



Gum Saan Journal

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Article Submission

Gum Saan Journal is an annual publication. It solicits manuscripts that explore the historical, cultural, and humanistic aspects of Chinese American experiences, particularly relating to Southern California, as well as contemporary issues of relevance to the Chinese American community. Manuscripts should be approximately 3,000 words in length, using Chicago style of endnotes when necessary. If your manuscript is accepted for publication, you will be responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce any copyrighted materials used in your article.

Submissions should be addressed to:
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Foreword

by Susan Dickson, President of CHSSC

Our first section of this *Gum Saan Journal (GSJ)* celebrates the 130th year of Castelar Street Elementary School, which is located in the heart of Los Angeles' Chinatown. Through the remembrances of former Castelar principals, teachers, and students, we gain understanding of this community resource and its impact on lives. These stories relate changes in the community from the 1930s to the present day.

The Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles likewise celebrates an important milestone: ten years of operation. In our second section, Dr. Pauline Wong provides insights into the growth and development of the museum. Dr. Wong, who now resides in Paris, France, was originally hired as the Museum Educator, but she later became the Executive Director. The current Executive Director, Dr. Michael Duchemin, outlines the current projects and his vision for the future of the museum.

In the third section, Raymond Chong returns to *GSJ* with his story of another iconic Chinese American institution, the Far East Café in Little Tokyo. Generations of Nikkei and Angelenos remember their *hom yu*. Many political deals—and romantic trysts, in life and fiction—were made in the Far East Café's booths. Chong's father was one of the many Jeongs who worked at this restaurant.





Section One

The Story of Castelar: 130 Years

Compiled by Susie Ling and Susan Dickson

In 1882, Los Angeles opened a four-room school on what was *Calle de Toros*, or Bull Street, named because of the nearby bullring or corral. This school may have been transferred from its first location on Bath Street, opened in 1870. Principal W. S. Reavis and the four teachers would educate children from grades one through eight. This little school was across from the French Hospital, established earlier in 1870. *Calle de Toros* was renamed as Castelar Street, after an author and history/philosophy professor, Emilio Castelar y Ripoll, who had been the president of the Republic of Spain (1873–74). In 1903, the main building of the little school was destroyed by fire and a 13-room Victorian structure was built in its place by 1904. Castelar Elementary School is the second oldest continuously operating school in the Los Angeles Unified School District¹.

From the beginning, Castelar Street School served many students with Spanish last names. Castelar's students were also of Italian, French, Serbian, Yugoslav, and Croat descent. By the 1920s, Japanese names and one Chinese name, Mary Jane Fong, of 902 N. Broadway, appeared on the roll.

In 1938, New Chinatown was founded near the vicinity of Castelar. In the 1940s and 1950s, the population of Chinese Americans steadily increased such that by 1964, 54% of the 529 Castelar students were of Asian descent and 41% were Hispanic. When the Pasadena Freeway off-ramp was changed to accommodate the new Dodger Stadium, Castelar Street was renamed Hill Street. By the 1970s, a new 33-room complex replaced the 1904 wooden building. The student population peaked in 1981, with 1,156 students of which 80% were of Asian descent. Today,

1 Los Angeles High School was established ten years earlier on Poundcake Hill (now Broadway and Temple). Their first graduating class in 1875 had seven students. In 1887, that school was moved to Sand Street on the abandoned Fort Moore Hill cemetery. In 1917, Los Angeles High School was moved again to Olympic and Rimpau.



Principal Choi leads 25 teachers that serve about 630 students, of which 75% are of Asian descent.



Students with Susan Sandberg in 1982.

In this series of interviews, it is evident that the changes at Castelar Elementary are a reflection of the changes in the Chinatown community. The families of Hoover Louie, Doré Wong, and Al Soo-Hoo were pioneers in New Chinatown when Castelar Street School was on Castelar Street. Al remembers the school on the “outskirts” of Chinatown. Gay Yuen immigrated in the 1950s and Castelar helped her learn a new reality. Principal William Chun-Hoon was at the helm to meet the needs caused by the 1960s Immigration Act and Civil Rights Movement. Bilingual and bicultural teachers like Gay Yuen, Phyllis Chiu, Christine Soldate, and Cheuk Choi served students like Fungi Ng and Mike Fong. Like Hoover Louie and Doré Wong, Sophia Thompson was not only a student at Castelar but is also a parent at Castelar. Castelar has laid the academic foundation for so many generations of children and remains a unique space in Los Angeles’ multicultural history.

Hoover Louie

Hoover Louie is a CPA whose parents opened K.G. Louie store in Chinatown’s Central Plaza in the 1930s. He has lived in Chinatown for most of his life.

I was born in Stockton to parents from Toisan when Herbert Hoover was president. My parents gave me my Chinese name and the doctor gave



me the English name to put on my birth certificate. Everybody questions me about my name. In the Army during the Korean War, they couldn't find my records because people switched my names. I'm often filed under Louie Hoover. The Army lined us alphabetically and the guy next to me was named Lobster [laughs]. So they would call out, "Lobster, Louie" [laughs]. He was a Black kid.

The Soo Yuen Benevolent Association 遯源堂 is made up Louie/Lui/Lei 雷, Fong/Fang 方, and Kwong/Kwan 龐 families. They are blood brothers from Kaiping County's history. My father was treasurer of the association.

My grandfather came to America in 1895 and was an importer of Chinese curios. We came to Los Angeles in 1934, as business was bad in Northern California. The new gift shop was on Hope and 7th Street, but Grandfather went back to China. When New Chinatown opened, we opened K. G. Louie in the Plaza. We were living near 21st Street in South Central Los Angeles; Dad would take the streetcar back home. When the business got established, we moved to Chinatown. Chinatown was an Italian residential neighborhood. Our family of seven children moved to a two-bedroom house. I'm the middle child of five boys and two girls. My parents couldn't buy property, but they put it in the name of my sister, their oldest American-born child. We lived right next to Alpine Playground, across the street from Castelar Street School.

We started at Castelar just before the war around 1939; I was in third or fourth grade. With the development of New Chinatown, the community was rapidly changing. Chinese would cluster next to the school. At Castelar, there were a lot of Italian kids, English-speaking Mexicans, and about 30% Chinese. Most of the Chinese were American-born. Chinese spoke different dialects at home and so we mostly spoke English at school. The staff was all Caucasian with a few men.

I still have my certificate that shows I was on the School Safety Committee in 1942, and it is signed by the principal, Pearl Milner. Mr. Davidson, a tall, slim man was the principal after Milner. Castelar was a two-story wooden building on Yale, facing College. Hill Street was called Castelar Street, renamed when they changed the freeway ramp. The brick building was already up and the childcare center was in the corner with the cafeteria. It was unusual for Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to have a childcare center, but there were a lot of working parents in our community.





The cafeteria was strange as I had not gotten used to American food. They served cottage cheese! There were also hot dogs, beans, and salads. I didn't go there much, only on special days. We brought our lunch. We mostly had sugar on bread or peanut butter sandwiches. There was a bakery where Ling's market is. They made the best fresh bread that came out at three o'clock. We would stand out there to wait. Then we would slice it and add butter or sugar. We wouldn't bring rice to school as that would be too Chinese; we wanted to fit in. Lunch was about 10 or 15 cents, but there were so many of us in the family. Sometimes we would just come running back home across the street.

At the time, we would play with Italian and Mexican kids. There were Croatians in the neighborhood too. Kids all spoke English so there were no barriers. The teachers didn't treat us differently. In fact, our house was owned by an Italian family. They had great grape vats in the cellar.

At school, we played a lot of basketball, baseball, and handball. In what is now today's parking lot, there was a big 25-foot backboard, and we played handball there. The girls at school played jump rope, pick-up sticks, and jacks. One time I had a new pair of shoes and after basketball, there was a hole in them. I knew I'd be in trouble if my parents found out. So I put cardboard in the shoe until I outgrew that pair.

You know the Hall family? We had a competition between their five girls and our five boys with College Street as a dividing line. It was the Chinese on their side versus the Chinese on our side [laughs].

We always had Chinatown New Year parades. It was on a smaller scale, of course. During the wartime, we would dress up in Chinese costumes and do fundraising for China at the Rose Bowl and City Hall. The funny thing was that at the school's Halloween march, we would also "dress" up as Chinese! That was our costume [laughs]!



Castelar's Lion Dancers.





At Christmas, the Shriners were so generous to Castelar kids. They would bus us to the Shrine Auditorium downtown and they'd give us packages of toys. It was quite a treat.

We were also part of the Catholic Center's Chinese school. We would learn Cantonese and it was another new language as we spoke Toisan. The school was founded by Dr. Stanley Chan, who was a professor of political science at Loyola University. George Chin and his wife were teachers there; they couldn't return to China during the war. There were different Chinese schools including Chung Wah and the Methodist's Chinese school. The routine was for Chinese kids to attend Chinese school. Then we would go to the shop and do Chinese school and Castelar homework there. My mother was cooking at the shop. My father died when he was 46 and I was about ten years old. My mother didn't speak a word of English, and she had to learn. She had the shop and seven kids! We started to help out at the shop more.

I went to Central Junior High up on the hill. My wife, Ruby Ling Louie, didn't go to Castelar. Her parents had a shop in China City and she went to Alpine Elementary, which is now Evans Adult School. I went to Belmont High School, but some of the Chinese "snobs" went to Marshall [laughs]. I was in junior high when the war ended. I remember we were all shocked when Roosevelt died. There were a few Chinese immigrants, especially after the war.

Castelar has always been the center of education. In Chinese traditional culture, kids were always supposed to listen and obey. Teachers were kings! We would be so scared if teachers called our parents [laughs]. Of course, I had no experience [laughs]. In Chinese school, we would get whacked.

Later, we converted my parents' two-bedroom house to an apartment complex, and we still live here. Our kids went to Castelar, Nightingale, and Belmont; my son was bused to San Fernando in the 1960-70s. The composition of Castelar's staff had changed. There was more curriculum that respected ethnicity and that was important. Of course, my theory was that if the kids ate Chinese, they would always be Chinese [laughs]. I even tried to encourage my children to go to Chinese schools, but they didn't want to go. My daughter did take Mandarin at Belmont High. My son played basketball at Alpine and still does.

Fortunately, Castelar is so accessible. My sister and brother brought their kids to Castelar when they were young. This was still our meeting point for our family, our point of congregation.





Doré Wong

Doré Hall Wong's father, Daniel Hall, was from Kow Kong 九江 and with the United Meat Market. Doré was a student at Castelar in the 1940s and returned to serve as principal from 1991 to 1997. She retired as an LAUSD administrator in 2000. She serves on the board of the Chinese American Museum and Daniel Hall Enterprise, Inc.

We were born at home on 132 North Main Street. My father ran a wholesale/retail meat market and we lived in the loft above it. Dr. Marietta Helen Bewley of the French Hospital was our family doctor and was instrumental in naming us: Helen, Elza, Inez, Beulah (deceased), Doré, Angelina, Beaumont, and Wellington. We siblings gave the rest of the family their names: Dorothy, Franklin and Jonathan. We were six girls, four brothers, and three half-sisters. We all attended Castelar Elementary School. Large families were common, and we watched over each other while our parents worked; we were never short of playmates or “bosses.”

When we were young and living on Main Street, one of our truck drivers would put us in the rumble seat of his old Model T Ford and drive us to Castelar. I remember Inez, my sister, and I started school at the Castelar nursery school at the corner of Hill and College. The nursery school had swings and sandboxes separated from the elementary school by a chain link fence. Our older sisters would pass by during recess and wave while we were on the yard, making us feel safe and comfortable. Soon after, my family moved to Yale Street.

Castelar School had two classroom buildings when I was a student. There was an old wooden building housing kindergarten to grade three classrooms. Across the playground was the newer part of the school with a self-standing auditorium adjacent to a concrete building that housed grades four to six, the principal's office, and the nurse. The custodian and the girls' bathroom were in that basement. I remember running down the center of the wooden building and hearing my footsteps echoing in the wide hallway. When it rained, this hallway had a dark, eerie feeling. This building always made me think of a big barn. Outside the wooden building was another wooden structure: the cafeteria. When we bought our lunches, we had to clean our plates and drink all our milk; the cottage cheese and beets were hard to swallow. Needless to say, a lot of that went into the milk cartons. Our cafeteria manager was Mrs. Manlove. I worked in the cafeteria when I





was in the fifth and sixth grades. I remember we would sometimes run out of food when service was finished. So, Mrs. Manlove cooked her special tamale pie for us: cream of wheat with tomato sauce, and we thought it was the greatest!

We had no library and books came to us by way of the Bookmobile. So, we would walk from Chinatown to the downtown library on 5th and Hope. Our “shortcut” was walking up a hill off Sunset and crossing Grand. This hiking trek was usually led by my sister Helen, who loved to read.

The students at Castelar were ethnically mixed, with Italians, Chinese, Hispanics, Indians, and Caucasians. Businesses nearby reflected the ethnic groups with the French Hospital, Frisco Baking Company (fresh baked breads), Little Joe’s, Costa Grill, taco stands, Rocco Italian Bakery (best rum cakes) and Chinatown markets and stores. I hope I’m remembering the names of Frisco and Rocco correctly.

Castelar teachers were nurturing and compassionate. I remember all my teachers: kindergarten, Miss Blank; first grade, Mrs. Fairchild and Miss Hamilton; second grade, Mrs. Butler; third grade, Mrs. Ulery and Miss Forest; fourth grade, Miss Baxter and Mrs. Lee; fifth grade, Miss Goldstein; and sixth, Mrs. Hostadt. I have fond memories of all: Miss Blank let us build with big blocks; Mrs. Fairchild taught us to sew; Miss Hamilton played the piano while we danced; Mrs. Butler took three of us overnight; Mrs. Ulery brought sweet peas to school weekly; Miss Baxter had red hair; Mrs. Lee let us visit her home with the moon-shaped entry; Miss Goldstein played softball with her bad hip; and Mrs. Hostadt appointed me secretary. I also remember there were two principals: Mrs. Milner and Mr. Davidson. I had a terrific childhood and never saw any prejudice or ethnic distinction. I had friends with names like Urbina, McDonald, Louie, Fung, Silva, Ragone, and Blackwater!

Recess was basically open play and we could play dodgeball, kickball, sockball, tetherball, handball, or jacks for the upper grades, whereas the primary classes had swings, sandboxes, hopscotch, and “monkey” bars to move across, and parallel bars to maneuver one-legged swings. We had only fifteen minutes and always managed to play hard and competitively. Corrective classes were offered for students who had minor physical problems during recess.





During World War II, Castelar promoted efforts to end the war. We saved tin foil from gum packages, sewed quilt squares to make blankets, and bought savings bond stamps. War bonds were sold on campus and many a child would try to fill their special books with stamps. When the books were completely filled, it was enough to buy one \$25 U.S. bond. Even our Spring Dance reflected our war efforts; instead of folk dances, we were taught marching maneuvers to the tune of John Philip Sousa. We were very patriotic and impressed our audience with our ability to march in precision with flags waving. We also practiced drop drills, huddling against the walls of the hallways responding to a series of bells. We had air raid drills while at home and turned off all the lights and drew the blinds over all windows.

Nationwide, Tuesdays were declared “meatless.” At my father’s meat market, I spent many hours counting rations from customers who had limited coupons for food. It was a serious time in our lives, but being young, we enjoyed all the “games” we had to play at home and school.

