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*Digesting Oriental-Occidental Fusion in 1976:
Ching Wah Lee's Memories of San Francisco's Chinatown*

Shelfmark

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The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH).
Project: Diversity Collections [Chinese American].
O.H. 1472.
Oral Interview with Ching Wah Lee, conducted by Julie Lam,
February 16, 1976, unspecified location.

Introduction

The oral history transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "Diversity Collections [Chinese American]." The interview with Ching Wah Lee was conducted by Julie Lam on February 16, 1976, at an unspecified location; however, based on its contents, it probably took place at Ching Wah Lee's gallery (a.k.a., "Museum of Chinese Art," 9 Old Chinatown Lane, San Francisco). It is 55 minutes and 53 seconds long, and it is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in the fall of 2025 by Cynthia Doan, Christine Hoo, Christopher Musnicky, Christopher Quan, and Omer Zia.

In this interview, Ching Wah Lee (June 28, 1901–January 2, 1980) recounts his life in San Francisco's Chinatown from his early childhood until his mid-seventies. He recalls the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, which resulted in his family's temporary displacement from the Bay Area, as one of his earliest memories; he details his family's struggles, such as living in makeshift dwellings and working on a farm in Sacramento; and he discusses his educational journey, the schools he attended, and the various jobs he held while attending middle school, high school, and the University of California, Berkeley. Mr. Lee talks about the impact the Great Depression had on his life and the Chinese American community. He explains that the curios and art objects that passed through his father's firm sparked his interest in Chinese art and culture at a young age, which eventually led him to manage a tour agency and art gallery—initially in response to racist, anti-Chinese sentiments from American tour agencies. While describing his agency's tours, he demonstrates his knowledge of and deep appreciation for San Francisco's monuments, historic landmarks, and Chinese culture. He compares the differences between the older and newer generations of Chinese Americans and briefly talks about the 1911 Chinese revolution and the Tong Wars. He recalls his time working in Hollywood, specifically recruiting Chinese actors, as well as his role in the film *The Good Earth* (1937). He then addresses his motivations for creating the *Chinese Digest*, the work they did, and how it was funded. He explains that the publication's readership consisted

of later generations of Chinese Americans who could not read Chinese but were still interested in news about China, along with local news and accomplishments of the Chinese American community. He also details the struggles they faced financing the publication and how it ceased operations after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, because staff members and readers were drafted to fight in World War II. He briefly talks about his time in the military as an interpreter, before ending his interview by reflecting on the Americanization of Chinese Americans and the influence that Chinese culture and especially Chinese cuisine have had on American society.

This oral history should be of particular interest to sociologists, anthropologists, scholars of Asian American studies and Asian American history (especially those focusing on Chinese Americans), and historians of San Francisco. Those studying economic change, societal change, and the concept of "Americanization" on a generational level (particularly the preservation and acquisition of language and culture) should also find a good amount of material here for their research.

Only identifiable individuals, locations, and technical terms have been referenced in the footnotes, usually when they first appear.

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 1472)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Ching Wah Lee [CL]

INTERVIEWER: Julie Lam [JL]

DATE: February 16, 1976

LOCATION: unspecified

PROJECT: Diversity Collections [Chinese American]

TRANSCRIBERS: Cynthia Doan, Christine Hoo, Christopher Musnicky,
Christopher Quan, and Omer Zia

JL: (sounds of tape turned on and paper rustling) This is an interview with Mr. Ching Wah Lee,¹ former publisher and editor of the *Chinese Digest*,² for the Chinese American Oral History Project at California State University, Fullerton. The date is (noise) February 16, 1976, and the time is 2:30 p.m. The interviewer is Julie Lam. (sounds of recorder turned off and back on, and paper rustling) Okay, Mr. Lee, can you tell me something about your family background and your childhood days?

CL: Well, first, I was born, uh, June 28, (sound of surface brushing against the microphone) 1901 in San Francisco.³ Um, I, uh, am the second son in a family with six sons and three daughters.⁴ Uh, one of my earliest recol—lections is the earthquake of 1906.⁵ Uh, my, uh, father and mother started packing as much of the important things as possible, uh, ready to leave the house because, uh, it was shaking quite violently. But father insist on having some hot tea, uh, before we leave. Unfortunately, uh, the gas was just petering out on the stove. However, the gas light above, uh, is still burning quite vigorously. So we took the kettle with, uh, about two cups of water in it and held off the gas light until the water is, uh, nearly hot,—

JL: Mm-hmm.

CL: —then we all have a sip of tea before we leave. Um, a peculiar thing happened when we were at the doorway. All the neighbors were shouting, “Don’t get out into the street because there’s a wild bull running loose.”

JL: (chuckles)

¹ (1901–1980), Asian American publisher, editor, art collector, and actor.

² Cultural magazine published in English (1935–1942) by and for Chinese Americans.

³ Coastal city in the northern part of the U.S. state of California.

⁴ His five brothers were Dr. Chang W. Lee, Rev. Edward Lee, King W. Lee, Horace W. Lee, and Edward W. Lee; his three sisters were: Agnes Sue, Cora Chan, and Marion Eng; see [online](#).

⁵ Great San Francisco Earthquake (magnitude 7.9; April 18, 1906).

- CL: Apparently, a man has, um, taken this cow to the butcher town for slaughter. But, uh, because, uh, of the earthquake, he, uh, apparently left the bull and ran for his own life,—
- JL: (chuckles)
- CL: —so the bull was running, uh, wild. Now this is not important, but among the Chinese there's a belief that when the end of the world come, uh, uh, a giant bull will be, uh, seen on Earth,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so we consider it a very bad omen.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But eventually, uh, ox ran off to another street, and we proceed on to the waterfront. Uh, we got to what is now, I guess, Fisherman's Wharf⁶—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and my father hired launch and took us to a friend of his over in Richmond⁷ across the Bay.⁸ This friend has a sh—shrimp fishery, uh, and was, uh, uh, operating a pretty large, uh, fishery at that time with several vessels and drying, uh, plot for the shrimp and so on.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, we stayed there a month or thereabout, but we know that, uh, we cannot stay there definitely. Um, so we, uh, my father thanked the owner who was very hospitable to us and we, uh, sailed to, uh, Stockton,⁹—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, then to Sacramento,¹⁰ and then to a farm, uh, along the Sacramento River.¹¹ Uh, if—if my memory serve me correctly, the farm is called On Sun Yin.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: (noise) Um, there we had the—the run of, uh, the farm, and we, uh, we felt very happy with the produce coming in,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —um, cherries were being picked and potatoes being harvest, so—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but, uh, eventually we make our way to, uh, Oakland.¹²
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And when we got there, there was no living quarters. The only, um, place we could find was a makeover¹³ barn,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.

⁶ Neighborhood on the northern waterfront of San Francisco.

