

# Gum Saan Journal

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## Voices of Chinatowns

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**Gum Saan Journal**

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**Front Cover Photos:** Upper left: Old Chinatown Santa Barbara; Lower left: Original Rice Bowl Restaurant in New Chinatown; Right: Los Angeles Chinatown Parade.

**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.

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# Foreword

by Susan Dickson, President of CHSSC

As Los Angeles' New Chinatown commemorates its 75th anniversary, the Chinese Historical Society is reminded of how important it is per Berkeley Professor Ronald Takaki "to listen to the voices" of our pioneers and family members. It is our duty to record our shared history through these voices of Chinatowns.

Nowland Hong, David Fon Lee, and the Hall siblings are the first generation that grew up in New Chinatown when it moved from its Marchessault location in Old Chinatown in 1938. Their parents were founding members of Los Angeles' Chinatown Corporation. Both Catherine Yee and Robert L. Gin witnessed dynamic changes in LA Chinatown during the decades of the 1960s-1980s as it sought to redefine itself.

Vicky Wong who emigrated from Hong Kong has spent more than 30 years working with immigrants at the Chinatown Service Center. The CSC has faced continual challenges in order to help the Chinatown residents throughout the years.

George Yu is looking towards Chinatown's future. He is an immigrant who connected with LA Chinatown and is now the Executive Director of the Chinatown Business Improvement District.

Raymond Chong returns to *Gum Saan Journal* with a piece chronicling the families of Santa Barbara's Chinatown. Like many other Southern California communities that had Chinese American enclaves, many Chinese families of Santa Barbara have since relocated.

We thank Icy Smith, our multitalented production consultant, for her beautiful work and dedication. And we thank our many interviewees and contributors whose valuable input made this issue possible.

## Voices of Los Angeles Chinatown

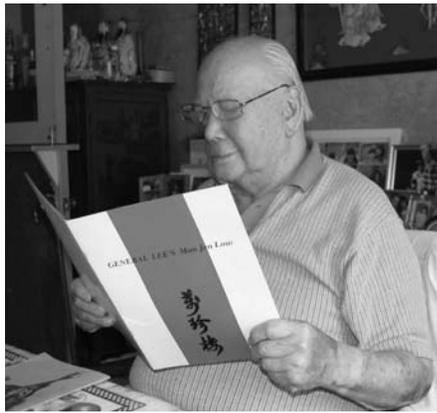
# Man Jen Low to General Lee's Restaurant: David Fon Lee

Interview by Susie Ling

*At the time of this interview, David Fon Lee was 93 years young and active in several Chinatown community organizations. David reminds us of the connections between LA's "Old" Chinatown and today. This is from an interview in August 2013 with Susie Ling.*

## Grandfather and M' Dak 唔得 Days

I was born on January 17, 1920 in Old Chinatown. My family was from Zhongshan in Guangzhou. My grandfather came to America to work on either the gold mines or the railroads. They would recruit from certain Cantonese villages. Grandfather used a couple of names, Woo Chung Lim and Woo Hoy. He came with two brothers. After World War II, the family was able to bring my grandmother over. She had bound feet.



David Fon Lee reading Man Jen Low Menu.

My father's paper son name was Lee Fon, but people called him Woo Fon Lee and Woo Fon Hoy. My grandfather bought papers from Lee for his only son. U.S. immigration restricted the coming of Chinese and many were held at Angel Island and in San Pedro. My father died at the age of 60 when I was thirty years old, so he was born around 1890. My father was born in China and did not see his own father until he was eighteen years old, near 1908.

My father learned English at the church school in *ma ya*, the horse stable, which was Old Chinatown; at night they would sing songs at that school. My grandfather sent my father back to China to marry. In fact, my oldest sister was born in Zhongshan. My father went back to China a second time to bring my mother here. My oldest sister and her family did not come to America until after World War 2. They were in Macau.

Originally, Grandfather started Man Jen Low restaurant 萬珍樓, House of Ten Thousand Treasures, near a train station on Central Avenue.<sup>1</sup> It was near the wholesale produce market on Central and Eighth. This was established in 1878. It was catering to other Chinese with rice and noodle dishes. Later on, they made chop suey with leftover vegetables. The Chinese used to go to the slaughter house and get the parts that White men would not eat. The Chinese would use tripe, ears, liver, tongue, and so forth. I remember White people would feed the kidney to the cats but we would make a soup base from it. That was the start of our restaurant.

Later, Grandfather moved the restaurant to the stable, *ma ya*, near Apablasa and Marchessault. There were other Chinese restaurants there, Yee Hung Guey, Joy Yuen Low, and Tuey Far Low.<sup>2</sup> Some of the customers were poor White people, and they would come down to Chinatown for a warm meal. Chop suey was 25 cents and noodles was ten cents. Mexicans could not even afford that. The Japanese would eat on First Street at restaurants like Far East Café, Yet Quong Low, and Guey Lum Low of the Lum family. That Lum family was well educated; they all went to USC.