Our regular school day was from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., followed with Chinese school from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. We had to finish homework from both schools each night as well as chores around the house. Many students worked in their parents’ stores as well. There was very little idle time.

In 1945, the first class from Castelar matriculated to Nightingale Junior High. Our local junior high, Central Junior High on Grand and Sunset (now Cesar Chavez), had been newly designated the site for the Los Angeles School District administration office, so all students were re-assigned. After I finished elementary school in January, our class was the first to be sent to Nightingale. The first year was difficult, as we had to take public transportation to get to school. I really missed my family and friends when I left Castelar, but by the following semester, more Chinatown children ended up at Nightingale Junior High. From Nightingale, we went on to Belmont High School; a majority of us went on to attend UCLA. We carpooled with neighbors or took public transportation.

I started teaching in September of 1956 and married David Wong in August of 1958. I raised four children, but never stopped working. My eldest, Debra, attended Castelar until the third grade. It took 35 years before I returned to Castelar in January 1991. I was transferred from Bushnell Elementary School where I was Principal for six years. It was an





easy transition to Castelar as I already knew many of the teachers socially—a neighbor, ex-babysitter, friends, and eventually, a sister-in-law.

My re-assignment came when Dr. Bill Chun-Hoon retired. The school was set to go year-round and my first job was to ready the teachers, students and parents. In May, the Board of Education changed its mind and retracted year-round scheduling for Castelar.

As Principal, and as a past student, I was very proud to be back in my old community. It brought back many memories as I walked the halls and grounds. Physically, the school had changed, but spiritually, it felt as though I were a student again.

In my first year, I noticed that the teachers and students were overwhelmed by the many activities, visitors, and schedules planned for the week. There were several community programs from a variety of outside agencies coming at different times and days, even Saturdays. To coordinate these services, I met with Larry Lue from the Chinatown Service Center. Together, we applied for a three-year federal grant called *Healthy Start*, and Castelar was awarded an operational grant of \$100,000 per year for the consolidation and extension of services under one umbrella. This grant allowed us to schedule all extracurricular activities through one office on campus with minimal classroom interruptions. A kindergarten room was converted to the new Parent Center. Language needs were met as we hired staff who spoke Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Chiu Chow languages. We were able to provide health services, which included school-wide fluorination, dental care; referrals to social services and counseling; and parent education sessions. Through the Center, I was able to get our entire staff immunized against Hepatitis B, which was prevalent in the Southeast Asian countries. Our school population at that time was 80% Asian, 18% Hispanic, and 2% others, and we had the largest number of Southeast Asian students in the district. This school-wide immunization was a first, and was duly recognized in Washington D.C. With our partnership, Castelar and the Chinatown Service Center were able to identify students at risk and assist them with direct services.

Castelar School also became partners with two community institutions through the district's *Adopt-A School Program*: Northern Trust Bank and the United States Attorney's Office. Employees from both locations would visit the school site, partner with a classroom, read to classrooms, introduce





them to the business and legal worlds, and arrange for field trips to the bank vault, federal courtroom, or even jail. They explained banking and law enforcement and the various jobs in each office.

Castelar also had a special relationship with the Coburn School of Music. For over 25 years, an entire symphonic orchestra would visit the students and play classical music. It was a magical and wonderful experience for our children who may not have had the opportunity to attend events at the Music Center. Another partnership was with the Central City Optimist Club who annually sponsored a forensic competition and also brought Santa Claus to visit the students.

The Castelar pre-school adjacent to us, and the Alpine Recreational Playground across the street, were also partners to our learning environment. Jointly, we served students from dawn to dusk. Other activities on our campus included: English and Mandarin classes for adults; after-school playground; drum corps and drill team for grades four to six; special district meetings; the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California; Saturday tutorial programs; health fairs with Pacific Alliance; and classes on Sundays. The campus was busy every day and never short of action.

My short six years at Castelar were both rewarding and challenging. My focus was to improve the education of our students and provide as many resources as possible to make this happen. Programs were now in place, schedules did not interrupt classrooms, playground and lunch areas were organized, and students and teachers recognized their responsibilities in our academic success.

Castelar School was unique. It was the entry school for new immigrants from many countries with one common goal—get an education. The students and parents were eager and the teachers were ready. There was a special aura at Castelar that existed and still exists today: students want to learn and teachers want to teach. It can't get any better than that.

Al Soo-Hoo

Al Soo-Hoo holds leadership positions with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, True Light Presbyterian Church, and other community organizations. He is president of the Board of Directors of the Chinese American Museum.

I grew up in Chinatown. My folks were living on Chung King Road with my paternal grandfather. Great-grandfather had worked in the United





States in agriculture and then returned to the village in Hoiping 開平. He went back to the village to make sure his four sons got married. The eldest and youngest son stayed in China, but Great-grandfather sent the second son to San Francisco and the third son to Los Angeles. My grandfather, Sung Soo-Hoo, was the third son.

Grandfather started a laundry near Second Street and Alameda in the 1930s. After Y.C. Hong opened his buildings in New Chinatown's Central Plaza in the early 1940s, my grandfather opened a gift store on the corner between Phoenix Bakery and Li Po Restaurant. The family moved into New Chinatown. When the West Plaza development, or Chung King Road, got started, my grandfather bought one of those buildings. He moved his business to Chung King Road and left the Gin Ling Way location.

My father, Wing Soo-Hoo, was the oldest. He was born in 1919 in Hoiping and came when he was in high school. He went to Polytechnic High(Poly) on the corner of Washington and Flower in the 1930s. Poly moved to the San Fernando Valley in 1955. My oldest aunt was also born in China. But the other two uncles and three aunties were born in Los Angeles. One of the girls did not survive and that slot was taken by my father's cousin as a paper son. My mother was also from Hoiping. Father got drafted into the military service during World War II. He got his citizenship and then he went back to China "to marry a girl from home." I'm the oldest; I have a sister and two younger brothers.

At one point, my father tried to start a tailoring business in one of the storefronts under the Bing Kong Tong (BKT) on 963 N. Broadway. My father was a member of Bing Kong Tong. He then leased a space on Gin Ling Way—where my grandfather was previously—from Y.C. Hong and started a gift store. We lived with Grandfather on Chung King Road.

In the 1940–50s, Chinatown had the residential area and two commercial hubs: Central Plaza and Spring Street between Ord and Sunset. We never called it Central Plaza until much later. We called it "New Chinatown," which included Chung King Road. Only after Mandarin Plaza was built in the early 1970s did we start using the names "Central Plaza" and "West Plaza." Gim Fong tried to organize the businesses on Chung King Road and call it "Chinatown West." But between New Chinatown and Spring Street, it was Mexican and Italian. My parents did not allow us to go to Alpine Playground because the Mexican kids would bully the Chinese





kids. That playground was there as far back as I can remember, but it was a lot smaller than it is now. When I was a kid, Chinatown was just from College to Bernard, between Hill and Broadway. There were a couple of stores outside this Chinatown.

I started kindergarten at Castelar in 1953. I remember I didn't know what people were saying as I didn't speak English. It was confusing, and I just didn't know what was going on. We spoke Hoiping (Sze Yup) at home, and I would be learning Cantonese at Chung Wah School and English at Castelar. The other kids at Castelar were primarily Mexican. But at that time, I didn't really know the difference between Mexicans and Italians. Some did speak Spanish at school. Castelar was kindergarten to sixth grade and we had the A1, A2, B1, B2 system. People who started in first semester were A1 and people who started second semester were B1.

There was a small group of kids my age that were also from Chinatown going to Castelar. Leland Wong's family owned Ting Hing Jewelry on Gin Ling Way. Edwin Gee's family ran Yee Hung Guey on Hill. Later, the storefronts of Ting Hing and Yee Hung Guey merged together to be Chong Hing Jewelry. Sandy Hoy's family was from Hung San Long market on Chung King Road. Sammy Young was from the residential part of Chinatown. Elaine Yee's family owned Home Cafe. William Chung's family had LA Trade Company on Spring Street. King Wong came to Castelar when we were in fifth grade. We knew other Chinese kids whose families had businesses in Chinatown but because of where they lived, they attended other elementary schools. I met these other kids at Chung Wah Chinese School on Yale.

Most of the staff at Castelar was Caucasian except when I was in fourth grade. We had a new teacher named Miss Yamato. As she was the first Asian, I had a crush on her [laughs]. But she didn't stay very long because she was not there by the time I was in sixth grade. The principal was a silver-haired man, Ben Davidson, who served 24 years. I remember Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Hamilton in kindergarten. There was a Miss Allen, and it got changed to Mrs. Powers. Or maybe it was Miss Powers who then became Mrs. Allen [laughs]. There were two Mr. Browns, one was a teacher and the other was the custodian. I had Mr. Calhoun for sixth grade. The men taught the older kids as the sixth-grade boys got unruly [laughs]. There was a Mrs. Reece, but I never had her.





I guess school was “okay.” I don’t remember any homework until the sixth grade and I don’t remember being pushed academically. I think I missed some classes because my family took a trip. When I got back, the teacher said, “Okay, you have to have some homework. So write a little thing about your trip.” I don’t know if I ever got a grade for that report. Chinese school had homework. We were supposed to copy strokes in these calligraphy books, but we would just color it in.

My mom made us sandwiches for lunch, mostly bologna and ham. But on Mondays and Thursdays, we got lunch money to eat at the cafeteria. That’s because there was no fresh bread delivered on Sundays and Wednesdays from Yee Sing Chong. At school, we would have hot dogs and something else. On Fridays, it was fish, but I didn’t have that. At recess, we played punchball—baseball without the bat and a bigger ball. There was also basketball and dodgeball.

After school, we kind of helped out at the store. We would be in the front and when somebody came in, I would call out to my mom and dad, “Somebody’s here.” When we got the electronic eye in the late 1950s, we didn’t have to sit there anymore [laughs].

When my grandfather died in 1955, my father eventually got title to the property on Chung King Road. My grandfather was the owner when West Plaza was built around 1949–50. I don’t know the legal reason behind it, but the property had to be auctioned off after my grandfather’s passing. And my father could not bid on it but we put a bid under my mother’s name. When the other bidders found out that it was really the son trying to regain the family property, they withdrew their interest. That was the way business was done in Chinatown.

After Castelar, we went to Nightingale Junior High and Belmont High School. The Mexican kids mostly went to Lincoln High School. Central Junior High on Fort Moore Hill was closed in 1946.

When I went to UCLA, I kind of moved out of Chinatown and in with my aunt in Northridge. After UCLA, I came back to Chinatown until I thought I should buy a house. My father didn’t believe in renting an apartment; he thought that was throwing away money. So I lived at home until 1977.

Prior to 1972, I didn’t really get involved in Chinatown although I lived and worked there. I had no interest. One Sunday afternoon I was standing





in front of our store near the wishing well and about a dozen girls walked by. I saw a guy I knew from church and asked him, “What’s going on?” He told me to come along and I did. They were on their way to Golden Palace to rehearse for the Miss Chinatown pageant. Somehow, I got hooked into helping out that year [laughs]. I met the coordinator, Barbara Jean Lee. I was given things to do and then I went to a few meetings and met some people. I even remember Helen Young telling me about the Chinese Historical Society meeting at the DWP in 1975. Obviously, things evolved and I got interested in getting involved. I realize I knew a lot of things as I grew up in Chinatown.

Castelar’s proximity to Chinatown made it a more self-contained community with school, hospital, and churches right there. Now, it is also a reminder that Hill Street was Castelar Street until they built the freeway ramp in the early 1960s. There used to be an off-ramp off the Arroyo Seco Parkway (now 110 Freeway) at Adobe Street. That off-ramp got closed and Hill Street off-ramp opened. When they opened the new ramp, Castelar Street was renamed Hill Street and connected to Hill Street in downtown Los Angeles. Hill Street used to end at Fort Moore. So Hill Street made Chinatown a thoroughway. Chinatown was not considered an important destination, but when they built Dodger Stadium, they needed an off-ramp for Dodger Stadium.

Dr. Gay Yuen

Dr. Yuen is the Interim Chair of the Division of Curriculum and Instruction, CSULA Charter College of Education. She is President of the Asian Youth Center and First Vice President of the Chinese American Museum. Gay lives in Chinatown.

There were several of us who attended Castelar as students and then came back to teach and work in the 1970s. Lily Leong Wong, Lola Lee, and I belong to that group. I had attended Castelar in the 1950s. During the Asian American Movement, we chose to come back to our community. We had been protesting against the establishment, but some realized that bashing our heads against the wall wasn’t working. Some went into law, some went into education, and yet another group went into unionization. We wanted to change things from the inside. As we wanted to influence the next generation of youth, a lot of us had connections with Castelar and Alpine Recreation Center.



I immigrated to America when I was six years old, in 1956. My maternal grandfather was a fruit picker at Suisun. In the 1930s, he came down to LA because he had uncles here working at an herb store. He petitioned for my mother, who came first. My father and I were left in Hong Kong. Mom left when I was 18 months old and then came back to marry my father officially at the American consulate. We then settled in Chinatown. My father was a dishwasher at Hong Kong Low restaurant, and Mom was working downtown as a piecemeal seamstress.

I entered Castelar in the first grade, totally non-English speaking. In those days, you were supposed to sit and absorb everything. There weren't that many Chinese students then because the immigration doors were still closed. I remember crying for two weeks, as I had no friends. I finally found another girl who spoke Cantonese. I remember we were jumping rope in the playground, chatting away in Chinese, and then this looming shadow came over me. I looked up and I got slapped in the face.

It was like a Charlie Brown cartoon because in those cartoons, the adults never talk. They just make noises like "wah, wah, wah." As I couldn't understand English, the White teacher was just saying "wah, wah, wah." But the message was clear: do not speak Chinese. That was the trauma that started my rejection of being Chinese until my UCLA days.

Castelar is not a good memory. I left Castelar in the third grade and I have little memory of those early years except for that slap. It is a total blank.

I know now from all my research that it takes four years to learn academic language. First, you develop social language as a second language. So in the fourth grade, I had an "aha" moment and started learning. It coincided with our move to the Echo Park area and my transfer to Micheltorena Elementary. For immigrant parents, the network of friends said that John Marshall High School was the premier school. So my parents and grandparents scraped their money together to buy within the Marshall district.

I do remember the old Castelar wooden building with an upside-down V roof; it was an old schoolhouse. It was cool and musty. There were no Chinese teachers. We were lucky to have Mrs. Mae Suto, a Japanese American nurse. At least she was Asian. There were Latino and Italian students, I think.





I was at UCLA between 1968 and 1973. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but that was not going to happen. I didn't know anything about Chinese history so I decided to major in Chinese literature. But what do you do with that degree? I heard about this new bilingual education program supported by the federal government. There was a need for bilingual education after the 1965 Immigration Act. I suddenly felt that no other kid should get slapped in the face for not speaking English, so I signed up for this teaching credential program in bilingual education. I was one of the first state-credentialed Cantonese teachers. I even helped the state establish exams for certification.

Castelar was in the process of starting their bilingual programs. Dr. Bill Chun-Hoon was transferred to Castelar to do this. It was one of the first programs in Southern California although San Francisco had established a couple of programs. At that time, Castelar was about 50% Hispanic and 30% Chinese. I went to Chun-Hoon because I wanted to teach at Castelar.