⁷ City in the northern part of the U.S. state of California, northeast of San Francisco.

⁸ Tidal estuary between San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland.

⁹ City in the north-central part of the U.S. state of California.

¹⁰ Capital city in the north-central part of the U.S. state of California.

¹¹ Largest river in California, flows into the San Francisco Bay.

¹² City in the northern part of the U.S. state of California, east of San Francisco.

¹³ Presumably meaning "makeshift."

- CL: —so, we stayed there for a couple weeks, uh, during which my sister, the oldest in the family, was born.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, humorously, uh, when we grew up, we called her “Lady Jesus Christ.”
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Because she was born in a stable.
- JL: (laughs)
- CL: Uh, my father, uh, who was a herbalist,¹⁴ has many client in Oakland because, um, many of the Chinese were sick and need his help.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, then, uh, eventually, we moved back to San Francisco.
- JL: Mm-hmm. When was that when you moved back to San Francisco?
- CL: Uh, latter part of 1907.
- JL: Uh-huh. Was, um, Chinatown¹⁵ much changed after the fire¹⁶ in 1906?
- CL: I don’t know, because I was too young to remember what old Chinatown looked like.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But, uh, they had just built some, uh, uh, very, uh, temporary dwellings,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and, uh, we stayed there until more permanent dwelling were made.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: I remember this temporary dwell—ing has a tin roof, and it leaked constantly.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But we were glad to, uh, have a place to live anyhow.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And, uh, we, we called the Red Cross,¹⁷ uh, offered to help.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And all the Chinese were interviewed, and they were asked what they would like to have.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And my mother says, “Just one thing, a sewing machine.”
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, she was given a white sewing machine, and she made clothes for all of us.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, can you tell me something about your edu—back—uh—cation background and some of your work experiences?
- CL: Well, we went to the, uh—first of all, to, uh, a school run by the Baptists.¹⁸
- JL: Mm-hmm.

¹⁴ Historically significant occupation in Chinese culture, linked to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), using plants and herbs for medicinal purposes.

¹⁵ Neighborhood in San Francisco, enclave of Chinese immigrants (1850s–present).

¹⁶ Following the Great San Francisco Earthquake (April 18, 1906).

¹⁷ American Red Cross, humanitarian organization (1881–present).

¹⁸ Protestant Christian denomination, originated in the sixteenth century.

- CL: Then we, um, went to a grammar school¹⁹ run by the city, and at that time it's called the Oriental Public School.²⁰
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, the building was a pretty large one, but still, it's, uh, it's a temporary wooden, uh, building.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Um—and it's, uh, quite drafty and chilly in the winter. But, uh, we didn't think anything of it at that time. That was on Clay Street,²¹ uh, corner Joice Street²²—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —where the YWCA²³ stands today.²⁴
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: Then in 1915, I believe, uh, a permanent, uh, building was, uh, uh, constructed in Chinatown, and we moved there. And, uh, it's still known as the Oriental Public School but the, uh, Native Sons organization,²⁵ known as "Tongmenghui"²⁶—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —petitioned the, uh, city supervisor to give us a more Occidental name.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And so it was changed to the Commodore Stockton School,²⁷—
- JL: Oh, so that's the one—
- CL: —yeah, and it's still standing on the same site today, except the annex was built across the street.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: And another annex, uh, behind the building reaching into, uh, Clay Street.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, so how many years did you study there?
- CL: We studied until we reached the eighth grade and—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —graduated. Then we went, uh, to high school.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: Uh, my first intention was to register at the lower high school—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because, uh, it's noted for, uh, its scholastic work.
- JL: Mmm.

¹⁹ Elementary school or primary school.

²⁰ Founded 1859 as a segregated school for Chinese (and later, Korean and Japanese) children, destroyed in 1906, rebuilt 1915, named Commodore Stockton School (1924–1998), now Gordon J. Lau Elementary School (950 Clay Street).

²¹ Major (East-West) street through Chinatown.

²² Small (North-South) street in Chinatown.

²³ Young Women's Christian Association (1855–present).

²⁴ (965 Clay Street), now Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) Museum.

²⁵ Native Sons of the Golden State (1895–1915), now Chinese American Citizens Alliance.

²⁶ Revolutionary alliance (1905–1912) to overthrow China's Qing dynasty.

²⁷ See above, note 20.

- CL: But, uh, ninety percent of our friend were enrolled at the Polytechnic High School.²⁸
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So I changed my mind and joined the crowd instead.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: I have no regret because it does teach many crafts—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —which, uh, uh, helped a lot, of course.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, I took, uh, woodwork, uh, uh, electricity, uh, practical, um, physics, and so on.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, and then, what was the first job?
- CL: Well, even when I was going to the, uh, seventh grade, uh—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —I went out and got a job as a, uh, house boy—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —helping, uh, the head of the family, uh, in the kitchen and doing all the janitorial work.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, I walk about a mile each day to, uh, reach there and, uh, return to Chinatown to enroll—uh, to take part in the grammar scho—school.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, later on, when I was in high school, then I slip out.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Um, first as, uh, a chef, and then, uh, I had two jobs. Uh, one being the, uh, volunteer worker, uh, at the YMCA,²⁹ but also, uh, was paid for taking, uh, care of the gymnasium.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:06]

- CL: And I gave, uh, lessons in, uh, wrestling and acrobatics.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Then, when the YMCA have a permanent building constructed on Sacramento Street,³⁰ where it stand now,³¹ um, with this, uh, gymnasium, uh, swimming pool, and dormitory, I was, uh, elevated to boy secretary. (chuckles)
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And, uh, of course, at that time, I was also, um, at that time, was enrolled at the university.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, I would, uh, commute. Uh, in those day, there was no Bay Bridge³²—

²⁸ (1884–1973; since 1915 located at 701 Frederick Street).

²⁹ Young Men's Christian Association (1844–present).

³⁰ Major (East-West) street through Chinatown.

³¹ (855 Sacramento Street), current building dates from 1926.

³² San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, constructed 1933–1936.

- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but, uh, we took the ferry.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And then the train to reach, uh, the campus.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But, uh—
- JL: —So, is that Berkeley?³³—
- CL: —Yeah, Berkeley.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: And, uh, I was very lucky be—because being boy secretary, I have, um, a salary of two hundred dollars a month—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —which is—
- JL: —That's pretty good at that time. (speaking over each other)—
- CL: —Yeah,—
- JL: —Mm-hmm.—
- CL: —in those day, yes. Um, then, uh, due to a change in policy, I left the, the YMCA, uh, chiefly because they, uh, were antagonistic to my running a Boy Scout³⁴ troop at the same time.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And although the Boy Scout work is volunteer work, still, the Y³⁵ felt that, uh, it's in conflict with their boys' work.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, and also, at that time, it was at the height of the Depression,³⁶—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so they were only too glad to let me go and save (chuckles) themselves a, a salary.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: So, uh, in, uh, an emergency, I worked as a cook—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —for one of the sorority.³⁷
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: It's one of big sorority, Tri Delta,³⁸—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and the girls, uh, were about twenty-four or five in number.
- JL: Mm-hmm. What were you studying at Berkeley then?
- CL: Uh—Anthropology, but at—in the beginning, I didn't know what I wanted. I just, uh, take general courses only.

