his appointment.

At the Department of Labor, Mok served as Chief Financial Officer with the rank of Deputy Secretary, reporting directly to Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao. He was responsible for overseeing the execution of the department's annual budget of approximately US$55 billion. His principal responsibilities included serving as a senior financial adviser to Congress, the White House Office of Management and Budget, and the Department of Labor itself.

His objective was to move beyond merely satisfying basic accounting requirements and towards providing financial management tools capable of informing policy and operational decisions. Under his leadership, the department replaced a fifteen-year-old financial management system with a new web-based system offering greater flexibility and stronger internal controls. Mok anticipated that these improvements would

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enable his staff to devote more attention to higher-level financial analysis.

Mok also discussed the differences between his responsibilities at the Treasury Department and those at the Department of Labor. At Treasury, each bureau maintained its own financial office, and he described his role as that of a policymaker and traffic policeman. At Labor, however, he oversaw a centralised financial management system. “Here, it is an operational job. I actually deliver services, make sure people get paid, and make sure reports go into production,” he explained. He also praised Secretary Elaine Chao for placing considerable importance on financial management, observing that her support made his responsibilities significantly easier.

In 2007, Mok stepped down as Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Labor. By then, he had held the position for more than five years. No Chinese American had previously occupied the role, and few of his predecessors had remained in office for more than three years.

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Chapter 4
Condor International: Transitioning from Government to Business

After leaving government service, Samuel Mok returned to the consulting profession in which he had previously worked. He established Condor International Advisors, LLC, and became its Chairman. The company was initially founded in partnership with retired United States Senator Birch Bayh.

Condor International Advisors provided strategic business intelligence and facilitated the development of important relationships between its clients and senior Asian diplomatic officials in Washington, D.C. Mok was frequently invited to advise Asian clients on strategies for entering the American market and establishing business partnerships. He acquired a strong reputation in international consulting involving government and private-sector affairs between China and the United States.

In a 2010 interview with China News Service, Mok observed that a visit to China had revealed numerous potential business opportunities and expressed enthusiasm about returning to invest in the country. At the same time, he noted that China's efforts to attract international talent were concentrated primarily in telecommunications, advanced technology, medicine and biotechnology. In his view, insufficient attention was being

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given to recruiting specialists in management and internal controls, whose expertise was particularly important for strengthening and expanding China's economy.

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Chapter 5
The National China Garden Foundation: His Most Important Endeavour in Later Life

The undertaking to which Samuel Mok devoted much of his energy in later life was the National China Garden Foundation.

The National China Garden was conceived as a friendship project between China and the United States following many years of bilateral discussions. Located within the United States National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., the proposed garden covered twelve acres and was intended to become the largest Chinese-style garden in North America.

Its design was inspired by the Ge Garden in Yangzhou, China, incorporating the garden's distinctive seasonal rockeries and twenty-two varieties of traditional pavilions and architectural structures. Under the proposed arrangement, the Chinese side would provide approximately twenty-two buildings, classical Chinese artworks, furnishings, landscaping and artificial rock formations. The American side would prepare the site and assume responsibility for maintenance following completion.

Mok became Treasurer of the National China Garden Foundation in 2012 and subsequently served as Chairman of its Board of Directors. In an interview with China Daily, he explained: “The ultimate goal is for the American public to

come here to appreciate and better understand Chinese culture. Through this, we can promote greater understanding between the peoples of our two countries and strengthen bilateral relations."

He regarded the project as an undertaking dedicated to peaceful relations. During the online reception organised by the Chinese Embassy in the United States to celebrate China's National Day and the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2020, Mok delivered a video address in his capacity as Chairman of the National China Garden Foundation.

He stated that, as a Chinese American, he felt immensely proud of China's five thousand years of contributions to human civilisation. He was equally proud of the contributions and sacrifices made by Chinese Americans to the United States over the preceding three hundred years.

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Chapter 6
A Pioneer and Mentor in the Chinese-American Community

Samuel Mok was a pioneering figure within the Asian-American community. His commitment extended beyond his own professional achievements to ensuring that Asian Americans as a whole had opportunities to succeed.

He was a founding member of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), founded the Federal Asian Pacific American Council, and became the first Asian-American National President of the Association of Government Accountants (AGA). President George H. W. Bush also appointed him to the National Advisory Council on the Public Service. Throughout his career, he served on numerous boards and committees.