I started at Castelar in 1974. Bilingual education was totally new; it was trial and error. And it was not always well-received. Another young American-born Chinese teacher greeted me at Castelar with a finger pointing in my face; she said, "We don't need your kind here." There are even people who worked in bilingual and bicultural studies who are anti-bilingual education.

And just about that time, the boat people came. The first waves of Southeast Asian refugees were ethnic Chinese. They gathered in Chinatown as there was nowhere else to go. The whole scenery changed. Most of the kids spoke Chiu Chow or Vietnamese. It was a different set of problems and needs. At Castelar, we had to deal with this.

As teachers, we knew that developmentally, first-graders do not lie and do not steal. But we caught these little refugee girls stuffing crayons in their underwear. We teachers huddled, "Why do they do this?" The Spanish language teachers would talk about refugee children from El Salvador or rural areas who did not know their colors in any language or who never held a pencil or use scissors. I made a snobby comment in a meeting, "Well, you are never going to find Asian children like that." If the kids came from Korea or Hong Kong or Japan, they were at grade level in their own country. I had to eat my words. These Southeast Asian kids or rural Chinese kids that were coming never went to school in their lives!





Castelar had racial prejudice just like every other place: “Why are these people so dirty? Don’t their parents teach them anything?” But at Castelar, there was a critical mass of students with the same needs. And there was a critical mass of teachers who could sympathize culturally. That critical mass contributed to making Castelar special. We had bilingual parent training programs. Many parents came to me and said, “If my child doesn’t behave, just hit him.” I had to explain, “No, I won’t do that.” Parents would say, “My child is watching TV and playing basketball too much.” And I would say, “Yes, he should be playing basketball. We teachers will not give more homework as we have state standards.”

There were a lot of after-school meetings and a lot of community events. There was a Chinese school next door. When each of these schools or community organizations had activities, we would attend. There was a lot of fundraising; I remember fundraisers to establish the Chinatown Library.

A fun story about Castelar: the artist, Leo Politi, would sit in the playground, sketching and painting the children. He was a part of our school life. When the new building went up in 1975, he painted a mural.

There was other chaos: homeless people would come in and sift through our garbage. Chun-Hoon would not let us stay after dark. One time, a teacher came running out of the bathroom. She said there was noise in the next stall but no feet. It was a Cambodian aide who was squatting on top of the toilet.

As there were so few other Asian teachers in bilingual education, I got called to present at district and statewide conferences. After two years, LAUSD pulled me out of the classroom to head the non-Spanish bilingual programs. I had jurisdiction over Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Hawaiian, Tongan, Samoan, and Armenian. Later, I became Asian Bilingual Program Coordinator for Alhambra Unified School District before becoming a faculty member at California State University LA.

In terms of standards and achievements, Castelar continues to be special. It has sustained a standard of academic quality. That’s mainly because of the students, the parents, and the community. Despite being an immigrant school with low socioeconomic status and dense apartment living, it retains high Academic Performance Index (API) scores.





Dr. William Chun-Hoon

William Chun-Hoon served as principal of Castelar from 1973 through 1992. He is on the board of the Friends of Chinatown Library and a longtime member of CHSSC. Dr. Bill Chun-Hoon wrote an article with Emma Louie entitled, "Castelar School: A Community Principal's Perspective," printed in Gum Saan Journal in December of 1994.

I was at Castelar School from January 1973 to January 1992 when I retired after a 19-year career there. I was born and raised in Hawaii and attended the University of Colorado, Columbia University, and Claremont Graduate University where I received my PhD in Education. I began teaching at Griffith Junior High in East Los Angeles in 1957 and then became a counselor. I was then appointed as Head Counselor at Sepulveda and Byrd Junior Highs. As I did a lot of in-service reading training, I was assigned to the LAUSD district office where I worked with grants from President Johnson's anti-poverty policy and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. I was then assigned to the District Reading Task Force to assist selected elementary schools in the LAUSD Developmental Reading Program.

During the early 1970s, the Asian American communities began to organize to lobby the LA Board of Education to establish an LAUSD Asian American Education Commission, modeled after the Mexican American and Black Education Commissions. Asian community groups came together to push for affirmative action and a more culturally sensitive curriculum. I was involved with the Asian communities' efforts. When Hilda Reynolds, principal at Castelar School, retired in late 1972, Dr. John Lingel, Area F Superintendent, appointed me as the first Chinese American principal in the LAUSD. I wanted to be back in a school environment working with parents and children.

There were a lot of challenges at Castelar. In 1965, the school's enrollment was 500, about half Hispanic and half Chinese. The Chinese students were American-born, but many did not speak English upon entering school. The school's enrollment grew following the 1965 Immigration Act. President Johnson liberalized immigration, and we started getting more students from Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China after 1979. In 1975, the war with Vietnam ended and a lot of Chinese Vietnamese were persecuted and escaped by boat. There was a large

resettlement center for refugees at Camp Pendleton. LA's First Chinese Baptist Church and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association under Poy Wong and Dr. Sherwin Chan traveled to San Diego and placed many of these refugee families in Chinatown. Castelar enrolled the largest number of Vietnamese refugees in the LAUSD. Castelar was influenced by many national and international events, which affected the school's ethnic makeup and the curriculum.

The school was founded in 1882, but the original main building was destroyed by fire and was replaced in 1904 by a 13-classroom building. In 1971, the Sylmar earthquake caused such extensive damage to the 1904 Victorian building that the school's main building had to be rebuilt. Prior to this, Principal Reynolds had worked with architects Eugene Choy and Barton Choy on a design for a new school. My first challenge following my assignment was to follow through on rebuilding the school. In 1975, California earthquake funds were available and in four years, a modern 27-classroom building including a multipurpose room, cafeteria and children's center was constructed along Yale Street.



The wooden Castelar schoolhouse was torn down in 1975 after the Sylmar earthquake caused extensive damage to the building.



Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down *Lau v. Nichols*, which gave school districts a legal mandate to establish bilingual education programs. In the LAUSD, four elementary schools established pilot programs—three in Spanish and one in Chinese at Castelar. Principal Hilda Reynolds initiated the Cantonese bilingual program in the 1971–72 school year at the kindergarten level, coordinated by Doris Wong with teachers Peggy Wong and Helen Chu. Six-hour bilingual aides, Winifred Lee and June Lee, were also assigned to assist the students. Each year, the program progressed up a grade level. The program utilizing Cantonese was transitional, in which English as a Second Language was emphasized. Castelar also had a Spanish bilingual program, which differed from the Cantonese program as Spanish reading was taught. The teacher was Sue Rabwin, assisted by education aide, Eva Castro. Teachers and aides were required to pass an LAUSD Chinese or Spanish proficiency test conducted by Eleanor Sue and Bak Pang Young. However, by 1998, bilingual instruction ended with California's Proposition 227, which mandated English-only instruction.

The Castelar faculty was uniquely staffed with nine teachers who were alumni of the school. The bilingual program was enhanced by the addition of six-hour bilingual educational aides in Chinese and in Spanish. Federal and state programs were well-funded, more so than the early 1960s. Among the assistant principals were Walter Simmons, Seth Sandberg, Ed Catlett, Jean Lau, Elsa Stewart, and Linda Martin, who gave invaluable service to students, staff, and community with logistics, instruction, and student service. Chris Soldate and Rafael Lerma coordinated the school's multicultural Chinese and Spanish festival programs. The school's instructional coordinators during these years were Shirley Bishop, Ella Quan and Cheuk Choi. The School Community Advisory Council was led by community members Dr. Ruby Ling Louie and Paul Louie of the Human Relations Commission.

The school continued to need to meet the educational needs of the immigrant and refugee students from China, Vietnam, and Mexico especially. The curriculum was modified. In their home countries, students were taught by traditional whole class instruction. But our teachers developed a cooperative methodology using open classrooms. For example, four second-grade classes would share a large open space with teachers teaming up to coordinate instruction. In this way, limited English-speaking





students were integrated in a classroom and could also be grouped for special instruction.

Health problems were of a high priority. Most of the students had never seen a dentist nor had their vision or hearing evaluated; and we had to check diligently for tuberculosis and other diseases. The school nurse, Mae Suto, worked closely with students, families, and public health agencies. Immigrants and refugees also came with a number of academic, social and emotional problems. School psychologists, Marilyn Fong and David Buchman, coordinated the school's resources with students, teachers, families, Department of Social Services, and the Chinatown Service Center. The school's resource specialist, Richard Ichimura, worked with students who had special academic and social needs. The Castelar Children's Center provided childcare for 200 children whose parents were working or attending school. Lauren Okayama was the Center's supervisor from 1978 through 1988.

After the 1954 *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, school districts across the nation were required by the Supreme Court to racially integrate students. It was not until 1978 that the LAUSD Board was mandated to integrate its schools. Castelar, as a racially isolated school, was paired with a school in San Fernando Valley. However, through community and parent objections, the board permitted Castelar to remain racially segregated due to the number of immigrant and refugee limited English-speaking students and the specialized bilingual programs.

The LAUSD Board required that desegregation be applied not only to students but school staff as well. By the 1980s, Castelar had too many "minority" teachers and we were fortunate to have Marie Parish and Susan Dickson assigned to the school.

In the late 1970s, the school's enrollment grew so much that we scheduled double session morning and afternoon classes for first and second grades. By the spring of 1981, there were 1,156 students—80% Asian and 19% Hispanic. The District required that we go to a year-round schedule. Students were divided into four tracks based on neighborhoods. The parents didn't like it because it interrupted their family schedules; the dissatisfaction of the parents caused enrollment to drop. Obviously, a lot of our students were using Chinatown addresses to come to the school. At this point, the School Advisory Council, chaired by Dr. Gay Yuen, petitioned the



LAUSD Board to end the school's year-round schedule. We were given the opportunity to vote on the status of the year-round schedule and the parents overwhelmingly voted against it. After three years, the school began the 1985–86 school year on the traditional schedule.

The School Leadership Council was very active in the 1980s in advising the school on budget, programs and schedules. During this time, parents who served on the council included Chi Mui, Sharon Lowe, Edmund SooHoo, Judy Wong and William Tong. Among the teachers were Susan Dickson, Carolyn Davis and Ellen Inafuku.

We developed a close relationship with many community agencies, social organizations and businesses. The Chinese Historical Society has been meeting in the school's multipurpose room since 1977. Early supporters included Cathay Bank, East West Bank, Yee Sing Chong Market, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, Kong Chow Benevolent Association, Chinese American Citizens Alliance, Chinatown Optimist Club, Chinese Women's Juniors, the Chinese Chamber, Alpine Recreation Center, Pacific Alliance Medical Center and the Chinatown Service Center. The Chinatown Community Advisory Committee led by Al Lum and Don Toy enabled LA City Redevelopment funds to build four much-needed classrooms.

Castelar is part of Chinatown. We are one of the organizations. We would get together with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce for the New Year parades. At first, the carnival was held in our schoolyard. These activities really helped our school, too. The parents were supportive. We had adult ESL classes in our classrooms. On Saturdays, college students would tutor our kids with the Asian American Tutorial Project. In fact, Stewart Kwoh was one of the volunteers who started the program in 1969. College students came from UCLA, USC, Occidental, and Cal State LA.

Joyce Law started the Chinatown Service Center upstairs in the neighboring Methodist Church. I got to know the minister, Reverend Ma, and served on their committees. The Methodist Church next door is landlocked. They needed parking and we don't use our parking on Sundays. In return they gave us space for adult classes in their building. We never had a formal contract. Joyce Lai was our aide and an adult teacher at Methodist. Chung Wah Chinese School is also Castelar's neighbor. During our construction, we used their classrooms temporarily. A community group, Dai Jung, volunteered to tutor the new students. Our other neighbor



is Alpine Recreation Center, whose Advisory Committee included Chi Mui and Sharon Lowe. We got special treatment there. The city closed Yale Street, and we were able to use Alpine's playground during our construction.

In 1977, the school, LAUSD and Los Angeles Public Library were in partnership to house the Chinatown Branch Library in the school's auditorium. The library, which was expanded three times, included a computer center donated by Tien Zee of Intex Corp. The educational value of this cooperative arrangement benefited students, faculty and Chinatown. In 2003, funding from LA's Proposition D constructed a new library branch two blocks away.

The approach to education has changed quite a bit. More is controlled by outside forces today. For instance, teacher evaluations are now more based on annual achievement scores. In my days, we pushed the kids' individual reading skills one year to the next. Now you evaluate the entire class as a unit and judge the teacher accordingly.

Castelar has a high API (Academic Performance Index) score and it is really because the parents believe in education. They support the school and they support the kids. And of course, we had support from the community and the most committed teachers. We all worked hard and we worked together. Those were long days working at Castelar. We had these wonderful Cinco de Mayo/Spring parades and Chinese New Year programs. Very creative!

We were really involved with teachers, parents and community. That's what I consider my achievement. I encouraged all to work together. At that time, the district gave schools more ability to work in our own context. We needed to build those relationships. I had it too good!!

Phyllis Chiu

Phyllis was a volunteer, aide, and then teacher at Castelar until her recent retirement. Phyllis speaks Cantonese, and some Mandarin and Spanish. Her second-grade team-teaching methods were a model studied by many outsiders. Chiu was also the teachers' union representative for several years.

I was born in Iowa; my parents were foreign students studying there. I grew up in Pennsylvania and came to California to go to school at UCSD. I never looked back [laughs]. I was in Third College and helped to organize Asian students. We would come to Los Angeles for conferences and I met





a lot of people doing community work here. After college, I got a research assistant position at UCLA's Asian American Studies Center, and I moved to Los Angeles. That was the year I started volunteering at Castelar. I wanted to help out in Chinatown. This was 1972.

I started volunteering in Shirley Cassell's fifth grade class. Shirley had about five or six immigrant students from Hong Kong. They didn't know any English, and I don't know how they communicated with their teacher. I would help out about an hour or two. There were a lot of Chinese-speaking students and few Chinese-speaking teachers. The kids were so eager to learn. But there were no direction and no materials for ESL. I would make up little games and activities to help the immigrant students keep up with math, English, and other subjects.

After a year of volunteering, I applied to be a Title 1 aide. I worked with Chris Soldate for over two years in the third grade. There was a third-grade team with Lillian Lee, Susan Sandberg, and Dalile Polikaitis. They had a bungalow with four connecting rooms. The third grade was really innovative. They worked together by ability levels. Whichever teacher had the high English-reading students would have the low math students, and vice versa. It worked out really well. I worked with the ESL kids. The Latino kids would speak some English; they were from families that lived near Evans Adult School and the DWP building.

Chris told me to get a teaching credential. I was happy with the \$250 per month that I was making as an aide [laughs]. But I followed her advice and got a credential at Cal State LA. In 1975, Bill Chun-Hoon needed a teacher for an overflow class because so many Vietnamese refugees had come. The new building had not been completed, so we had no space. I got Richard Ichimura's "closet" as the classroom for my fourteen students. I didn't know enough then to know how bad it really was.