³³ University of California, Berkeley (1868–present).

³⁴ Boy Scouts of America (1910–present; a.k.a. Scouting America since 2024).

³⁵ Acronym for “YMCA” (Young Men’s Christian Association).

³⁶ Great Depression (1929–1939), worldwide economic downturn.

³⁷ Social organization for women at colleges and universities.

³⁸ Delta Delta Delta (ΔΔΔ), sorority (1888–present).

- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: I also audit many classes, which, uh, I got no credit for.
- JL: Mm-hmm. How did you get interested in, you know, all this Chinese art and culture?
- CL: Well, my father, besides being an herbalist, uh, had partnership in a firm, Tai Chong Company,³⁹—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —which import, uh, curios and art objects.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, naturally, I took great interest in the things that come through.
- JL: Mm-hmm. So, that was the beginning, when you started—
- CL: Yeah.
- JL: Uh, have you ever been outside of United States?
- CL: Uh, yes, I have, uh, uh, been to, uh, Formosa,⁴⁰ Hong Kong,⁴¹ uh, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and then around the world, back to, uh, Boston.⁴²
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And then Florida⁴³ and back to, (chuckles) to California.⁴⁴
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: On the way back, I tried to visit the pyramids—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —in, uh, Mexico, but I was taken sick, so—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —the trip was called off prematurely.
- JL: Uh-huh. What was that trip for? Was it on your own? Was it a special—
- CL: Uh, partly on my own, partly I have a, uh, partner who wanted to buy some art objects in the Far East,⁴⁵ so, uh, I went, uh, with her in this buying trip.
- JL: I see. Just now, uh, you were talking about the Depression. Uh, were the Chinese very much affected by the Depression?
- CL: Yes, they were greatly affected, uh, but they managed, uh, better than most other, I think, because our economy was simple, and the jobs are the kind that, uh, American don't want, even during the Depression.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: They serve as domestics and, uh, janitor, things of that sort. Not that they wouldn't like to get it, but they were already established as cooks and janitors, and—
- JL: Mm-hmm.

³⁹ Tai Chong & Co. Oriental Goods, established in the early twentieth century (743 Jackson Street). See, for example, *Polk's Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory* (R.L. Polk & Co., 1930), 1393, [online](#).

⁴⁰ Former name of Taiwan.

⁴¹ Coastal city and special administrative region in China, former British Crown colony (1841–1982) and dependent territory (1983–1997).

⁴² Capital city on the Atlantic coast of the U.S. state of Massachusetts.

⁴³ U.S. state on the East Coast.

⁴⁴ U.S. state on the West Coast.

⁴⁵ Historical term for the easternmost portion of the Asian continent.

- CL: —they managed to retain their job. But I recall, uh, in my Boy Scout troop, uh, ninety percent of the boys were trying to get a school job—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —without any success.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, on one occasion, I, uh, organized a restaurant and, uh, put the boys to work as waiters and, uh—
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: —assistant cook and so forth.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: Uh, but we just barely paid, just managed to pay the rent—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so, we discontinued that.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, did you have, uh, sort of a tour agency, something like that, too?
- CL: Uh, when I was in high school, I had already started to take tour, free of charge.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: The reason we do that is because we were very *incensed*—
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: —by the commercial guides—
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: —who misrepresent us.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: They're, uh, ne'er-do-well⁴⁶ Americans who just want to find a quick way to make money.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So they used their vivid imagination—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and painted us as a weird race, either bloodthirsty or—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —opium-smoking,⁴⁷—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —things like that. And, so, uh, I got a group of Boy Scouts together—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and put out a—post a free tour—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, at such and such an hour.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Then, the demand was so great that, uh, I finally had to charge.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

⁴⁶ Lazy, irresponsible, good-for-nothing.

⁴⁷ The Chinese became associated with smoking opium primarily due to the British opium trade with China (1770s–1917), leading to widespread addiction in China and later to the establishment of opium dens in the West run by Chinese immigrants.

- CL: And at first, uh, we charge just a nominal sum because it didn't cost us anything.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: But then, when we have to maintain a gallery and so forth, then we do have to—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —charge. But still, we, uh, take our tour for less than half, uh, a—a similar tour would cost commercial—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —even to this day,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —it is still, uh, about half of what any other would charge.
 JL: Mm-hmm. What did you show them, you know, on the tour?
 CL: Well, at present, uh, I take care of only school, uh, students.
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: Uh, prior to that, we, uh, worked with the Gray Line⁴⁸—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, Cook's Tour,⁴⁹ American Express,⁵⁰—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and hotels.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And they charge a full price, but we only charge those company, uh, one fifth.
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: So that they—of course, they have greater expenses—
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: —so that's only natural. And, uh, we, uh, were very successful in that regard—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, the Gray Line, uh, having me till I was past sixty-five.
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: But now, uh, I, uh, take care only of, uh, school children—
 JL: Mmm.
 CL: —or private clubs.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And uh, we charge, uh, only fifty cents per person—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and we arrange lunch for them at cost, whatever the restaurant charge.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: But what we do, we meet at Portsmouth Square⁵¹—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and we started out, uh, inspecting historical landmarks,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.

⁴⁸ U.S.-based sightseeing company (1910–present).

⁴⁹ Thomas Cook (& Son), British travel company (1841–2001).

⁵⁰ (1850–present; a.k.a. AMEX), first a U.S.-based freight forwarding company, added a travel division in 1915.

⁵¹ First park in San Francisco (1833–present) in Chinatown.

- CL: —like where the American flag was first raised,⁵²—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —um, where the vigilante, uh, have their trials and do the hanging,⁵³—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, the site of the first, uh, public school in our state,⁵⁴—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, the place where gold—the discovery of gold, was announced⁵⁵—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —by Mr. Brannan,⁵⁶ a Mormon,⁵⁷—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and, uh, we showed them the monument to Robert Louis Stevenson.⁵⁸
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Of course, Stevenson wrote his famous story, *Treasure Island*,⁵⁹ only six blocks south of the square.⁶⁰
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Then we, uh, visit a produce market,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and we, uh, pointed out a dozen vegetables or so, which were transplanted from China,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —now grown here.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And sometime, uh, if it's an older group, we suggest how they can cook them.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, then, we walk along Grant Avenue,⁶¹ the main street,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —for one block, just to study street signs and symbols.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And we point out the dragon,⁶² the phoenix,⁶³ and the bamboo,⁶⁴—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, shaped lampposts, things of that sort.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

⁵² Portsmouth Square (1846) by Commander John B. Montgomery of the *USS Portsmouth*.