Within the AGA community, Mok was widely regarded as a mentor. A former president of the organisation's Washington chapter recalled: “Sam was a generous and thoughtful mentor to many people, including me. He shared his insights through his longstanding commitment to the AGA community and his service on numerous federal accounting standards advisory committees. Sam could always be counted on to share his talents, regardless of how busy he was. Most importantly, Sam

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treated every colleague first as a friend and only then as a professional associate."

Another former AGA National President remarked: "His enthusiasm and energy were remarkable. Sam was always a champion of AGA and a strong advocate for the CGFM programme. He helped establish the Chinese New Year celebrations that the Washington chapter organised for many years. I especially enjoyed Sam's storytelling and kindness."

In 2007, Mok received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in recognition of his service to the United States and his outstanding contributions to the community.

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Chapter 7
A Thinker on Chinese-American Political Participation: From Climbing the Ladder to Becoming Ambassadors for China

Samuel Mok reflected deeply and critically upon the position of Chinese Americans within American society.

In a 2021 interview with China News Service's East-West Question series, he introduced a memorable analogy involving a staircase. If integration into American society were compared to climbing a staircase, he suggested, immigrants from every ethnic group would attempt to climb upwards, while those already occupying higher steps might push down those beneath them. He characterised this as a recurring feature of American society and argued that Asians remained on one of the lowest steps.

“The problem is that Chinese people, whether they are fourth-generation or fifth-generation Americans, still have yellow skin and are still regarded as different. This is a racial issue,” he observed.

Nevertheless, he also expressed an optimistic belief about the future: “I believe that one day the United States will have a president or vice-president of Chinese descent. It is only a matter of time.”

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He hoped, however, that once Asian Americans had advanced socially and politically, they would not imitate the discriminatory practices directed towards newer immigrants by earlier European immigrant groups. Instead, he believed they should show gratitude and offer support to those who followed.

On the subject of Chinese-American political participation, Mok emphasised that Chinese Americans needed not only to participate in politics but also to understand how to participate effectively.

He welcomed the growing involvement of Chinese Americans in political affairs after achieving financial stability. However, he warned that inadequate understanding of the American political system could leave some individuals vulnerable to manipulation and ultimately cause them to become scapegoats.

He urged politically active Chinese Americans to develop a thorough understanding of American politics, become familiar with its institutional rules and procedures, and conduct their activities in accordance with American law.

Mok also advanced another memorable idea: “Every Chinese American living in the United States is an ‘ambassador of China to America’.” Although individuals might differ in culture and religious beliefs, he believed they could use their

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distinctive backgrounds and experiences to promote people-to-people diplomacy between China and the United States.

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Chapter 8
Final Years and Legacy

On 21 September 2022, Samuel Mok passed away, surrounded by his family and accompanied by his wife, Nancy.

He was laid to rest with military honours, with a military honour guard in attendance. He was survived by his wife, Nancy, two children and six grandchildren.

In a memorial tribute, the Federation of Chinese American Associations in the Greater Washington Area wrote: “Mr. Samuel Mok was a source of pride for the Chinese community. His life, beginning with his immigration to America at a young age and his subsequent struggles and achievements, was truly remarkable. He accomplished extraordinary things in both government and business. His military service and career in the media during his younger years laid a solid foundation for his entry into mainstream American society.”

Among his many undertakings, Mok particularly cherished his work with the National China Garden Foundation, which he regarded as a project dedicated to supporting peaceful relations between China and the United States. He believed that the garden, inspired by Yangzhou's Ge Garden, would become an enduring symbol of goodwill and mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries.

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From Shanghai to Hong Kong, and from working as a waiter in New York's Chinatown to becoming a senior federal financial officer in Washington, Samuel Mok followed an extraordinary professional journey. His career took him from becoming the Treasury Department's first Chief Financial Officer to overseeing the Department of Labor's substantial budget, and from founding Condor International Advisors to leading the National China Garden Foundation.

Over seventy-seven years of life, he progressed from an immigrant beginning a new life in America to a senior federal official and ultimately to a cultural bridge between China and the United States.

His story offers an enduring reflection on achievement and responsibility within a society where racial inequalities continue to exist. The most meaningful contribution is not always simply to climb the ladder of success oneself, but to help create opportunities for those who follow.

Samuel Tinsing Mok was a man who, having achieved distinction in his own career, did not forget to reach back and help others advance.

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