If I had known more, I would've gotten more services for the refugees. There was this little Vietnamese-speaking girl who was drawing some sexually explicit pictures. I thought it was weird, but I didn't know how to communicate and reach her. I now think she saw too much at refugee camps. There were a lot of kids that had been harmed or scarred. There were kids that were hiding under tables when they heard a loud noise. There were kids that would be running around and shooting at each other instead of working at their desks. The kids were acting out in very inappropriate





ways. We had not seen this with the Hong Kong immigrant kids. The Hong Kong kids didn't speak English, but they had gone to normal schools and they knew what schools were about. That was really different from kids who had never gone to school. They would talk about walking a long way to get to boats.

The school did hire some Vietnamese-speaking aides and they were so helpful. Some of the Vietnamese were Chinese-speaking. But then I got some Cambodian kids who spoke Khmer.

We developed a pod for second graders in 1977. We took Chris Soldate's ideas of team-teaching. Sharon Siow and Pauline S. Wong had teamed before and asked me to join them. Doris Hong, Karen Luo, and Lily Ow were also teachers. Later on, we had an open classroom with removable walls in Rooms 18, 19, 24, and 25. We could see everybody. We could do big projects like murals and dancing as we had so much room. We could work on something all at once. We put students on contracts for record-keeping. We all had reading groups and math groups. Each of the teachers would specialize in one content area: social studies, music, science, or art. One teacher would teach one lesson four times. ESL students were integrated with the high groups at least for part of the day.

The team-teaching allowed us to do special projects for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Chinese New Year. One person would cook a turkey and serve it to the kids. Then we had the kids cooking pumpkin pies, corn bread, sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce. They could see what a traditional Thanksgiving meal might be like. For Halloween, we would do trick or treating around the four rooms. One of my favorite events was a multicultural food fair with parents bringing in dishes. The parents showed the kids how to prepare different foods like tamales, green papaya salad, and sweet potato pie. The kids were able to share their culture and be proud of their heritage. That's what kids remembered even when they came back to visit as young adults. The kids always remembered the food.

There were a lot of curricular changes over the years. There is always a new reading program. I remember Mrs. Reece, one of the older teachers, said, "Don't worry. If you don't like this program, it'll be gone in a few years" [laughs]. That was so true. Every six or seven years, there would be a new reading program and then it would be replaced by something else. It was spiraling around, but not up. The worst trend was the whole language





program when we weren't supposed to correct anything. It didn't work in Chinatown [laughs]; it didn't service the immigrants. And another mistake was the ending of bilingual education with Proposition 227. Another bad trend was year-round school. The whole incident showed the district's disregard of community interests; it also broke up school unity. The district gave us all these reasons why year-round school would be academically better, but I thought it was dishonest. It was a time when parents stood up. The parents also stood up when our student, Jason Chow, was killed by a speeding car at a crosswalk. The parents demanded a street light on College but we got a stop sign. That accident was so tragic.

Teachers feel Castelar is heaven and so they never leave. But then a whole group of teachers did retire, and I wondered about the impact. I came to realize that it wasn't the teachers that make Castelar a unique place. It was the immigrant students who come to school prepared to learn, prepared to accept instruction. That attitude comes from the home and the family. We probably overestimate the importance of the staff. I think there's actually a lot of parental support from Chinese and Latinos. The parents believe that anything the teacher says, you should accept. No matter how much homework we gave the students, the parents would not complain. They may do the homework for their child [laughs], but they wouldn't complain against the teacher. And the parents send their children to school every day. That's not true in other schools. Our kids would come to school even when they were sick. They don't go on vacations during school time.

The teachers know that Castelar is part of the community. Dr. Chun-Hoon really opened the school. I don't know how he got around all the District's rules. He opened the school at 6:00 a.m. and closed it at 6:00 p.m. All kinds of community events happened on campus. We had health screenings; the public library was right there. Alpine was across the street and Chung Wah Chinese School and the church were next door. The hospital was in the other direction, very convenient for our earthquake drills! That's unique.

There are more housing developments in the neighborhood now. Kids today are more distracted with technology. There are always problems of children not really talking to their parents. There's a new Mandarin first grade program at Castelar, but the kids' home language is Cantonese [laughs]. We'll see.





Christine Soldate

Ms. Soldate was an exemplary teacher who taught at Castelar from 1969 to 2006.

I grew up in South Pasadena and went to Cal State University. After completing my credential, I became a substitute teacher and spent almost the entire year at Castelar. I enjoyed the camaraderie and helpful attitudes of the faculty as well as an opportunity to teach in the old building with 15- to 16-foot ceilings, hardwood floors, broad corridors and beautiful, tall windows—all barred, of course. The classrooms themselves were very large but then so were class sizes in those days.

The children were mixed together with no consideration given to ethnicity. No one differentiated between those who spoke Cantonese and those who spoke Spanish. There were some newcomers, but most of the Chinese had ties to the community. The parents owned grocery stores, jewelry stores, gift stores, and restaurants. Most children who were the eldest in the family came to school with very little English, but within a year their social English was excellent. After all, if you wanted to speak to the person sitting next to you or who was going to play with you, there had to be a mutual language for communication. We did have an ESL program for the few children who needed it.

In those days, the games the children played were very much like the games that are played today except there were swings, monkey bars, rings and a jungle gym. There was kickball, four square, handball, punchball, hopscotch, softball, basketball, and Chinese jump rope—a lot of Chinese jump rope. We also went over to Alpine Park to play. Many of the children went to Chinese school after Castelar. You could hear the students reciting their lessons and would often find their copy books on the tables in the school classroom.

There was a wonderful sense of camaraderie. It was a smaller school with just two classes per grade level. The Latinos mainly lived in tenements. They did very well although they didn't do as well as the Chinese.

In those days we had IQ testing and MR classes. We had EMR, educationally mentally retarded and TMR, which is trainable mentally retarded. TMR IQs were probably 70 or lower. The classes were small—10 to 15. These kids were from the community. I don't think it had anything



to do with retardation. These kids were slower, and they hadn't learned how to read. Basically, these were children who had learning difficulties. They didn't see things the same way or hear things the same way. Nowadays, they would be in Special Ed. They stopped having these classes when it became politically incorrect.

We had a cultural arts program of my devising. I decided that students needed exposure to cultures other than their own. I devised a program with folk dance, folk stories, architecture, and clothing. I taught Japanese, Israeli, English, and French dances in the afternoons. The students came to the multipurpose room every other week. I would go into classroom in the mornings and teach songs from different countries. After three or four years, the Title 1 funding got cut so I went back into the classroom.

In 1975, I went with Dr. Bill Chun-Hoon to mainland China on an exchange. In China, I noticed that one of the schools we visited was doing a dance using a large round Chinese jump rope. The way they moved, their synchronized kicks, the interesting way the rope bent with their movements was fascinating. Our students used the jump ropes made from rubber bands and were quite skilled with them, but I had never seen an actual dance using the bands made into a large circle. When I returned, I choreographed a Chinese jump rope dance using a record I purchased in Shanghai. The rubber bands were replaced by elastic cords. These ten third-grade girls soon became the hit of the LAUSD show-and-tell circuit. Eventually, we did the dance in front of President and Mrs. Ford in Chinatown's Central Plaza. I still have the letter that President Ford wrote me from the White House thanking me for the wonderful dance. We did the dance all over the Southland. We did it at the cultural festivals, at LACMA, at Long Beach State. By that time, I had added the Cambodian coconut dance inspired by a visit to the Cambodian Cultural Center in Long Beach. Since there was no music involved I was able to copy many of the motions and come up with a very interesting dance. The district sent our coconut dancers and Chinese jump rope dancers everywhere. Unfortunately, the jump rope girls graduated, and we never replaced them. Been there, done that; on to something new.

During that time, Title 1 was overflowing with funds, and the children were able to go on these wonderful field trips. We were able to take the third grade classes on a whale-watching trip. We never saw a whale, but we did see very big waves. When we asked the kids to draw a picture and write a story





about what they saw, two boys drew a picture of this dark room with a light bulb in it. When asked, the boys explained that it was the bathroom. That was the only thing they saw because they were seasick the whole time.

That same year we went to Vasquez Rocks. One of the teachers, Ingrid Watson, tripped, fell, and broke her leg. So we sent the kids back with Phyllis Chiu while I stayed with the teacher. The next thing that we knew, there was a big, huge rescue helicopter that landed in the dirt parking lot to the delight of all the children hanging out the bus windows. There were also search and rescue people coming in on horses, and there were rangers from the park. Ingrid was airlifted to a local hospital, and she had no way to get home. The two buses performed taxi service and picked us up. We finally got back at 5:30 p.m. The other faculty were still having a meeting. Everyone was concerned about our missing buses. It seems that the bus drivers radioed into bus central, but bus central had not called to tell the school where its students and teachers were. When we pulled up, all of the teachers were hanging out the windows and parents were lined up at the curb cheering and crying. The students had a very exciting time with the helicopter, horses, rangers, hospital, and all. We got some great stories that time.

When school started one September in the mid-1970s, there were all these children sitting in my class from Vietnam, Cambodia, and one from mainland China. These kids couldn't speak a word of English, and I didn't speak a word of Vietnamese...who did? Fortunately, my classroom aide was able to speak Mandarin to the child from mainland China who could speak Vietnamese to the students from Vietnam, and one child from Vietnam could speak Cambodian. They all could get the basic instructions of what to do. This got old very quickly. The parents of these children often spoke more than one language, and the students learned to understand and communicate in English very quickly.

In the late 1970s, developers began eyeing the Chinatown area for buildable land. Many of the tenements housing the Latino population were torn down. The Dorothy Mae apartments burned down in an arson fire in September 1982. We lost about twelve Latino students from the school in that horrible tragedy. They were all on the top floor with the exterior fire door locked shut. They all died of smoke inhalation. I had taught a number of them and the loss was devastating. Twenty-five people died.





Fungi Ng

A Chinatown lifer, Fungi worked at Castelar and works at the Alpine Recreation Center.

I was born in Chinatown in 1968. My parents were immigrants from Hong Kong, and we speak Toisan. My father was a chef; my mother did sewing and worked at different stores. My brother and I both went to Castelar since kindergarten.

When I started at Castelar, we were still in the old building. The bigger kids were in bungalows near the church. But we moved into the new building about second grade. It felt like a new high rise! Everything looked so great: air conditioning and everything!

When I started school, it was quite frightening. It was the first time I was away from my parents for many hours a day. Everything was so large, and there were so many other kids. Half of my teachers were Chinese, and the other half were Caucasian. I think about 60% of the kids were Asian, and the other 40% were Latino. I spoke English only at school. There were some kids by the mid-1970s that spoke Chiu Chow at school. But we still communicated; our English wasn't that great either [laughs]. I picked up a little Spanish and a little Chiu Chow. We all mixed; we didn't care about ethnicity. We'd just hang out with each other. Even today, I still see my classmates now bringing their kids to Castelar. I think it wasn't until junior high at Nightingale that we even became conscious of different ethnicities and cliques.

I enjoyed Castelar; it was great. I had great teachers, and a majority of them stayed at Castelar for thirty years. They taught generation to generation. I feel bad that now there are teachers who come in and only stay for two years, and then move on. They don't really get a feel for the community. When you have a teacher who's been there a long time, they know you, they can relate to you. They know your lifestyle, your family. You know they know Chinatown and its customs. That's very important that they understand. Some even spoke your language, which was a big help when you are a little kid. It makes that kid feel so much better or else they have no clue what's going on.

I still live in Chinatown in the same apartment; I'm as local as you can get! After Belmont High School, I came back to work at Alpine Playground.



I've been here twenty-five years. I started as a Recreation Assistant I, and have done all different kinds of things from pre-school to the sports programs.

I went back to Castelar to volunteer to teach the lion dance program in the early 1990s. The program existed before, but there was a break in there before I took it over. As a kid, I was part of the East Wind Youth Foundation [established in 1972] with Ron Quan. I thought it was something that was good for the kids. It is part of our cultural background, and something that the parents can relate to. It is exercise and a social network. I wanted to give that back to them. I went to Dr. Chun-Hoon and told him about my program. He was very helpful and supportive. I didn't want just to take everybody; students had to maintain a certain grade point average. It wasn't babysitting; they had to earn their spot. So the kids were very proud of themselves. When we first started, it was the talk of the town; everyone wanted to do it. But students had to earn it through their school work, and be physically fit. The youngest were in third grade and the oldest were in sixth grade. There were about 15 to 20 kids, but I got requests from about 60 kids or so. I met the team about twice a week after school. At first, we would just perform for Chinese New Year at Castelar. But then we started performing for other schools, Cinco de Mayo, bank openings... It just got too much; it was almost like a business. We had to do a lot of fundraising, as those lion heads were very expensive. And we were taking the kids out of classrooms just too frequently. It wasn't just lion dancing, you had to be there and talk to the kids. The kids are still in contact with me and each other. You have to be a role model; the kids are always watching you. It was a lot of memories and a lot of good times.

I'm glad we have a school in the heart of Chinatown. It is very convenient. We are fortunate that our kids don't have to jump in a bus or car to go to school. Within a five-minute walk, you are there. It is part of Chinatown's rhythm. After you take your kids to school, some parents go to work. Year after year, I see some parents and grandparents get dim sum after dropping the kids off. They chat, they connect. A lot of the kids are in after-school programs together.

Chinatown has changed a lot in so many different ways. In the past, there were many new immigrants who come to Chinatown. But many have moved to Alhambra and the San Gabriel Valley. Of late, there are new younger people—many Caucasians—coming in perhaps from Echo Park and other communities. They want to travel less to their work in downtown





LA. Especially with the recession, I think people are having less kids. Castelar's ethnic demographics remain the same although Chinatown has changed. You always have to adjust.

With all these recession cutbacks, all the schools and the parks have taken a hit. I was working at Castelar as a campus aide, a security guard. My job was to make sure everybody was safe but I'm not there anymore. Everything got cut. All these teachers got laid off. I don't think the state realizes how much these people do for the school. Teachers don't just teach eight hours; they do a lot of extra things. Now morale is bad. Kids are impacted. What is the country going to look like in the future?

Day after day, year after year blends together. Sometimes I see kids and ask them what grade they are in. They answer, "I already graduated from college!" Time flies. One day the kids are three years old, and the next day they are running the country.

Mike Fong

Mr. Fong is Senior Liaison to the Asian Pacific Islander community for Los Angeles' Mayor's Office. Mike was Field Deputy for Councilmember Ed Reyes and is currently on the national board of Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA) and Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA).

I'm a Castelar kid; I went from 1982 to 1988. I have such fond memories of Castelar. My mother, Wanda Fong, worked at the Chinatown Library since it was founded. As a kid, I was immersed in Chinatown. I even went to pre-school and after-school programs at Castelar. I remember going with my mother to the library at 7:00 a.m., helping her shelve books, walking 100 feet over to the school for breakfast... My younger sister went to Castelar, too. After school, we often went to my grandparents for dinner.

Before six years old, I spoke more Cantonese, but now I just understand a little and a little Toisanese. I actually speak more Spanish from my four years at high school. My parents did try to get me to attend the Chinese school next door to Castelar, but I didn't want to do that. Now I wish I had gone and could have that knowledge.

Castelar was an amazing experience. There were great teachers. Ms. SooHoo was my kindergarten teacher. I had Mrs. Carolyn Davis for third grade and fifth grade; she was my favorite. When she retired a few years ago,





it was awesome that I was invited to present her with a certificate on behalf of the city. It was an opportunity for me to reconnect.