⁵³ Portsmouth Square (1851) by the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance.

⁵⁴ Portsmouth Square (1848).

⁵⁵ Portsmouth Square (1848).

⁵⁶ Samuel Brannan (1819–1889), American settler, businessman, and journalist.

⁵⁷ Member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1830–present).

⁵⁸ Portsmouth Square (1897), memorializing Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), Scottish author.

⁵⁹ (1883), historical adventure novel.

⁶⁰ Portsmouth Square. Stevenson visited the city but wrote the novel in Scotland.

⁶¹ Major (North-South) street through Chinatown.

⁶² Associated with prosperity, protection, and good health by the Chinese.

⁶³ Associated with virtue, harmony, and good fortune by the Chinese.

⁶⁴ Associated with virtue, resilience, and integrity by the Chinese.

- CL: We also analyze a Chinese-style building,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, to point out the salient facts of architectural design—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —in the Far East.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Then, we visit a Buddhist⁶⁵ temple,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and we demonstrate the rituals used in the worship of the Buddha.⁶⁶
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Also, a short description of the teaching of Confucius.⁶⁷
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And we mention Daoism⁶⁸ as being a backward religion,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —although, it has a lofty beginning.
 JL: Mm-hmm.

[00:20:09]

- CL: Then we visit three industries.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, we take them to a fortune cookie⁶⁹ factory, where they can see how they're made,—
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: —and the front of a newspaper plant,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and we show them how they read the newspaper vertically instead of horizontally.⁷⁰
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And we give a five-minute chalk talk⁷¹—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —on the writing of the ideographs,⁷²—
 JL: Mmm.
 CL: —starting with very primitive, uh, pre-Song,⁷³ uh, ideographs to the modern—
 JL: Mm-hmm.

⁶⁵ Ancient Indian wisdom tradition, based on the teachings of the Buddha.

⁶⁶ Siddhartha Gautama (6th or 5th century BCE), founder of Buddhism.

⁶⁷ (c. 551–c. 478 BCE), Chinese philosopher, inspired Confucianism.

⁶⁸ Ancient Chinese wisdom tradition, emphasizes living in harmony with the “Dao.”

⁶⁹ Folded cookie containing a slip of paper with a prediction written on it, popularized by Chinese American restaurants, with possible roots in nineteenth-century Japan.

⁷⁰ Chinese is traditionally written in columns (top to bottom, and right to left).

⁷¹ Talk in which the speaker uses a blackboard and chalk.

⁷² Symbols representing abstracts, ideas, and objects.

⁷³ Before the Chinese Song dynasty (960–1279 CE).

- CL: —characters.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, but it's only a five-minute talk, so it has to be very *sketchy*.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, then we visit this alley, which was once a notorious district,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, and it's, for a while, it's named Cameron's Alley,⁷⁴—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because the late Donaldina Cameron,⁷⁵—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —a Presbyterian⁷⁶ reformer, used to send the police here to clean up this alley.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, then we visit this gallery,⁷⁷ which, uh, believe it or not, has three million dollars of rare jade,⁷⁸—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —Ming Dynasty⁷⁹ porcelain,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —old brocades, uh,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —bronze casting, and sculpture.
- JL: Mm-hmm. How long have you had this gallery here?
- CL: Since, uh, 1934.
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: And, uh, when we first moved in here, the rent was only sixty dollars.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: Today, we pay a hundred—uh, we pay eleven-hundred dollars a month.
- JL: My goodness.
- CL: Uh, we talk about bronze earlier.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Here's a bronze dragon, which may be of interest.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, there are only two such dragon in the whole world.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

⁷⁴ Old Chinatown Lane (a.k.a. Donaldina Cameron Alley), small (North-South) alley in Chinatown, north of Washington Street and south of Jackson Street, between Stockton Street (west) and Ross Alley (east).

⁷⁵ (1869–1968), New Zealand-born American missionary and social reformer who ran a home for Chinese immigrant women and girls in San Francisco (1895–1934) and rescued many from human trafficking.

⁷⁶ Protestant Christian denomination, originated in the sixteenth century.

⁷⁷ Ching Wah Lee's gallery (a.k.a., "Museum of Chinese Art," 9 Old Chinatown Lane).

⁷⁸ Decorative rock used for jewelry and ornaments.

⁷⁹ Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

- CL: It was order-made by the Emperor Meiji⁸⁰ of Japan to celebrate the Year of the Dragon,⁸¹—
- JL: I see.
- CL: —but the bronze caster made *two* because they had to make more for, uh, the different—different scales and—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —claws of the dragon. There were—there are 4,500 movable pieces of bronze,—
- JL: Ah.
- CL: —and this bronze is *Sakatu* bronze.⁸² It's a warm-colored bronze. Uh, you can compare it with, uh, Dancing Shiva⁸³ on the left. The bronze of that dancing figure is of just, uh, uh, copper and tin—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and perhaps some impurities,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but this *Sakatu* bronze is copper, tin, plus gold and silver,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and so this has, uh, this dragon has a very warm color. It's almost silvery, and all the parts are movable, (clinking of objects being moved)—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and the tail is almost like it's alive. (continued clinking noise)
- JL: Mm-hmm. So you must have paid a handsome price to get all these things in here.
- CL: Yes, uh, we have, uh, earliest, uh, pottery, uh, Neolithic time,⁸⁴ clear down to the end of the nineteenth century.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So we have a very representative collection of pottery, porcelain, stoneware, and fine porcelain.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Have you ever showed any of these items outside of, uh, San Francisco, outside of California?
- CL: Yes, we have shown some in, uh, Portland,⁸⁵ Oregon,⁸⁶—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, over in Berkeley.⁸⁷
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —Uh, we've shown, uh, them, uh, in San Jose⁸⁸—
- JL: Mm-hmm.

⁸⁰ (1852–1912, r. 1867–1912).

⁸¹ Part of the twelve-year Chinese zodiac cycle.

⁸² Presumably shakudō bronze, a unique gold-copper Japanese billon (alloy).

⁸³ Nataraja, depiction of the Hindu deity Shiva as the divine cosmic dancer.

⁸⁴ New Stone Age (c. 10,000–c. 2,000 BCE).

⁸⁵ City in the west-central part of the U.S. state of Oregon.

⁸⁶ U.S. state on the West Coast.

⁸⁷ City in the northern part of the U.S. state of California, northeast of San Francisco.

⁸⁸ City in the northern part of the U.S. state of California, southeast of San Francisco.