I also was on Castelar Elementary School's lion dance team from 1986 to 1988. I played the gongs. There were two lions, and other kids did the drums and the cymbals. There were about ten of us. We performed for many people including Prince Andrew at Chinatown Plaza. I even performed for Leo McCarthy at Tai Hong Restaurant. I'm still friends with Ali Huynh from the lion dance team and several other members. I remember Dr. Chun-Hoon would drive us around to some functions. There were also martial arts classes after school.

At the time, I didn't really appreciate the significance of Chinese culture. As a kid, I just wanted to be part of that lion dance team. It was fun. We performed for Chinatown Parade, Nisei Week Parade. It was such an opportunity. I performed for Lotus Festival in Echo Park. For me, it was exciting to get three dollars of vouchers to buy anything I liked. But now twenty years later, I represent our mayor at the same festival. I share the story with the audience: I performed here twenty years ago!

We played Chinese checkers. I learned it from the other kids. Now I know that that is not part of other elementary schools' experience. In my mind, Castelar was about 85% Chinese at that time. There were a lot of Chinese Vietnamese in those years.

In the fifth grade, I got selected to go to Finland with a bunch of other kids from LAUSD. It was also opportunity to meet youth from around the city. We went to a lot of local fieldtrips: LA Zoo, City Hall... Castelar is in the middle of the city.

After sixth grade, I was bused to Millikan Junior High in Sherman Oaks, and it was a different environment as most kids there were Caucasian. I learned that LA is a big place, a diverse place. For ninth grade, I went to Griffith Junior High in East LA, which was about 99% Latino. I was one of a handful of Asian American kids, but everybody was very accepting. I got to do the Jaime Escalante Math/Science Program at East LA College that summer. I think I was the only Asian in that program. That program took us to a lot of college tours, and it was amazing. Then I went to Bravo High School. I'm a proud product of LAUSD public schools. I can work with everybody; I became a team player.





I attended UCLA from 1995 to 1999. I majored in psychobiology with a minor in education. I volunteered for, and then served as Project Director, of the Asian American Tutorial Project. That was founded in the 1970s by UCLA, USC, and Occidental College students. When I was a student at Castelar, I used to go on Saturday mornings to get tutored. Now I was at UCLA, and I had to continue the cycle of service. Every Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to noon. I got to take the kids on fieldtrips, and it was fun to get my fellow college students excited about Chinatown. Chinatown is not like the San Gabriel Valley.

Chinatown is still Chinatown in some ways. The family associations and the cultural organizations are still a very important part of Chinatown. As a representative of the mayor's office, I go to a lot of events and functions and have the opportunity to see these organizations servicing the community. But Chinatown is also evolving. The demographics are changing especially due to gentrification, affordable housing developments, and new immigration. Chinatown is still growing. But it is still the cultural heart of the Chinese American community. Chinatown Library, Alpine Recreation Center, and Castelar Elementary are touchpoints. I still run into many alumni who may have moved out but still have feelings for Castelar and Chinatown.

In its 130-year history, Castelar has been one of the top performing schools. That has a lot to do with the teachers. Many of the teachers have been there a long time, and it is a very stable environment. They enjoy teaching at Castelar; they don't transfer out. Principal Chun-Hoon was amazing. He really empowered teachers. He was a good leader and very involved even to this day in the community. Chun-Hoon remembered every student's name. He was the first Chinese American principal but regardless of whether he was the first or the last, he made it a point to embrace the community. His success was everyone's success and vice versa.

When I was in Millikan Junior High, I decided to do a book report on public safety. Mom said, "Why don't you talk to Dr. Chun-Hoon?" So I knocked on his door and next thing I knew, he was driving me down to the Central Police Station to meet some police officers. That was for my seventh grade book report! He took the time.

There were other people like Dr. [Ruby Ling] Louie who helped the library, which was on the Castelar campus. Judge Delbert and Dolores Wong worked so long and hard for that library too. Then there were people





like my grandfather who came to America in 1923. He raised my mother who went to LA High and worked in the family laundry after school. Police officer Tom Bradley was one of the customers who got his uniform dry-cleaned at Gong Gong's (grandfather's) laundry. That's Los Angeles. I'm a proud Angeleno.

Castelar is a special place. Castelar is the heart of a community. It even houses a lot of community meetings and events; it is more than a school.

Sophia Thompson

Sophia was an immigrant student at Castelar Elementary and is now a parent of three Castelar children. She works at a downtown law firm.

I was born in Hong Kong. I immigrated at three months old and we came to Chinatown, where my aunt lived. My mom was a stay-at-home parent and my father worked two jobs as a waiter. My mom didn't speak English. Going to school was hard because my parents wanted me to be Chinese but school wanted me to be American.

They sent me to Castelar so I would maintain our Chinese roots. Now, I want the same thing for my kids. I sent all three of my daughters to Castelar. What better way to learn Chinese culture than to stay in Castelar?

I was a horrible student at Castelar. In the first grade, I went to school mostly on field trip days and book order days. Mr. Cheuk Choi was my second grade teacher, and I made it very difficult for him. I faked stomachaches every day, so I would get sent home or didn't have to attend class at all. Mr. Choi was not having any of that and told my parents that I had to go to school; my parents listened to him. I did not like school at all. I thought the other students were mean, and I didn't assimilate well. I didn't like staying up until nine or ten o'clock to do homework. I hated it. I had to do fractions, math, and use the ruler. I got terrible grades. I fought with my mom about school all the time.

But when I got to King Junior High, I became an honor student because I had learned to work so hard at Castelar. Junior high was a breeze. All the habits and cultural influences that Castelar instilled in me make me who I am today. I graduated with a 4.97 GPA from Marshall High School. I then went on to USC and earned a BS in Business Administration and continued to earn a certification from UCLA in Human Resources.



That's what Castelar instilled in me: education, education, education. The Chinatown culture and the Chinese people focus on education. As an adult, I appreciate everything from writing simple Chinese words to Cinco de Mayo celebrations. Castelar makes really good well-rounded kids.



Former alumni Mike Fong, Brian Lam, and Sophia Thompson.

As a mother, I decided to put my three girls in Castelar as well. My oldest daughter is now in high school and I follow the progress of some of her classmates. Although they weren't the best students while at Castelar, they also got that work ethic instilled in them that made them honor roll students. My middle daughter graduated from Castelar two years ago and feels that Castelar made her into a better student. My youngest is in fourth grade at Castelar.

Teachers at Castelar genuinely care. Teachers like Susan Dickson, Tammie Quach and many other teachers put in a lot of their own time—and money—into the classroom. Teachers are dedicated and truly care about the success of their students. To them, it isn't just a job. It's all about the students. That's what makes Castelar such a great school. Asian and Latino students alike accept the push for education and embrace it. Teachers help students all the time by staying after school on their own time or sending students who fall behind to get Saturday tutoring help. At Castelar, parents work with teachers very closely. Both Latino and Chinese parents at Castelar not only talk to their children about education and strive for their



kids to get good grades, but they partner with the teachers to help their kids succeed. Teachers like Ms. Dickson are not Chinese, but have the same no-nonsense attitude; she gives the kids a lot of structure. The kids love their teachers; the teachers are like celebrities in the community [laughs].

I'm very involved in the school although I work full-time at a downtown law firm. I want to give back to the school that shaped me into who I am, so I help where I can. Especially with all the budget cuts, I try to donate my time, voice concerns, or donate supplies. Because of the culture of the community and the language barrier, the community does not know how to ask for help; other schools in low-income communities have parents that are more outspoken. A lot of our parents work two jobs and don't speak English well. I get parents who speak Spanish or Chinese say to me, "You say it, Sophia. You say it for us." For many, many years we did not have an on-campus library. I organized a group of parents. We went down to the school board and addressed our issues with them. When that didn't work, we enlisted the help of the news media to feature Castelar and our battle to get an on-campus library. Now we have a beautiful on-campus library, a new administration wing, a parent center, and a new computer lab.

The young and upcoming teachers will stay at Castelar for a very long time and will continue its legacy. Castelar will continue to be a really good school and provide stability and cultural awareness to the community. If you do well, you can go to gifted magnet schools in LAUSD; opportunities will open up. But it all starts at Castelar.

Cheuk Choi

Principal Cheuk Choi started as a teaching assistant at Castelar and has been its principal since 1997.

I was born in Toisan and I immigrated as a teenager in 1969 with my mother and sister. Our original destination was Boston but my uncle convinced us that Los Angeles was warmer; he was already living in Chinatown. We moved here too and I attended Belmont High School. It took some time to adjust to the language and culture. There were only a handful of Chinese at Belmont in those days. I had some classmates who joined Chinese gangs. I saw how difficult it was for them to get adjusted to the system and to life. All our parents were working long hours. And joining the gangs was one way to survive.



I started at Cal State Los Angeles and transferred to UCLA to major in Oriental Studies. I finished my master's in education at Cal State. When I was getting my teaching credential, I wanted to focus on secondary education to help new immigrants like myself. But at that particular time, bilingual education was focused on elementary grades. I speak Toisan, Cantonese, and Mandarin.

I started as a teaching assistant at Castelar. And I did my first student teaching assignment here. Proposition 13 passed and all the free summer sessions were cut. I was supposed to do a second student teaching assignment but couldn't. I got an emergency teaching credential instead and started teaching second grade in 1978. The second grade teachers rotated the students each Friday. I taught music on Fridays. It was an interesting start to my career, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. The kids were very, very fun.

I became Principal in 1997 after Doré Wong left to serve in the district offices. My years here have gone by quickly. Every school is special, but the Chinatown location has caused us to deal with a lot of immigrants. Previously, most of the immigrants were from Hong Kong and Mexico. In the last 20 years, there have been more immigrants with a Central American and South American background. Many people feel the same way as my family when we started. When you first immigrate, you want to start with something familiar so you can survive. Chinatown is an easier adjustment so it is a very special place for families. A lot of parents trust us at Castelar to help their children. I can sense their anxiety. We play a very special role for the students and their families.



**Principals
Bill Chun-Hoon,
Doré Wong,
and Cheuk Choi
with CSULA
Professor
Gay Yuen, 2012.**



About 25% of the school is Latino and about 90% of those students start with very limited English skills. The majority of the 75% Asian students start school also with no English skills. Many of the children are American-born, and their families have been here for 10 or 15 years, but the families have not adjusted to the language change.

We have one of the highest attendance records in LAUSD. Many of our graduating fifth-graders started pre-school at Castelar. Some families do move out to the suburbs when their oldest completes the fifth grade. And we have a very stable teaching staff. It has to do with the students. The students come with a tremendous desire to learn. Teachers are really focused on teaching, not difficult behavior. For teachers, this is what you want. You want to feel good about teaching to students who are learning. We are fortunate to be here.

Of course, we have some racial tension. Each family comes to the school with their backgrounds and biases. But over the years, we have done a good job of talking to parents and their children about the district's policies. Teachers know to educate their classes and the parents as well. It is a minimum problem on this campus.

Student achievement is the number one priority of parents, teachers, and administrators. We have done a good job in providing a safe environment for our kids to learn. We want each child to succeed to his or her fullest potential.

But life has more than just academics. The performing arts budget has been reduced for over 20 years in the district. We partnered with Education Through Music to bring music back. In 2007, we made sure every second- and third-grader at Castelar had an opportunity to learn either violin or cello. Very few parents in our community see the need nor have the means to provide musical training. But I want to bring in the performing arts. Now, every child from second to fifth grade has access to violin or cello during school time. I've brought in some ballet programs and some ballroom dancing. I never had that experience as a child, nor did other parents. Performing arts is a different set of disciplines for our kids.

My other project is the renovation of this wing on the corner of Yale and College streets. It was a 10-year project! We had to argue with the district to get funding. This building now includes a Parent Center, a conference





room, a school library and a computer lab with 35 computers. Our Parent Advisory Council recently taught Chinese cooking at the Parent Center as part of our nutrition program. It was fun watching Latino parents learn Chinese cooking.

The city has a lot of different plans for the vicinity of the school. Projects like the Orsini luxury apartments on Caesar Chavez and Figueroa have not directly impacted Castelar. Chinatown apartments are expensive and cramped. I don't know how all these factors will affect Castelar. When I started, we had about 1,000 students and our enrollment dropped a little every year for 15 years; we now have about 630 students. This last school year, we started a Mandarin Immersion program; this might attract students from other districts. Even students immigrating from Guangdong and Hong Kong will have some school background in Mandarin.

I lived in Chinatown until I moved out for college. I've attended the church right down the street for the last 40 years. I have a special relationship with Chinatown, a very close one [laughs].





Castelar Poems

By Cindy Yan, Simin Woo, and Jay Tong

Cindy, Simin, and Jay are currently fifth graders in Susan Dickson's classroom at Castelar.

By Cindy Yan

Cooler elementary school I know is Castelar.

Ask anybody there and they'll say the same.

Students meet new friends.

The teachers help us learn.

Everybody there has a talent.

Little by little, step by step, we get wiser.

A retired teacher still helps us with our work.

Really, Castelar is my safe house.

By Simin Woo

Castelar is filled with pride.

All of the teachers teach endlessly.

Students earn their knowledge to get ready for college.

Trying makes Castelar students finish their tasks.

Eating healthy is part of every student's goal.

Learning is part of every school, but Castelar is the best of all.

After each day, students are filled with smiles and are excited to return the next day.

Ready, set, go to Castelar!





By Jay Tong

*Castelar is...
Full of great intelligence,
Where students seek more knowledge and wisdom.
A place of historical life.*

*Castelar is...
A spectacular part of my learning life.
A school with teachers like our parents,
Where all students get smarter.*

*Castelar is...
Also like a sweet home.*



Castelar children dressed in Early American costumes.





Section Two

The Chinese American Museum at Year Ten: A Personal Story of CAM's Early Years

華美博物館

By Pauline Wong, Ph.D.

Pauline Wong, Ph.D., was Executive Director of the Chinese American Museum from 2006 to 2010. Prior to being appointed Executive Director, she was Museum Educator and launched the Docent Training Program and created the Family History Scrapbook Program. Pauline served on the board of the Museum Educators of Southern California from 2005 to 2007 and Time Warner Cable Asian Advisory Board in 2010. She relocated with her family to Paris, France, in late 2010 and is now External Relations Manager at the American Library in Paris.

Introduction

As Asian Pacific American (APA) ethnic specific museums across the nation continue to celebrate milestones—the Japanese American National Museum is 20 years old, Wing Luke Museum of Asian Pacific American Experience is 47, and the Chinese Historical Society of America Museum is 49—the field is faced with important issues of how to stay relevant within rapidly changing communities, and sustainable in a still-struggling economy. Many APA ethnic specific museums have a long history of community building, resource development, and political advocacy prior to opening their doors to the public. It usually begins with a community's fervent desire to tell their stories and show art and cultural artifacts that other mainstream museums were not doing on any regular basis, if at all. This was certainly the case for the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles (CAM), which celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2013. CAM may be 10 years old, but the path to opening took twice as long, and involved a roster of prominent community leaders and city officials working together to refurbish a historic building into what will become a vibrant arts and cultural institution.





In 2004, I became part of the inaugural team that would develop and build CAM in its early years after opening. I hope to share my personal story and encourage others to think about the efforts involved in creating an APA ethnic specific museum and what the future holds for its relevance and sustainability.

History of the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles

In the early 1980s, Jean Bruce Poole, former Senior Curator at the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, was an early champion of creating something within the historic 1890 Garnier Building that would tell the story of the original Chinatown of Los Angeles. Jean understood the historical significance of the Garnier Building, the oldest and last remaining structure of the original Chinatown of Los Angeles, and considered the unofficial town hall of the Chinese community in Los Angeles in the early to mid-1900s. The Garnier Building, located within El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, was leased to Chinese American merchants and was home to prominent businesses, fraternal and social organizations, schools and temples from 1890 to the mid-1950s. The Garnier Building was part of the vibrant original Chinatown, established in the late 1880s and encompassing the area now occupied by Union Station. Residents were evicted from original Chinatown and all structures were demolished for the construction of Union Station in the early 1930s. In the mid-1950s, a portion of the Garnier Building was also destroyed in order to make way for the Hollywood 101 freeway. The remaining two-story Garnier Building would remain uninhabited until the opening of CAM more than five decades later.



The historic Garnier Building.





Community leaders within the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC) shared Jean's concern and desired to refurbish the Garnier Building. In the early 1980s, discussions about creating a museum of Chinese American history within the Garnier Building took place between CHSSC and the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument.

In October 1984, a museum committee was formed to lay the plan and foundation for the preservation of the Garnier Building. Due in large part to the strong efforts of Dr. Munson Kwok and Howard Quon, a Founding Donors program was established in December 1985. In 1987, local historians, educators, community volunteers and descendants of pioneer Chinese American families gathered together and formed the Friends of the Chinese American Museum (FCAM), a volunteer support group that would help to raise funds, increase community awareness, and collect artifacts and stories. Dr. Dan Louie, Jr. was appointed Charter President and would lead FCAM for the next 10 years until 1997.

The 1990s was a period of intensive community building, raising of funds and political activism towards the opening of CAM. The Chinese American community convinced city officials to allocate 2,500 square feet of the Garnier Building as the site of the museum. The allocation would increase to 7,500 square feet in 1995. The space inside the long-vacant building was dilapidated, but CAM finally secured its future home. In anticipation of the museum's opening, Chinese American families and businesses donated their cherished possessions to help tell the story of the community—everything from faded photographs and letters to antique furniture and herb store furnishings to wedding gowns and children's toys. Even without prepared museum space, CAM developed its first exhibitions, many portable, from these artifacts under the curatorial leadership of Suellen Cheng, who took over as Senior Curator and Museum Director from Jean Bruce Poole in 2001.

After more than 20 years of community dedication and activism, CAM celebrated its much-anticipated grand opening on December 18, 2003. The grand opening was by all definitions a huge community success—nearly 1,000 people celebrated outside the main entrance on Sanchez Street as the red ribbon was cut and CAM, the long-anticipated project, was finally opened to the public.





CAM's ground-breaking ceremony in spring 2002.



The much-anticipated grand opening of CAM, December 18, 2003.





CAM's current mission is to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of America's diverse heritage by preserving, documenting and sharing the history, rich cultural legacy and continuing contributions of the Chinese American community. In the 10 years since its opening, CAM has created exhibitions, educational materials, and public programs that highlight the contributions, struggles, and lived experiences of the Chinese American community, often within a limited budget and with little or no prior body of research to draw from. As one foundation officer once stated as a reason for awarding CAM a grant, CAM is creating something important in an area where very little has been done before.

From University to Museum—My Path to Involvement

In 2000, I was introduced to the Chinese American Museum by my dissertation co-chair Dr. Clara Chu, who was then Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since I started my MA program at UCLA, Clara had been a mentor. She was interested in my passion for museums and exploring how teachers and students engage with the content and information in exhibitions.

During our many meetings together, Clara told me about how the Chinese American community was trying to develop an ethnic specific museum in downtown Los Angeles. She was part of the museum's Council of Scholars, but was not as active as she had hoped due to her busy schedule. Still, she spoke fervently about how community leaders were creating the museum from grassroots efforts and organizing. There would not be an actual museum until 2003, and by that time, I was finishing up my doctoral classes at UCLA and starting to conduct research for my dissertation.

When I returned from all of my research travels in the spring of 2004, I had a meeting with Clara to talk about writing and editing my thesis. She mentioned that CAM was recruiting for the position of Museum Educator and that I should apply. Clara said that there would always be time to finish my thesis; but there are only a couple of times in life when one receives an opportunity to do work that is directly aligned with one's passion. I applied for the position and was hired in July 2004.





CAM Growing Pains and Gains—A Personal Reflection of the Early Years

Those early years at CAM were both exhilarating and challenging. The staff, under the leadership of Executive Director Suellen Cheng, was charged with the mission of preserving, documenting and sharing the history, rich cultural legacy, and continuing contributions of the Chinese American community. We were entrusted with a growing collection of artifacts, oral histories recorded by pioneering families on audio tapes, and the legacy of a 20-year community grassroots effort to create a museum dedicated to sharing the experiences of Chinese Americans as an integral part of Los Angeles, California, and U.S. history. Suellen reminded us often that CAM's mission carried a heavy responsibility and that we were all important players in its development and delivery.

The staff was continuously in debate and discussion about CAM's mission and purpose. What did it mean to be Chinese American? How could our history be told in a meaningful way to a new generation of Chinese Americans and Angelenos? How could we engage our community that was no longer concentrated in the New Chinatown neighborhood just down the street from the museum, but rather spread across the San Gabriel Valley and beyond? How could our exhibitions and programs reflect the diversity of the Chinese American community? The answers to these questions would become a process that was constantly re-examined and redefined.

CAM was going into uncharted territory with all the exhibitions that were created. For the first few years after opening, CAM's temporary exhibitions focused on pioneering and emerging Chinese American artists, many of whom were being shown for the first time in a museum. Each exhibition—from *Tyrus Wong: A Retrospective* (2003) to *(invisible): Angel Island by Cindy Suriyani* (2004) to *Impressions: Milton Quon's Los Angeles* (2005)—required first-person research, interviews, site visits, and countless discussions debating the importance of using art as a medium to exploring history, identity, immigration and cultural pride. CAM's permanent exhibitions, *Journeys* and the *Sun Wing Wo General Store and Herb Shop*, helped to anchor the historical significance of the Garnier Building and the more than 175 years of Chinese American history in Los Angeles and the nation. From the very beginning, CAM was a multidisciplinary institution that could not be easily categorized like other museums. We fused art with social history, artifacts with personal stories, and culture with a trans-Pacific perspective.





The Sun Wing Wo General Store and Herb Shop exhibition at CAM.

I started at CAM as Museum Educator, a role that was largely open to my interpretation. I spent my first few weeks sitting at my desk wondering what my priorities should be in making CAM an educational resource to our visitors. In walking around the galleries, I quickly learned that many of the visitors to CAM were not Chinese Americans, or even APAs. Rather, they were primarily visitors of El Pueblo and Olvera Street who happened to discover the museum in their walk around the plaza. Large groups of students and their teachers would also find their way into CAM after their tour of El Pueblo. In addition, I received many requests from teachers for guided tours of the museum. At the time, CAM did not have any volunteer docents to lead these guided tours. Therefore, it was my responsibility to schedule staff members to fulfill this role. Although nobody seemed to mind taking time out of their busy day to give tours, I knew that recruiting and training docents would be a priority. Thus, my first year included launching a docent training program, developing curriculum aligned with California's educational standards, creating educational interactives to accompany temporary exhibitions, and assisting with grant development for educational programs.





All along the way, Suellen was always willing to talk with me about both practical matters and the history of El Pueblo and New Chinatown. Suellen had moved to Los Angeles from Taiwan in the 1970s for graduate studies at UCLA, and in the ensuing decades, had come to know many of the pioneering families of Chinatown. She embodied a spirit of generosity and openness that gave her an unrivaled ability to make meaningful connections with everyone she came into contact. I probably was not alone in feeling that Suellen was the heart of CAM in those early years before and after opening.

I learned a lot from Suellen that extended beyond my duties as Museum Educator. She, along with her husband Munson, oftentimes invited me to join them at community gatherings and dinners. Munson and Suellen were chronic supporters of numerous other APA organizations in Los Angeles and their presence at events was constant. At these events, I watched Munson and Suellen greet and thank CAM supporters all night long. They were always armed with the latest CAM brochure or postcard, and by the end of the event, most everyone would have one or two in tow. Munson would sometimes comment how Suellen could outdo any politician during campaign season with the number of hands shaken and cards distributed. It was community building at the most grassroots level—one personal encounter at a time.

Despite the growing success of our exhibitions, educational workshops, and public programs with each passing year, there were some definite challenges on an organizational level. All staff members were aware of the many missing organizational elements at CAM in those early years. We did not have many “systems” in place—everything from membership renewals to exhibitions planning. Everything we did seemed very organic and fluid, which to a certain degree, allowed all staff members to be creative and enterprising. However, with very few systems and processes established, we also felt like we were reinventing the wheel each time we set about performing certain tasks. As well, communications and the sharing of information were hindered by the lack of a shared drive and by the physical separation of staff in two office locations. Many of these missing elements were part of our growing pains. Thus, even as our exhibitions and programs were increasingly being noticed by mainstream media and attended by large crowds, we all knew that our internal organization had to improve if we were to maintain the quality and level of output.





One of CAM's many high-quality exhibition galleries.

I knew that Suellen understood the need for organizational structures to be established. She shared everyone's desire to ensure the long-term success of the museum. Even with her unwavering optimism and dedication, Suellen was honest about the difficulties of being Director of a small non-profit arts and cultural institution. Her challenges as CAM's leader were amplified by the fact that she held a full-time position as Senior Curator at El Pueblo. This dual role was less daunting before CAM's opening. However, it was impossible for even the most effective leader to perform two full-time jobs. FCAM, the museum's board of directors, launched a search for an executive director not long after opening.

In December 2005, after nearly a two-year search and many candidates interviewed, I was asked into a meeting by Suellen and Rushmore Cervantes, El Pueblo's General Manager. In that meeting, I was briefed on how FCAM had searched for a suitable executive director but did not hire any of the candidates. It was then recommended by Rushmore that FCAM look internally for a staff member who would serve as Interim Executive Director for a period of time and later appointed as full Executive Director, if all went well. I was then asked if I would be interested in being the interim executive director of CAM. It's hard to explain the feelings





that were going through my mind, except that I remember asking, “What about Suellen?” Suellen, with her ever-generous spirit, said that she would not be leaving CAM, but knew that it was for the best that someone be able to fully dedicate her time to leading the museum. With that promise, I accepted the position.

The “Accidental” Executive Director of CAM

I assumed the position of Interim Executive Director of CAM in January 2006. My vision for the museum was to continue to develop CAM as an important arts and culture institution in Los Angeles, expand its audiences, and diversify its exhibitions. I also wanted to continue Suellen’s grassroots community building and donor cultivation. I wanted the staff to know that I had not forgotten all of our discussions about mission, direction and the need for organizational structures. Having been a staff member since 2004 meant that I had a good understanding of the museum’s daily operations. However, I felt decidedly less prepared for the daunting tasks of fundraising, board management, and government relations that I inherited with the position. I was 33 years old when I took the position, and needless to say, I felt both fortunate for the opportunity and humbled by the challenges ahead.

In my first few months as the interim executive director, I worked with the staff to change the temporary exhibitions, planning to be more diverse and encompassing of social history, cultural artifacts and community stories. CAM had by now developed a strong series of solo exhibitions showcasing numerous Chinese American artists. Thereafter, in addition to the art exhibitions, we developed shows that were diverse in theme and presentation, a pattern that continued all throughout my tenure as director. CAM’s exhibitions during this time included: *Growing Up Chinese American: Childhood Toys and Memories* (2006); *Sunshine and Shadow: In Search of Jake Lee* (2007); *Asian Roots / American Reality: Photographs by Corky Lee* (2008); *Hollywood Chinese: The Arthur Dong Collection* (2009–2010); *Remembering Angel Island* (2010–2012); and *Dreams Deferred: Artists Respond to Immigration Reform* (2010–2011).

True to her word, Suellen was present and available throughout my interim status and transition into Executive Director in June 2006. As a city employee, Suellen was well-versed in the hierarchy of government relations. She impressed upon me the importance of political advocacy and





community activism in building and sustaining CAM. The museum was a special project—jointly operated by the FCAM board of directors and the City of Los Angeles, through El Pueblo Historical Monument. CAM was a city project that was sustained by the community, and its future depended on the support of all sides.

Above all, Suellen helped me understand the critical role of the FCAM board of directors in supporting and advocating for CAM. FCAM had put in tremendous effort and resources over 20 years to finally open the museum. It had seemed that once the museum was opened, all would be fine and they could transition from a “working” board to a “policy” board. However, the transition was not an easy process, and for a while, lingered in a state of indetermination. As with many non-profits, the roles between staff and board member were sometimes blurred. Board members were interested in being involved in exhibitions and program development, whereas staff members felt that funding development should be their priority. There were definite trust and communication issues between staff and board. It took a coordinated effort, over time, of both staff and board to put into place some of the organizational structures that were needed to move CAM forward. As well, the board of directors started its own internal restructuring and recruited younger professionals to join FCAM, allowing for a new generation of donors to be cultivated. In 2009, as part of our long-term strategic planning, a retreat was organized that brought together board and staff for a day’s worth of team-building, mission-related exercises, and projections for the future. That retreat helped to recognize the hard work and dedication put forth by everyone involved in the organization. It was considered a good turning point for board and staff relations.

On a more personal level, there was little to prepare me for dealing directly with the board of directors. Many of the board members were part of the founding group that spent two decades tirelessly transforming the dream of building a museum into reality. I was a relative newcomer to this project, with little experience in museum operations, and was likely looked upon with some skepticism of my ability to take their project to the next levels. As any diligent student embarking on an unknown topic, I pored over Board Café manuals with hopeful titles like *Working Board vs. Governing Board* and *Ten Quick Ways to Improve Board Meetings*. The reading was helpful to an extent, but much of the advice was geared towards handling the board as an entity. It was an insurmountable ordeal to deal





with 20 people all at the same time. I certainly wanted the board as a whole to become my ally and I tried very hard in my first months as Executive Director to be their equal. Needless to say, this endeavor was not very effective. It was Rushmore Cervantes who first advised me that I should stop treating the board as a multi-headed beast and instead look to the expertise of individual board members. I had much more to gain if I spent some personal time with each person, rather than as a group. And indeed, over time, I would rely upon board members like Gay Yuen for the latest in educational policies; Eugene Moy for historical content; Munson Kwok for strategic planning and fundraising; and Al Soo-Hoo for fiscal organization.

By far the most challenging task throughout my tenure as Director was sustainability and fundraising. CAM had been fortunate to receive generous donations over the many years, particularly from the pioneering families who developed New Chinatown. However, there was the continual struggle to find and cultivate a new generation of donors and supporters. This task was made more difficult by the fact that CAM did not have professional development staff. As well, the board of directors initially regarded fundraising as a seasonal banquet function, rather than a systematic cycle of donor cultivation, solicitation, and recognition that needed to be performed all the time. Even with these obstacles, FCAM was serious about its fiduciary responsibility to safeguard the museum. In those early years, what we all lacked in formal development training was made up for by a passionate and “from the heart” approach to fundraising. This meant spending time at community events, listening to people’s stories, looking over family archives, and when the time was right, making the request for funds. It was fundraising not exactly by the books, but it was the only way we knew how at the time.