- CL: —and, uh, one of the colleges south of L.A.,⁸⁹ I think, uh—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —not Pomona,⁹⁰ but one sister college,⁹¹—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, I forgot the name. (chuckles)
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And also at the Los Angeles County Museum.⁹²
 JL: Mm-hmm. Are any of these items, you know, uh, for sale or just for display?
 CL: They're not for sale.
 JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, um—what are your feelings as a Chinese American?
 CL: Well, uh, I think we have made big progress, although not as much progress as the Negroes,⁹³ but, uh, let's make a comparison.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: During World War I,⁹⁴ I think there were only two, uh, Chinese, uh, who were officers in the armed force.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: In the last war, uh, during the, uh, Korean conflict,⁹⁵ we have, uh, hundreds of officers.
 JL: Mm-hmm. I see. Uh, what kind of opportunities were there for Chinese Americans, say, in the—you know—
 CL: —In the early days—(speaking over each other)
 JL: —thirties to—
 CL: —we had no opportunity at all.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: You could be well-educated and could be *jobless*.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, the doors for the white-collar⁹⁶ work are completely close to us—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —with maybe one or two exception. That stem from the early days of the anti-Chinese agitation⁹⁷—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —when, uh, this, uh, orator, Kearney⁹⁸—
 JL: Mm-hmm.

⁸⁹ Los Angeles, city in the southwestern part of the U.S. state of California.

⁹⁰ Pomona College (1887–present) in Claremont, California.

⁹¹ Presumably Scripps College, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, or Pitzer College.

⁹² Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA; 1961–present).

⁹³ Now considered unacceptable, this term was still widely used in 1976.

⁹⁴ (1914–1918).

⁹⁵ Korean War (1950–1953).

⁹⁶ Work in an office or similar setting.

⁹⁷ Hostility toward immigrants in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including violence and passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).

⁹⁸ Denis Kearney (c. 1840s–1907), Irish-born American labor leader and anti-Chinese agitator in California.

- CL: —uh, would, uh, get a crowd at sandlots⁹⁹ and shouted that the Chinese must go.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Now, um, in the early days, the Chinese started many factories,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —even after the fire, there were still some that I recall seeing—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —were shoe factories, cigar-making factory, broom factory, uh, trunk and suitcase-making factory, so on,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but the—the unions¹⁰⁰ started making it impossible for the Chinese to sell these outside of Chinatown.—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —They do not have the union label,¹⁰¹ and they are—therefore, uh, badly handicapped,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so, one by one, these, uh, important business fold,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and the Chinese were left to their own wits. Uh, they, uh, run restaurants and laundries,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, they worked in the, uh, farms and orchards.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, and the *best* of the—the most *able* Chinese return to China,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —that is the, I think, the most unfortunate—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —part of the, um, anti-Chinese agitation,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because what they did is to make the, uh, more capable Chinese realize that there's no opportunity here,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and so they returned to the Orient,¹⁰²—
- JL: I see.
- CL: —leaving mostly working people, you see,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —industrious, hard-working, but perhaps, uh, lacking in some of the initiatives of, uh, of the entrepreneurs.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, were there any conflicts in values and ideologies with older generation?

⁹⁹ Vacant lot in front of San Francisco City Hall, gathering place for anti-Chinese labor protests (1877–1880).

¹⁰⁰ Presumably California's "Anti-Chinese Union"(1876) and others.

¹⁰¹ Symbols printed on goods, marking them as made by unionized labor.

¹⁰² East Asia.

- CL: You mean—
 JL: —As a Chinese American. (speaking over each other)—
 CL: —between the older and the new? Right.—
 JL: —Uh-huh.
 CL: Oh yes, there were many, but they were gradually dissolved.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, there is, uh, the, uh, regret that the Chinese are not keeping up with the language,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, that they no longer follow the older religion,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and not so much the religion, but the, uh, moralistic teaching of Confucius.—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —And the older generations,—
 JL: Mmm.
 CL: —and they, uh, to some extent, uh, opposed the, uh, Christian churches,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —although there were no act of intolerance that I ever witnessed.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, and they, uh, uh, do not approve of, uh, dancing, for example.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: But gradually, these are dissolved.
 JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, what was the general social condition in Chinatown like during the Depression period?
 CL: What was the general—
 JL: —social condition.
 CL: Oh. Uh, we were slightly more ingrown. Uh, we had no reason to go outside of Chinatown, so we develop many social clubs, and, uh, we, uh, arrange for our own outing, picnics,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and we have, uh, annual banquets, uh, for different clubs and so forth.
 JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, did Chinatown get any help from the state or the federal agencies at all?
 CL: Practically not.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: There were some, but very little.
 JL: Mm-hmm. Were there any, um, political factions existing in Chinatown then?
 CL: Well, at the time of the revolution,¹⁰³ uh, 19—say, 1910 or 1912,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, there was the conflict between the pro-monarchists and the, uh, Republicans.¹⁰⁴
 JL: Mm-hmm.

¹⁰³ (1911–1912), ended China's imperial system, established the Republic of China.

¹⁰⁴ Those seeking to establish a republic and end imperial rule.

- CL: Uh, but the, uh, pro-monarchists were in the minority—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —because after all, the monarchy, uh, are composed of Manchus,¹⁰⁵—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —an alien group. Uh, but still, I recall there was some conflict. There were many who refused to cut off their queues,¹⁰⁶ for example.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, I think *way* after the revolution,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, but I think there's the matter of inertia.
 JL: Mm-hmm.

[00:30:09]

- CL: Uh, the, uh, growth of, uh, participation in, um, American, uh, political parties, uh, has a rather slow start,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —because they usually know us anyhow.
 JL: Mmm.
 CL: Um, we would, uh, send petition to city hall,¹⁰⁷—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and they would perhaps thank the delegate profusely, but nothing is done.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, and nationally, uh, we have a, uh, Native Sons organization.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, we send delegate to, uh, Washington, D.C.,¹⁰⁸—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —urging for lifting of some of the restrictions.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Uh, the Chinese immigrant were treated very poorly,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, stuck away in Angel Island¹⁰⁹ for many months,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and the majority of them, uh, who didn't qualify were sent back—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —to China, so there's a great deal of bitterness.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Furthermore, there is a disproportionate amount of male versus female,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.

¹⁰⁵ Ethnic minority in China from the region of Manchuria.

¹⁰⁶ Manchu hairstyle enforced during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912).

¹⁰⁷ Metonymy for San Francisco's municipal government.

¹⁰⁸ Capital city of the United States in the District of Columbia.

¹⁰⁹ U.S. immigration station (1910–1940) in San Francisco Bay.

- CL: —uh, in California,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, and this large popu—uh, population of bachelors, uh, didn't help, uh, the tranquility of Chinatown very much.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: I think that more than anything else resulted in the Tong War,¹¹⁰—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because, uh, uh, without a social life, uh, worth anything, uh, they turn to gambling,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —narcotic,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and prostitution,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and these require, uh, armed men to back up their territories,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and these are the Tong men.¹¹¹
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: I have witnessed perhaps the last Tong War in Chinatown.
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: Well, maybe not the last, one of the last.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: It was at the corner of Stockton and Washington.¹¹²
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, I was looking out the window and saw the two group line up across the street,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —shooting at each other.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: No one was killed, but I think two were, uh, injured, one lying—
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: —on the street, unable to move.
- JL: Mm-hmm. What was the cause of that?
- CL: I have forgotten. (chuckles)
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: It's typically a matter of temperament, more than the two assessing each other.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Um, I understand that you were involved in several Hollywood¹¹³ productions, too.
- CL: Yes, I have always enjoyed acting.

¹¹⁰ (1800s–1930s), violent conflicts between rival Chinese immigrant factions in major U.S. Chinatowns, especially in San Francisco.

¹¹¹ Members of various Chinese immigrant factions.

¹¹² Major intersection of Stockton Street (North-South) and Washington Street (East-West) in Chinatown.

¹¹³ Metonymy for the American film industry.

- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: So when, uh, the late Irving Thalberg,¹¹⁴ um, one of most important producer of our time, uh, uh, wanted to make *The Good Earth*,¹¹⁵—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —they, uh, were unable to get enough, uh, talented actors in Hollywood.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, so I was asked to comb the Chinatowns¹¹⁶ from Seattle¹¹⁷ down—
- JL: (chuckles)
- CL: —to San Diego,¹¹⁸—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —looking for actors or actresses.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Now, uh, unlike the American, the Chinese do not, uh, seems eager to participate.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, usually when you put a notice in an American paper and say there's a tryout,¹¹⁹ there will be, uh, people lined up around the block.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But, uh, if you put a notice in a Chinese paper about a tryout, you're lucky if you have two or three that go.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, we had to interview them—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —to try to find more.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And it's strange to say it's not easy to find,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because they, uh, if they look the part, uh, they don't speak English,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and if they speak English, they can't act,—
- JL: Mm-hmm. (chuckles)
- CL: —or if they can act, they don't want to act.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: So, uh, the net result is we sent only half a dozen—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —candidates down to Hollywood for the screen test.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Were they used, then, in the film?

¹¹⁴ (1899–1936), American film producer (a.k.a. "The Boy Wonder").

¹¹⁵ (1937), film about Chinese farmers struggling to survive in China, based on Pearl S. Buck's eponymous novel (1931).

¹¹⁶ Enclaves of Chinese immigrants.

¹¹⁷ Coastal city in the northwestern part of the U.S. state of Washington.

¹¹⁸ Coastal city in the southwestern part of the U.S. state of California.

¹¹⁹ Audition.

- CL: Were they what?
- JL: Were they—
- CL: Yes, uh, uh, about two or three. In fact, three were used.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: And, uh, still, there weren't enough, so, uh, in the meantime, I was, uh, uh, more or less coaching, uh, Paul Muni¹²⁰ to, uh, put in a slight Chinese accent—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —to his utterances.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And also to suggest certain behavioral patterns.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And, uh, he was the one that urged me to take a screen test.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, fortunately, I passed.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: A funny thing happened in Hollywood. Uh, I was dressed up as a typical farmer friend¹²¹ of Paul Muni,—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —uh, Wang Lung.¹²² And, uh, every time I passed Luise Rainer,¹²³—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —she and her brother¹²⁴ would, uh, gawk at me. And I didn't know why.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: You see, Luise Rainer is from Vienna¹²⁵—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and speaks very little, uh, uh, English.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, she felt very lonely,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and the studio has, uh, hired her brother to keep her company.
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: And so the two always whisper whenever I walk by.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: But after I become friends with them—two of them, they told me why.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

¹²⁰ (1895–1967), American stage and film actor.

¹²¹ Ching, supporting character in *The Good Earth*, played by Ching Wah Lee.

¹²² Main character in *The Good Earth*, played by Paul Muni.

¹²³ (1910–2014), German-born film actress, played Wang Lung's wife, O-Lan, in *The Good Earth*.

¹²⁴ Presumably her younger brother, Robert Fritz Rainer (1915–2008), who worked in San Francisco and later served in the U.S. Army during World War II. Her older brother, Rudolf Hans Rainer (1909–1997), was working on the East Coast.

¹²⁵ Capital city of Austria. In fact, Luise Rainer was born in Düsseldorf (Germany) and raised in Hamburg and Vienna prior to moving to Hollywood in 1935.

- CL: They said I was the splitting [*sic*] image of their father.¹²⁶
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: And I said, "I'm not too surprised because, uh, Luise Rainer, when you dress up as a, as a Chinese lady, you look like my mother."
- JL: Oh! (laughs)
- CL: So, that was a strange reason,—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —a family resemblance.
- JL: Mm-hmm. That's interesting. Um, how did you get involved in the *Chinese Digest*?
- CL: Well, it was an experiment. Uh, there was, uh, Tommy Chinn¹²⁷ and, uh, a Mr. William Hoy,¹²⁸—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and I, and we often talked about the possibility of having a publication in English because there's none, uh, in English at that time.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, we, uh, organize the *Chinese Digest*.
- JL: Mm-hmm. What were the goals of the *Chinese Digest*?
- CL: Uh, to record interesting event in Chinatown,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, and to, if possible, name some of the achievements of the American Chinese,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and, uh, print important facts or happenings in China that may be of interest to the second or third or fourth-generation Chinese here.
- JL: Mm-hmm. So, who were the main audience of the *Chinese Digest*?
- CL: I would say mostly A—American-born Chinese.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Do you have any idea how many American-born Chinese there were then in San Francisco?
- CL: No, uh, I don't think there's any accurate survey,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but, say, around the time of the *Chinese Digest*, uh, 1933 or -4, uh, perhaps *half* of the Chinese are American-born.
- JL: Mm-hmm. As many as that, huh? Okay—um, in several instances, the *Chinese Digest* res—referred to itself as a progressive publication. How was it progressive?
- CL: Uh, we don't emphasize the old, uh, social structure here.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Practically, we ignore the, uh, Chinese Six Company,¹²⁹ the district association, the family association.
- JL: Mm-hmm.

¹²⁶ Heinrich Rainer (1875–1956).

¹²⁷ Thomas W. Chinn (1909–1997), historian, editor, and publisher.

¹²⁸ William J. Hoy (1911–1949), historian, journalist, and editor.

¹²⁹ A.k.a. the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), organized in the 1850s and formally established in 1882 to advocate for Chinese immigrants.