Moving On and What the Future Holds

In late 2010, I announced to the board of directors that I would be stepping down as Executive Director of CAM. I was relocating with my family to Paris, France, a decision that was both exciting and bittersweet. My last year at CAM was incredibly productive, with over \$175,000 in grants awarded for future exhibitions and programs, including *Breaking Ground: Chinese American Architects in Los Angeles, 1945–80* (2012), part of the Getty Pacific Standard Time initiative, and *(de)Constructing Chinatown* (2012). The CAM staff that I had worked with the past several years—Linh Duong, Sherie Mateo, Dora Quach, Steven Tran, Michael Truong, and Steve Wong—





had steadily grown into a cohesive team of highly supportive and creative colleagues. The board of directors hardly ever asked to be part of exhibitions and programs development—the staff had more than excelled in these areas over the past years. CAM was catching the eye of mainstream media for its exhibitions that highlighted the Chinese American experience within relevant and important social and cultural issues. All this made leaving CAM difficult, but it was satisfying to know that everything was upward bound.

My tenure as Executive Director at CAM was in many ways a case of, as one staff member aptly described it, “learning to fly the plane while flying it.” I never studied non-profit management by way of university. Much of what I learned about managing a non-profit organization was through the half-day courses at the Center for Non-Profit Management and the conversations I had with experienced directors like Bill Watanabe at the Little Tokyo Service Center or Ron Chew at the Wing Luke Museum. I also talked with Sue Lee from the Chinese Historical Society of America and Eddie Wong at the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation for their take on everything from community building to fundraising. Of course, I found out that there was no magic formula or easy way for anything in the non-profit sector—it was all about the belief that you were carrying out a mission that will inform people’s perceptions of your community and its contributions to the building of this country.

There is continued debate on the need for ethnic specific museums in the future. Some feel that ethnic specific museums emphasize a divided nation based on race/ethnicity. Others feel that we should strive to have our stories be more represented in mainstream museums. Supporters of ethnic specific museums argue that such institutions greatly enrich the national narrative with more depth and perspective on what it means to be an American. People of color are oftentimes never asked to write their own version of history, and ethnic specific museums can become powerful tools for advocacy, social change, and inspiration. In my experiences, there is an empowering difference between seeing one painting by pioneering artist Tyrus Wong in a mainstream exhibition—likely the only Chinese American artist among many others—and walking into a gallery of 30 paintings by Tyrus Wong. Far from being divisive, it reinforces the understanding that our community story is large and encompassing. Museums like CAM have a definite place in the national landscape—and with continued community involvement and the proper fiscal care and strong leadership, will sustain itself well past its first 10 years.





The Chinese American Museum at Year Ten: A Postscript

By Michael Duchemin, Ph.D.,
Executive Director of the Chinese American Museum

Pondering the future of the Chinese American Museum (CAM), Pauline Wong framed a debate between the need for ethnic specific museums and the need to better integrate histories of race and ethnicity into the mainstream of American cultural industries and American media culture. Dr. Wong concluded that CAM was vital, because the museum enriched the national narrative, adding depth and perspective to the American experience. She argued that CAM provided Chinese Americans with an opportunity to tell their own stories, to advocate for social change, and reinforce the contributions of Chinese Americans in the history of the United States. Pauline referred to Founding Patrons, like Robert and Edith Jung, and the vision of Founding Donors, including the directors of Standard Savings Bank, and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California. She described how CAM grew gradually and organically from a group of hardworking volunteers, representing the pioneering families of Old and New Chinatown, into a trained staff of museum professionals.

By comparison, my own history with the Chinese American Museum came not from the inside out, but rather, from the outside in. Similar to Pauline's experience, my relationship with the Chinese American Museum started when I met Suellen Cheng in 1993. Suellen served on an advisory board that I set up at what was then the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum (Autry National Center). The Autry hired me to redo its Spirit of Community Gallery, the weakest of seven permanent galleries the museum opened in 1987. In developing the community gallery, I created a context for race, ethnicity and religion as the foundations of community formation and development in the American West around 1890. Suellen assured that an accurate portrayal of Chinese American history became part of the interpretation in a major museum of the American West. In the process, she educated me and many others about the contributions of Chinese





Americans to American culture. Suellen also introduced me to Leslee Leong, proprietor of the F. Suie One Company in Pasadena, California. Leslee's parents, Florence and Gilbert Leong, were also Founding Patrons of the Chinese American Museum.

Suellen Cheng and Leslee Leong introduced me to the world of Chinese American material culture, the artifacts of the Chinese American past. Because the Autry had few collections related to the Chinese American experience in the American West, Leslee agreed to loan materials for the community gallery. She introduced me to others in the community with collections and stories to tell. Leslee's cousin, Lisa See, was among the group of fascinating individuals I met while lunching in the backroom of the F. Suie One Company.

The success of the Autry's Spirit of Community Gallery led to the creation of a major traveling exhibition based upon the history represented in Lisa See's book, *On Gold Mountain: The 100-Year Odyssey of a Chinese-American Family* (1995), which included many prized possessions from the collections of the F. Suie One Company. The Autry opened *On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience* in July 2000. The largest and most significant museum exhibition to date documenting the history of the Chinese Americans in the U.S., *On Gold Mountain* traveled to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., for an exhibition that opened in May 2001.

While working on the *On Gold Mountain* exhibition in 1999, Suellen Cheng and Munson Kwok approached me about joining the Friends of the Chinese American Museum (FCAM) board of directors. As an FCAM director, I had the opportunity to meet and work with Joe and Betty Wong, Lillian Lee Jang, Dan and Esther Louie, Jr., and Pedro and Pek Chan. I had the opportunity to meet Beth and Wilbur Woo, Bing and Yin-Jen Liu, Fung Chow and Wai Hing Chan, Ann and Daniel Jeng, Dorothy and Ming Seto Lew, and John and Esther Yee, CAM's Founding Patrons. I accepted an appointment to serve as Chair of the FCAM Exhibition Committee from 1999 to 2004. I worked with FCAM to expand the museum's footprint into the Garnier Building and develop the inaugural *Journeys* and *Sun Wing Wo* exhibitions for the museum.

We reached a major milestone on December 18, 2003, opening the museum to a boisterous crowd. Basking in the day-glow of such





monumental effort, the Autry awarded me a year-long sabbatical, which I used to begin a doctoral program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, studying U.S. history and the history of the American West. In 2004, I stepped down from my appointment as an FCAM director to concentrate full-time on graduate studies. Still, as a Charter Member of CAM, I kept pace with the changes and growing pains experienced by the museum board, staff and membership.

Major gifts from Joe and Betty Wong, Beth and Wilbur Woo, and Pedro and Pek Chan enabled Suellen Cheng to develop the museum staff and secure additional funds from outside the Chinese American community. Grants from The Ahmanson Foundation, Nissan Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, and Southern California Edison led the way. A turning point came in 2007, when CAM partnered with the Automobile Club of Southern California to produce the exhibition, *Sunshine and Shadow: In Search of Jake Lee*. These successes resulted in major gifts from Dan and Esther Louie, Jr. and Lillian Lee Jang.

It is unfortunate that an economic downturn of 2008 coincided with CAM's coming of age. Along with most of the museums in America, FCAM struggled through the recession, making compromises and consuming precious resources to keep the museum open. Support from the Jung Family, Israel and Nadine Soo Hoo Levy, Tim and Annie Siu, Munson and Suellen Kwok, Al and Bibiana Soo Hoo, and Stanton and Grace Wong attracted support in the form of government grants from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment, California State Parks, the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. Additional funding came from the California Community Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, MetLife Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, and Cathay Bank Foundation.

Serendipity played a role in November 2010, when Pauline Wong announced her resignation as CAM's Executive Director. Al Soo-Hoo and Munson Kwok approached me about returning to serve as Interim Executive Director. I had just finished work developing content for the inaugural exhibition, *L.A. Starts Here!* at the new La Plaza de Cultura y Artes, located on LA County land on Main Street across from the El Pueblo Historical Monument museum complex, which included CAM. The most essential task at hand involved spending \$268,000 in grant funding awarded to CAM through the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air





and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000. Administered through California State Parks, these funds enabled CAM to develop a new permanent exhibition about the history of culture and community transformation among Chinese Americans in Los Angeles.

Moreover, as I took the helm of the Chinese American Museum, a grant from the California Community Foundation enabled me to hire the Arts Consulting Group (ACG) to perform a development assessment and hire Laurie Dowling Woo as a senior development consultant. As Pauline pointed out, revenue generation and sustainability remained the most challenging tasks facing the museum in 2011. The struggle to find a new generation of supporters focused attention on the amazing growth of Chinese American communities in the San Gabriel Valley. Dr. S.Y. Wong and his colleagues at the Pacific Alliance Medical Center emerged as guiding lights in these efforts. The Cathay Bank Foundation, MetLife Foundation, and the Institute of Museums and Library Services also contributed to the efforts spearheaded by ACG. A grant from the James Irvine Foundation enabled FCAM to conduct a nationwide search for a new executive director.

As I reacquainted myself with FCAM, it took all of my professional acumen to manage the museum's operations, develop its financial resources, produce a backlog of four exhibition projects, negotiate a 50-year extension to FCAM's operating agreement with the City of Los Angeles, secure the Garnier Building as the future home of CAM, and grow the museum from about 7,000 square feet to nearly 20,000 square feet. Professional management of the museum's collections became my highest priority. Collections management is essential to exhibition development, securing donations, and borrowing materials from individuals and institutions. Toward that end, FCAM hired Joelle Mintz, a professional trained museum collections manager with a Master of Arts degree from George Washington University. Joining an able team that included Curator Steven Y. Wong and Education and Programs Manager Michael Truong, Joelle rounded out the core team responsible for exhibition and program development at CAM.

Continuing a relationship with Think Jacobson & Roth, the exhibition design firm responsible for producing *Journeys* and *Sun Wing Wo* in 2003, the CAM team began working in earnest to develop the a new exhibition called *Origins: The Birth and Rise of Chinese American Communities in Los Angeles*. Opening in December 2012, *Origins* established links between Historic Chinatown, represented by the Garnier Building; New Chinatown,





represented by the Central Plaza; the growth of suburban Chinese American communities, represented by the City of Monterey Park; and the need to assist young Chinese Americans growing up in the San Gabriel Valley and elsewhere coming to terms with a complicated ethnic identity. *Origins Online*, a web-based interactive exhibition curated by museum and community members, and a special project called *Lens Wide Open*, funded by the Nissan Foundation and Southern California Edison, have encouraged young people to become more actively involved with CAM.

Simultaneously, while working on *Origins*, CAM staff also succeeded in mounting three critically acclaimed temporary exhibitions: *Dreams Deferred: Artists Respond to Immigration Reform*; *Breaking Ground: Chinese American Architects in Los Angeles, 1945–1980*; and *(de)Constructing Chinatown*. The success of these efforts convinced me to accept the position as CAM's permanent Executive Director in May 2012. Extending FCAM's operating agreement with the City of Los Angeles until 2062 emerged as the most important goal in 2012. In addition to the 50-year extension, this operating agreement also guarantees that FCAM will have the rights to occupy the entire Garnier Building, in addition to 425 North Los Angeles Street. In June 2012, the El Pueblo Commission unanimously approved these goals, agreeing to create the largest Chinese American Museum in the United States. The Commission's approval is currently awaiting ratification by the Los Angeles City Council.

Another major goal involved the hiring of FCAM's first Director of Development. Victor Wong joined the museum staff in September 2012, after a long tenure with several notable institutions, including the Los Angeles Pops Orchestra and the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center. Wong assumed the responsibility for assisting the FCAM board of directors in its efforts to generate new revenues through contributed income, government and foundation grants, special events, and earned income. Working closely with Sherie Mateo, CAM's Membership and Visitors Services Manager, Victor has already contributed to expanding CAM's membership, providing new member services, and preparing to celebrate CAM's tenth anniversary with the opening of *Origins* and *Origins Online*.

After ten tumultuous years, CAM is on the verge of evolving from a small museum staffed by volunteers into a medium-sized professional managed institution with a national and international reputation for quality exhibition, innovative programming, and a growing membership.





Having worked on projects at the Autry that helped give context to the Chinese American experience, I know that Pauline Wong's assessment was correct. Chinese American contributions will not be known unless CAM develops the collections, exhibitions, and programs to bring those stories to the forefront. Chinese Americans have contributed greatly to American society and culture for more than 160 years, but these contributions go unrecognized unless CAM is positioned to do the spadework. As an ethnic specific museum, the mission of the Chinese American Museum has never been more essential or more inclusive than it is today.





Section Three

The Far East Café: A Proud Legacy in Little Tokyo

By Raymond Douglas Chong

Raymond Chong is a fifth generation Chinese American born in Los Angeles. As part of Generations, his creative enterprise, Raymond has published Gim Suey Chong: His Life from Hoyping to Gum Saan (GSJ 2009) and My Kaiping Journey: From Gold Mountain to Hill of the Flying Swan. With brother Michael George Chong, he also has produced a documentary film on Far East Café. Raymond has worked for various municipalities in California and Texas as a traffic operations engineer and a transportation planner.



Raymond Chong.

Introduction

In the heart of Little Tokyo in the City of Angels, the Far East Café stands as a glorious landmark. Memories of chop suey, historic red-colored wood booths, and its iconic neon sign are clearly etched in many hearts of four generations of Japanese Americans. From 1935 to 1994—for 59 years—the Jeong (Zhang) clan from Guangdong Province happily served their customers. The Far East Café at 347 East First Street was a unique place for the Nikkei and others; they gathered for weddings, birthdays, graduations, parties, and funerals. The chop suey joint served their popular China-Meshi dishes (Japanese version of chop suey).

In 1935, ten Jeong cousin partners opened the Far East Café during the heyday of Little Tokyo. They were Chinese immigrants from Hoyping (Kaiping) County. Anna May Wong, the famous Hollywood actress, was present at the grand opening. Later, she had several family dinners in the mezzanine.





Originally, the Jeong cousins leased the storefront commercial space from the Italian Dondero family. Finally, on March 29, 1963, Look Mar, Shang Ging Jeong, Ott Ming Chong, and Hoy Young paid \$70,000 to the estate of Josephine Gallo Dondero for the property. Far East Café Inc. was incorporated on February 28, 1978, with four partners: Shang Ging Jeong, So Wun Mar, Mario Chang, and Ott Ming Chong.

On January 17, 1994, the Northridge earthquake severely damaged the Far East building and forced its sudden closure. For 12 years, the Nikkei community patiently waited for the resurrection of the Far East Café. On Thursday, August 10, 2006, the new Chop Suey Café and Lounge had its grand opening. James Hong, the Hollywood actor, was present at the event. The eatery served the classic signature China-Meshi dishes again. Chop Suey Café has a dining room with lounge in front. The Far Bar with its private alley patio is in the back. Banquets are held again in the mezzanine.



An older photo of the Far East Café.
(Photo courtesy of Visual Communications.)

Chew Young Village

The men and boys of the Jeong clan originated from Hoyping, in Wuyi (Five Counties; ed. note: the district was formerly comprised of four





counties and known as Sze Yup), in the fertile land of the Pearl River Delta. They were from Chew Young village. The Jeongs had lived and worked in the rich rice fields and abundant fish ponds. The village was a cluster of simple brick houses sandwiching narrow alleys. About 100 people lived among the 30 homes. In this tropical paradise of bamboo groves and piney woods, people eked out a simple and basic life.

The village gate proclaimed, “Chew Young Village, Facing the Sun.” The Jeong ancestral hall was the center of life in their close community. As children, the Jeongs were taught in the village by a male teacher. They shopped in Sew Gew Market near Chek Hom, along the Tan River. Banyan trees stood between the village gate and the ancestral hall. The Diaolou, or “Tower in the Sky,” protected the villagers from bandits. Nearby, their ancestors were buried in holy graves.

Their founding forefather was Zhang Che Zhu, dating back to the Tang Dynasty. Their most famous ancestor is Zhang Jiuling, a poet of *300 Tang Poems*. He was of Generation 8. According to Zhang Zupu, “In the Zhang family, there were 18 Zhuang Yuan (the scholar level who scored the highest on the imperial examination) and 3 Zai Xiang (the prime minister level in feudal China) during the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties. There were 70 Jin Shi (former third degree candidate in the national civil service examination) and 9 Gong Hou (duke and marquis) amongst our forefathers.”

Gum Saan Journey

With the Qing Dynasty in steep decline near the turn of the century, the Jeong forefathers joined successive waves of desperate emigrants who sought their fortune on Gold Mountain. From Hong Kong, they traveled on sailboats and steamships. In crowded living quarters and subject to foreign foods, they endured a one month journey. They had deep regret to leave their loved ones. They felt anxiety for the new land. With their fellow brothers, they shared hopes and dreams of Gum Saan.

The men and boys arrived in the port of San Francisco where immigration officers immediately placed them in detention barracks on Angel Island. They were interrogated. If credible “paper sons,” they were issued Certificates of Identity.





Upon their arrival, other Jeong clan members gave them sanctuary along Dupont Street's (now Grant Avenue) cramped buildings. They searched for jobs in hand laundries, chop suey restaurants, and grocery markets. Or they ventured out to the rich farms of Central Valley, gold mines of Sierra Nevada, and railroad tracks of the West.

The Jeong cousins always lived under a dark shadow as “paper sons.” They feared sudden arrest and quick deportation back to China. They faced a world of racial prejudice, legal discrimination, and economic ghettoization. Away from their wives and children, they endured miserable lives in a bachelor society. Many sought comfort in the three vices: gambling, opium, and prostitution.

By the 1910s, some Jeong men and boys settled in Mason City, Iowa, and stayed for about two decades. “River City,” in Cerro Gordo County in north central Iowa, was the world capital in the manufacturing of cement, bricks, and tiles. The Jeong cousins operated the “Le Chung Brothers Chinese Hand Laundry” in downtown, first on Washington Avenue, later on Federal Street. “We Guarantee All Our Work” and “All Work Done by Hand.” With a successful business, they invited other Jeong cousins to join them.

The Jeongs returned to Chew Young village for short stays to marry their women and to raise children. They built “Gold Mountain houses.” They raised funds to build the Diaolou in Chew Young village for protection against bandits. But sadly, they were not able to bring their wives and children to America, which led to long years of separation. Their “Gold Mountain wives” were “living widows.”

Far East Café (aka En To Low)

The Iowa laundry business gradually declined during the Depression years. So the Jeong cousins decided to move to California. In 1935, the “Year of the Pig,” ten Jeong cousins opened the Far East Café or “En To Low.” It was the golden era of Little Tokyo, with vibrant stores, restaurants, and theaters before World War II. In this bustling community of 30,000¹ people, Lem's Café, San Kow Low, and Yet Quong Low Chop Suey Café (aka Nikko Low) also served China-Meshi.

1 Editor's note: According to the 1930 census, there were about 35,000 Japanese Americans in Los Angeles County.





Jack Chick Cheong.
*(Photo courtesy of National Archives
and Records Administration.)*

Jack Chick Cheong, allegedly born in 1876 in San Francisco, was a cook in San Francisco Chinatown. His wife was Jew Shee. He was blood father to Goey Yee Chong. Goey Yee Chong arrived in San Francisco on May 10, 1909, aboard the S.S. Korea and was admitted on May 30, 1909. He became a laundryman in Mason City. He married Hoo Shee on September 3, 1920, in Chew Young village. Ott Ming Chong, his blood son, arrived in San Francisco on April 11, 1934, aboard the S.S. President Coolidge and was admitted on May 28, 1934. He married Hong Shue Quan in 1947 in Chew Young village. Dr. Andrew Chong is the male descendant of Ott Ming Chong.

Andrew Chong said, “I remember working at the Far East Café from [the ages of] 11 to 22. And it was fun. Not work at all. At that time, we enjoyed ourselves as kids. We broke a lot of dishes and drank a lot of soda, but you learned to work hard and to know values of hard work.”

Jim Suey Chong, my father, was a proud weekend waiter at the storied Far East Café. He worked for his Jeong cousins. He served those popular China-Meshi dishes from 1950 to 1974. When he did, he talked, joked, and played with his fellow waiters, busboys, and cooks. Their world was a close-knit fraternity filled with many arm wrestling matches—which he always won—and other games. This eatery was a vital part of his short but vibrant life (1922–1979).

George Wakiji fondly recalled the Café:

“In my younger [pre-war] days when I lived in Pasadena, it was always a treat to go to Little Tokyo in Los Angeles to eat “China Meshi,” the popular Cantonese cuisine, at the Far East Café. I can still vividly recall the dark cherry wood panels, which covered the walls and booths. Sometimes when we had a family gathering on Sunday, I recall eating in a secluded mezzanine section in the back of the restaurant. Hanhichi Wakiji, my father, held court there. We never





failed to order the same dishes each time. There was always *pak kai* (sweet and sour pork), pea *chow yuk* (Chinese pea and pork), chow mein (with chicken and pan-fried noodles), and *wor shu op* (almond duck). My favorite was *cha su* (roast pork). In the ensuing years, I have eaten in many Chinese restaurants around the world, but have never found *cha su* that matched the Far East Café version. James Hajime Wakiji, my older brother, always had to have an order of *hom yu* (pork hash with salted fish). After our return from internment from the Gila River Relocation Camp in the Arizona desert, I with my good friends played in the post–World War II Nisei Athletic Union’s (NAU) softball and basketball leagues. After the games on Friday evenings, we invariably stopped in Little Tokyo and headed for the Far East Café. We gorged ourselves on the best Cantonese cuisine. In those days, they served the steamed rice in large rice bowls, which were mounded high. I remember that in addition to all the Chinese dishes, I would down at least four of those bowls. Nowadays, I would eat an eighth of that amount of rice.”

After December 7, 1941, Little Tokyo greatly changed for the Nikkei community. Little Tokyo became “Bronzeville,” with African American residents who came to work in war plants. Shang Ging Jeong, Yook Toy Jeong, and Look Mar were drafted by the United States Army. Shang and Yook fought in the European theater in France and in Germany. Look Mar fought in the Pacific theater across the South Sea Islands.



Shang Ging Jeong.
(Photo courtesy of Rafu Shimpō.)

After the end of World War II in 1945, the Nikkei gradually returned to Little Tokyo. The Jeong clan welcomed their cherished customers and good friends. They offered room and board and meals on credit. Bill Watanabe, former

Executive Director of the Little Tokyo Service Center, wrote,





“After World War II ended in 1945, many Japanese Americans sought to return to Southern California but they found there were few places for them to live. A number of families were housed temporarily at the Koyasan Temple on First Street in Little Tokyo—including members of my own family.

“According to some folks who recall those days, after spending years in the camps and losing most if not all of their possessions, they had little spending money. They would go to the Far East Café across the street from the Koyasan Temple and the Chinese owners of the café, who were familiar with many of these returnees, allowed them to eat “on credit,” asking to be paid when they were able to do so. It could truthfully be said that this kind of goodwill helped to make the Far East, along with its famous cheap and tasty menu, the most popular and well-known restaurant in the entire Japanese American community.”

From 1945 to 1994, Far East Café continued to serve the vibrant Little Tokyo community with countless dishes of chop suey and chow mein. There were many happy parties. Nisei Week was always a festive annual tradition. The City of Los Angeles redeveloped Little Tokyo around this venerable landmark institution. It was a popular destination of city hall politicians like Mayor Tom Bradley, Hollywood stars like Anna May Wong, sports figures like Mike Garrett, gangsters like Mickey Cohen, and other celebrities. It opened every day of the year from 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. Later, the Far East Café was open from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

John Matsuda remembers his wedding day on December 28, 1952:

“Marian and I got married at the West Adams Christian Church, officiated by Reverend Kashitani. For us poor students, we could only afford an economical wedding reception so my family and close friends went to the upstairs section and had the usual China-Meshi. When I came out of the Far East Café, my brother gave me \$100 as a wedding present, which was a lot of money in those days. Those are our happy memories from 50-plus years ago!”

At the end of World War II, Congress enacted the Chinese War Brides Act and the Jeong men went back to marry their sweethearts and bring their brides and wives back to America. In the midst of the Cold





War, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) created the Chinese Confession Program, which offered legal status in exchange for confession of illegal entry into the United States. From 1956 to 1965, the program resulted in about 14,000 confessions. INS was able to bar future immigration of Chinese while other Chinese applied for naturalization.

The Jeong clan gradually assimilated into mainstream America. They were busy with activities of the Lung Kong Tin Yee Family Association in Chinatown and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. For years, the Jeong cousins and their growing families lived in Little Tokyo or around downtown. Gradually, with financial success, they brought homes in Monterey Park and other suburbs of the San Gabriel Valley. Their children continued to learn Chinese and attend public schools. The children graduated from college and universities. The Jeong cousins are buried in East Los Angeles Chinese Cemetery² and Rose Hills Memorial Park in Whittier.

China-Meshi Cuisine

The Far East Café menu promoted its famous brand of Chinese food. Chop suey was a smorgasbord of various fresh vegetables. Almond duck was pressed boneless duck. It was flattened for easy deep-frying, then garnished with almonds. *Hom yu* was salted fish from China that was topped on fatty pork hash; it was cheap food. The tasty *cha shu* was the leanest pork baked with a secret sauce. Chow mein was pan fried and topped with bean sprout, celery, and onion in a sauce. It was topped with *cha shu* and garnished with fried egg slices. Slogans read, “Famous Chinese Food,” “Chop Suey,” “Try Our Real Chinese Dishes,” and “Served in Complete Family Style Dinner at All Hours.”

The Chinese cooks of the Far East Café bought their meats from Wai Sang Meat Company on 700 North Spring Street in New Chinatown. Frozen shrimp and abalone were from Mexico; frozen lobster was from Cuba. Later, they brought fresh fish. Fresh vegetables and other cooking ingredients were from Kwong Dack Wo Company grocery store on 702 North Spring Street. This included bean sprouts, onions, celery, bok choy, water chestnut, and Chinese peas. Chinese peas always had to be fresh for a crispy taste. They used canned mushrooms. They cooked in vegetable and peanut oils. They brought 100-pound bags of long grain rice with the usual condiments of soy sauce and mustard sauce. Peking Noodle Company,

2 Editor’s note: Chinese Cemetery is on First And Eastern in the Belvedere Gardens region.





Hong Kong Noodle Company, Eastern Noodle Company, and Quon Yick Noodle Company of Los Angeles provided their mein, egg flour noodles, and wonton skins.

Far East Building

The Far East Building is now on the National Register of Historical Places. It was built in 1896, with Beaux Arts elements. Its façade has massive arched windows and a vertical “Chop Suey” neon sign. Before the Northridge earthquake, in addition to Far East Café, the building included Queen Hotel apartments (351 East First Street) with 24 single-occupancy units. Anzen Hardware (353 East First Street) was on the ground floor. That space was formerly occupied by Ninomiya Studio, owned by Ichiro Ninomiya.

On March 14, 2002, Mayor James Hahn with George Takei, the Hollywood actor, led a groundbreaking ceremony. Little Tokyo Service Center spearheaded the effort to restore Far East Building to its former grandeur at cost of \$3.9 million.

Robert Uyeda, architect with Tetra Design, redesigned the new Far East Building, which includes Chop Suey Café, DISKovery Computer Learning Center, and 16 units of affordable housing. The entire three stories of 17,454 square feet—including the basement—was totally restored.



HGTV's *Restore America: A Salute to Preservation* honored the Far East Building. SurveyLA: Los Angeles Historic Resource Survey showcased the Far East Building as a historic place in a video. In *If These Walls Could Talk* (2005), Elizabeth and Ed Asawa share fond memories of the Far East Café.

Far East Building.
(Photo courtesy of Raymond Chong.)





The Far East Café has been featured in Hollywood films, television shows, novels, and stories. Raymond Chandler, mystery writer, wrote the Farewell My Lovely novel (1940) about Philip Marlowe, the tough detective. Moose Malloy engaged Marlowe to find Velma, his missing sweetheart. Marlowe exclaims, “I was having some Chinese food when a dark shadow fell over my chop suey.” Robert Mitchum starred in the film version (1975).

In the sentimental *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* film (1993), Bruce Lee, played by Jason Scott Lee, is a new dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant owned by Gussie Yang, played by Nancy Kwan. He becomes involved in a fight with the staff and he beats them away. Yang promptly fires Lee. As well as severance pay, she gives him a loan to invest in his education.

Naomi Hirahara, mystery writer, produced Mamo’s *Weeds*, a short film (2007). Mamo Ikeda, a Kibei gardener, battles a destructive weed epidemic. He also is solving a mystery and travels to Far East Café in search of elusive answers. Mas Arai of Hirahara’s *Summer of the Big Bachi* (2004) and *Gasa-Gasa Girl* (2005) also uses the café. In *A Day in Little Tokyo* (1986), Hisaye Yamamoto’s character, Rose, casually mentioned “a new café called Far East.”

Huell Howser featured the new Chop Suey Café in the first television episode of *Downtown* (2006). Ted Tajima with his eldest daughter Pam Praeger were in search of hom yu at the Far East Café. Union Bank sponsored a video, *Community Matters 2011: Elwin Ichiro Ninomiya*; Ninomiya Studio was on the ground floor of the Far East Building.

Far East Café is also featured in Mike Murase’s *Little Tokyo: One Hundred Years in Pictures* (1983), *Downtown Los Angeles: A Walking Guide* (2004), and *Little Tokyo Historical Society’s Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo* (2010). In fact, it has been featured in many oral histories, films, and even songs.





My Far East Café

By Zhang Weiming
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*My Far East Café
Splendidly endures
In the heart of Little Tokyo
In the City of Angels
Among the Nikkei community of Southland.*

*Cooks anxiously prepare
In the chaotic kitchen
Waiters calmly serve
In the noisy dining room.*

*Amid timeless booths
Cherry wood panels
Vintage posters
Shanghai cigarette girls.
Cantonese cuisine of China-Meshi*

*Crispy noodles of Chow Mein
Glistening skin of Almond Duck
Pungent aroma of Hom Yu.
Nostalgic place of fond memories
Hungry farmers feasting on Saturday lunches
Jubilant newlyweds celebrating at wedding parties
Loved ones sharing Sunday meals.*

*Jeong Clan
From Hoyping of China
Happily handing out
Chop Suey dishes.*

*Delightful warmth
Cheerful kindness
My sentimental reminiscences
My Far East Café.*