- CL: Uh, but instead, we, uh, describe activities in the different churches. We, uh, describe the latest dance,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, the contest between, uh, tennis player, uh, uh, Berkeley and San Francisco,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —or San Francisco and Stockton,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —things of that sort.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Did the publication have any political, um, affiliations?
- CL: No, none whatsoever,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —we try to keep it purely neutral.
- JL: Uh-huh. What were some of the problems that the publication encountered?
- CL: Uh, we couldn't get enough advertisement—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —to make it worthwhile. The cigarette people, uh, and any, uh, big corporation will not advertise in a local paper. They say you have to have a national distribution—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —before we would even consider it.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And then downtown, among the clothiers¹³⁰ or restaurants, uh, they usually says, "Well, we might give you, uh, a quarter-page ad,"—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —"if you give us a full page"—
- JL: —Oh, (inaudible) (speaking over each other) it was just, uh huh—
- CL: —"at a discount." They say, "We don't need it, but just to help you." You see.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, we were at a great disadvantage.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And the local shops, they're all part of my story—they don't have enough, and they don't need the ad, because you see them every day.

[00:40:05]

- JL: Right, uh-huh. Then how was the publication financed?
- CL: It was financed chiefly by subscription—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —and, uh, small ads,—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —and I subsidize it the best I can.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, because, at that time, I was earning good money every month.

¹³⁰ Cloth merchants, tailors, and garment retailers.

- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, it came to an end when, uh, World War II¹³¹—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —was declared.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Then, uh, shortly after, practically all the writers and most of the readers were in the armed forces.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, we just had to collapse.
- JL: Mm-hmm. When did you put out the last, uh, issue of the magazine?
- CL: If my memory serve me correctly, 1941.
- JL: 1941, uh-huh.
- CL: Right after Pearl Harbor.¹³² Perhaps '42.
- JL: Uh-huh, I see. (sound of paper rustling) Okay, can you tell me something about, um, William Hoy, his background and his personality, something like that?
- CL: William Hoy is a self-educated, uh, young Chinese who had a flair for writing,—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —and he has many fine articles, uh, and he, uh, was the editor.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Thomas Chinn, who did most of the work as a Linotype¹³³ operator, also took care of many of the ads—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and so forth.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, my role is chiefly to raise money and furnish this, the front part of this, uh, gallery—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —as a office.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Um, why did Thomas Chinn resign from the paper after the first year? First and a half year, I guess.
- CL: He didn't resign.
- JL: Oh—
- CL: He stayed—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —until the end.
- JL: Mm-hmm. But he just wasn't working as editor then, maybe.
- CL: Yeah, you're right.
- JL: Uh-huh. And when William Hoy, uh, took over the editorship, did the magazine differ in any way from its beginning stage?

¹³¹ (1939–1945).

¹³² (December 7, 1941), Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base in Oahu, Hawaii.

¹³³ Hot-metal typesetting machine (patented 1884, first built commercially 1886).

- CL: Uh, I think there might be a little more emphasis on the literary quality of the magazine,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and maybe more book review—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and things like that.
- JL: Mm-hmm. (sound of paper rustling) Then who did the typesetting then?
- CL: That was done by Thomas Chinn. He is a Linotype operator.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: And also we have a, uh, uh, Mr. Fong¹³⁴—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —Fong Yim Hing,¹³⁵ who is a fine photographer,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and he do the cover pictures for us.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay. Um, how was the magazine received by, you know, the audience?
- CL: Very well.
- JL: Uh-huh. What about from the older generation? What did they think of the publication? (speaking over each other)—
- CL: —Very few. Most of them don't read English,—
- JL: —I see.—
- CL: —so they're not interested.
- JL: Okay. Can you tell me something about, uh, Lim P. Lee?¹³⁶
- CL: Yes, uh—Mr. Lim P. Lee helped, uh, a great deal also.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: Um, he was, uh, interested in, uh, the Democratic Party,¹³⁷ uh, but he would not let politics influence, uh, the paper,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so, he chiefly helped in, uh, getting, uh, the paper to publish, uh, social progress, and, uh, he attended as delegate to many, uh, conventions and gave a summary of them to our paper.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay, I have been reading the *Chinese Digest*, and, um, I couldn't find any copies between June to December of 1939. Did the publication, you know, stop for a while then, or—?
- CL: Not that I know of.
- JL: Uh-huh. Maybe the copies were just missing. Mm-hmm. And at the later stage, I think in, uh, 1940, the magazine start to take on a different format, and it became the organ of the Chinese cultural society. Uh—why was that, you know, why did that happen?
- CL: Uh, it really didn't represent any cultural society,—
- JL: Uh-huh.

¹³⁴ Yim Hing Fong (1905–1980; a.k.a. Wallace H. Fong), photographer.

¹³⁵ Surname "Fong" listed first, a common practice in East Asian culture.

¹³⁶ Lim Poon Lee (1911–2002), writer, postmaster of San Francisco (1966–1980).

¹³⁷ Liberal political party in the United States (1828–present).

- CL: —it's simply my interest in Chinese art—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —that, uh, more, uh, cultural articles were written,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —that's all.
- JL: Mm-hmm. And then you were editing the publication then?
- CL: I only edited, uh, one issue. That's all.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: I think the last two issue, rather.
- JL: Mm-hmm. I see. (sound of paper rustling) Can you remember, more or less, you know, how much you have put into the publication, you know, throughout its—
- CL: —Financially? (speaking over each other)—
- JL: —publication period? Yeah, uh-huh.
- CL: Uh, I think, uh, I subsidized at an average of, uh, fifty dollars each publication,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —each issue.
- JL: Each issue, uh-huh.
- CL: There are time when there's more,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and there's times when there's less.
- JL: Uh-huh. But it's around that figure. Would you say the publication was a success?
- CL: It certainly is a success, uh, in, uh, that we met our objective, but as a moneymaker, no.
- JL: Mm-hmm. What kind of satisfaction did you derive from working on the magazine, you know, personally?
- CL: Yeah. Uh, I think, it give us a chance to, uh, express our feeling,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and the satisfaction is that we have a pretty good running record of what's going on—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —in Chinatown, and it will remain as long as there are issues of the paper there.
- JL: Mm-hmm. What was the impact of the magazine, say, in other words, uh, was the magazine able to effect any changes in the community?
- CL: I doubt it. It may help, but I doubt it—we exert a very strong force.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, we fought against the "Podii,"¹³⁸—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —who will fee charge of a new tenant,—

¹³⁸ A practice that had led to abuses, defined as follows: San P. Tu, "About All This 'Podii' Business," *Chinese Digest* (February 21, 1936), 8: "In Chinese business parlance, a "podii" is the intangible asset created by the tenant of a business establishment through his effort in increasing the economic value of that location either by physical improvements or by establishing a goodwill. When this tenant is ready to move or retire from business, he usually negotiates with a prospective newcomer to recover this intangible asset in a definite sum of money."

- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —uh, we, uh, opposed, uh, elaborate funerals,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, things of that sort.
- JL: Mm-hmm. But it didn't really bring about any significant changes.
- CL: No, not too much.
- JL: Uh-huh. (sound of paper rustling) Um, how did the publication portray the Sino-Japanese situation?¹³⁹
- CL: Uh, we kept a pretty good running record of, uh, the, uh, war. From the very beginning, we have always had the latest news from the Orient.
- JL: Mm-hmm. And, uh, did it try to, uh, do any campaigning for the war or participate in the war relief fund and things like that?
- CL: Uh, it goes without saying that we do,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but even if we didn't do a thing, the local Chinese were very patriotic and, uh,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —wanted to do their best.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: They, uh, participated eagerly in the boycott of s—shipping scrap iron to, uh, Japan,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —even before the war started.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And, uh, during the war, we, uh, cooperated with the *Chronicle*,¹⁴⁰—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, in maintaining the Rice Bowl Festival,¹⁴¹—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —which raised a huge sum of money for the war effort.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: And we publicized the first, uh, China clipper¹⁴² to, uh, the Orient. Actually, the clipper didn't land in Chinese territory,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —because the Chinese cannot, uh, grant, uh, privilege to any one country, like the United States,—
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: —without granting it to England, France, and Russia, and Japan,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —so, therefore, as a safe precaution, uh, they, uh, would not let Pan Am¹⁴³—
- JL: Oh.

¹³⁹ Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

¹⁴⁰ *San Francisco Chronicle* (founded 1865; 1872–present under this name).

¹⁴¹ Annual charitable events in Chinatown to support China (1938–1941).

¹⁴² First of three Martin M-130 four-engine flying boats built for Pan American Airways.

¹⁴³ Pan American (World) Airways (1927–1991), American international airline.

CL: —land there. But then, they landed in, uh, Hong Kong—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —uh, Macau,¹⁴⁴ I've forgotten which,—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —and that enabled, uh, Pan Am to call the early planes "the China clipper."
 JL: Mm-hmm. Did you participate in World War II?
 CL: Yes.
 JL: Uh-huh.
 CL: I was past the, uh, draft age.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: But, um, I was made an interpreter.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And, so, I was the oldest, uh, (chuckles) uh, enrollee in, uh, in my division.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: I'm older than even, uh, commanding officer.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: But, uh, it's, uh—uh, easy job for me because I was stationed at the Presidio of Monterey,¹⁴⁵—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —where I interviewed, uh, incoming draftees.

[00:49:53]

JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, were a lot of, uh, local Chinese drafted for the war?
 CL: Oh, yes.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: Proportionally, it's the same as anywhere else.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: All those who are born here are subjected to the draft.
 JL: Mm-hmm. Um—how is the present generation of Chinese Americans different from, say, your generation?
 CL: Oh, they're much more Americanized.
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: And, uh, many of them, uh, now marry American mates,¹⁴⁶—
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —whereas before, it's a rarity, not that there weren't *any*, —
 JL: Mm-hmm.
 CL: —but it's very rare. Whereas today, it's quite a commonplace thing.

¹⁴⁴ Special administrative region in China, former Portuguese lease (1557–1887), colony (1887–1987) and dependent territory (1987–1999).

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Army installation south of San Francisco (1846/1902–present).

¹⁴⁶ Interracial marriage was largely illegal in many U.S. states until the 1967 Supreme Court decision, *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional.

- JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, as far as job opportunities is concerned, you know, is there still the discrimination there?
- CL: Oh, there must be, but, uh, it's very slight, so,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —there's no cause for complaint,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —but undoubtedly, we still encounter resistance.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Um, what is your personal opinion on this Americanization of Chinese Americans here?
- CL: Oh, it's inevitable.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, all the, uh, record history will indicate that, that is inevitable.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Now the Chinese in, uh, Southeast Asia, uh, where there are no restriction, they intermarry very freely.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: So, uh, in America it's not gonna be different.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Okay. (sound of paper rustling) Well, I think that's about all the questions I have here. Mmm, is there anything else that we have not covered and you would like to include?
- CL: Uh,—
- JL: Any comments?
- CL: —uh, not much, I might say, uh, it's surprising, uh, what great influence, uh, the Chinese cooking has upon our neighbors.
- JL: Mmm.
- CL: Many Americans are now hooked to Chinese cooking.—
- JL: Mm-hmm. That's true.
- CL: —I know some families that, uh, plan to move but they say they will not move to any, uh, town where there isn't a good Chinese restaurant. (chuckles)—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —So—and it also influence their American diet,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —whereas before, uh, there's a sharp demarcation between Chinese and American—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —cuisine. Uh, today many American housewives,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, are using bean sprout and winter melon,—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —uh, and, uh, dried, uh, mushroom.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, so there's a terrific, uh, blending—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —in that direction.
- JL: Mm-hmm. Oh, one more thing. Um—how has Chinatown changed over the years?

- CL: Uh—if you were to compare pictures of Chinatown—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —shortly after the fire, for example, and now,—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —you will find that, while the buildings are substantially the same,—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —uh, the, uh, exterior and interior has definitely changed.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Of course, that's very obvious, we now have neon lights.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Uh, we have, uh, very modern gift shops.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: The grocery store, uh, has also changed.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: When I was a kid, there's only a dozen things in a Chinese grocery store that are American. You could get, uh, salt and ketchup,—
JL: Mmm.
CL: —uh, and perhaps, uh, oil, uh, and a few things like that.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Uh, otherwise, every item is, uh, imported from China—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —that are not vegetables.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Um, even the wrapping paper—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —is, uh, imported from China,—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —and so are the bags. The bags, in fact, were made right there at the store.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Uh, and they do not use string unless it's a big bundle. They use that long, dry straw—
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: —to tie up their bundles.
JL: Mm-hmm. Uh, I've heard a comment, you know, some people say that Chinatown is about, you know, fifty years—
CL: Behind time.
JL: —behind time.
CL: That isn't so at all.
JL: Uh-huh.
CL: Uh, it only appears so,—
JL: Mmm.
CL: —actually, uh, they are quite, uh, subjected to change.
JL: Mm-hmm.
CL: Perhaps always, uh, a *little* behind, but not much. Certainly not fifty year behind.

- JL: Mm-hmm. Um, what about the kind of people who are living in Chinatown? Are they any different from those before?
- CL: Yes, uh, I think the old-timer who live here, uh, myself included, always have a little accent left.
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: Uh, one great change that is noticeable is the disappearance of the laundries.
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: Uh, there used to be, uh, *hundreds* of laundries all over town.—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —Today there's not a one. It's replaced by the laundromats—
- JL: Mm-hmm.
- CL: —and so forth.
- JL: I see. Well, do you have anything else you'd like to say?
- CL: (laughs)
- JL: (laughs)
- CL: I can't think of any—
- JL: Uh-huh.
- CL: —just now.
- JL: Okay. Well, thank you, Mr. Lee, on behalf of the Oral History Department at California State University, Fullerton.
- CL: I enjoyed doing this.
- JL: Thank you.

[00:55:53]

END OF INTERVIEW