In those days, everything was *m' dak* 唔得, or "not okay". Even if you get more education, you can't get better work. For Chinese, there was restaurant work, gambling work, grocery work, or laundry work. Some of the Chinese did housework and gardening.

There weren't too many women in Chinatown, but there were a lot of children. My parents had eight children. There were a dozen Quons; their father, Quon Soon Doon, owned Tuey Far Low. There were a few women who were prostitutes on Temple Street or First Street. I think the Wong family was running that; the customers were mostly Japanese. I don't know

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1 Starting in the 1870s, many small transit companies which included steam trains, horse cars, electric streetcars and trolleys, were built in Los Angeles. The 1887 Main & Fifth Street Railroad ran from First and Main Streets to Fifth Street and Central Avenue. The Los Angeles & Vernon Railroad operated a horse car line on Central Avenue from Fifth Street to Vernon Avenue.

Source: <http://www.metro.net/about/library/about/homeloss-angeles-transit-history/>

2 Later, the Quons of Tuey Far Low, opened the Grand Star Restaurant, now the Grand Star Jazz Club at 943 Sun Mun Way in Chinatown. Quon Soon Doon (or Soon Doon Quon) adopted Him Gin Quon. Him Gin Quon's wife, Yu Hai Seto Quon (1899-1999), was fondly known as Mama Quon and cooked until she was 95. Their daughter, Edith Quon Jung (1923-2011), and her husband, Robert B. Jung were leaders of the LA Chinatown Corporation, Chinese American Museum, and other organizations.

what happened to the prostitutes. They would die of disease or marry and move far away. They didn't want to stay; they got away. If they had a daughter, they would sell her to a matchmaker for a Chinese. There was always somebody willing to make money in Chinatown.

I was born at Bow On Low, that big Chinese apartment on Apablaza in Old Chinatown. I was the youngest son, and the most independent. We were all born at home. In those days, we only went to hospitals to die. Rose was the oldest born in the U.S., Walter was the oldest son, then the twins, Merton and Norman, and then me. There were also Harry and Jenny. When I was about four years old, my grandfather wanted us all to go to China to visit our grandmother. My grandfather stayed behind to work at the restaurant. Norman, Harry, and I were not vaccinated and we all got small pox. Harry died and my face was scarred. Jenny was born in China. We came back through Hong Kong, and I remember the junk boat took us to the ship in the middle of Hong Kong Bay.

My grandfather wanted my mother to send a son back to China to keep one anchor there in case things got bad in the United States. I was sent to China in 1931. I came back to Los Angeles before the Marco Polo incident in 1937 when all the Americans had to leave. That's why I'm a China-phile. I read and write Chinese. I studied at Pui Ching 培正 boarding school.<sup>3</sup> It struck me when I was there that there was a Cuba Building and a North America Building. Overseas Chinese had donated funds for the school.

When I got back, I went to Central School's "opportunity class" with Bob Gee, Stanley Gee, Nelson Moy and others. We came back about the same time. I spoke more English than they did because I had attended Macy Street School before I left.

At about that time, Union Station was in the planning stages and the Chinatown community had to be moved. It was always *m' dak, m' dak*. Who cares about our feelings? If the White man says you walk, 'You walk,' you walk. If the White man says, 'You cook,' you cook. It wasn't as if our voices mattered.

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3 Pui Ching was a prestigious school that was founded in 1889 by Chinese Baptists in Guangdong. Many Chinese Americans and other overseas Chinese were enrolled at this campus before the War.

## New Chinatown

There were two choices. You could move to the market area near San Pedro Street. Or you could go with Mr. Lapham. Herbert Lapham was the land agent for the Santa Fe Railway. He found a new location for Chinatown. This acreage was across from the Capitol Milling Company. Lapham was working with Peter Soo Hoo. Peter Soo Hoo and his siblings were born in the United States. Peter went to USC and became an engineer. Some of the early Chinese immigrants came from educated backgrounds. Peter was the first Chinese American to work for the Department of Water and Power. Peter's younger brother had made his own skates with string and cups. He fell and hurt his spine; he was paralyzed and died. Peter was a little younger than my father. I heard that Peter died when I was stationed in Florida with the Navy. He suffered a stroke when he was about fifty-five years of age.

Soo Hoo formed a corporation with twenty-eight people, each contributing \$500 per share. That included Lee Wah Shew of Yee Sing Chong grocery. Tofu Bak—he was the only one in Los Angeles who knew how to make tofu. The jewelry store, Jin Hing, belonging to Lee King Yee, moved with Soo Hoo. So did the Wongs of Grandview Garden Restaurant and the Kow Kong 九江 group. The Kow Kong group ran the meat market, and they established the Golden Pagoda<sup>4</sup> right behind the wishing well in Chinatown Plaza. This included Dan Hall. This was the L.A. Chinatown Corporation. Of course, Man Jen Low was part of this. I still have my stock in the L.A. Chinatown Corporation.



David Fon Lee in Navy, 1943.  
(Courtesy of David Fon Lee)

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4 Now, Hop Louie Restaurant at 950 Mei Ling Way, Chinatown.

We didn't have much money but we formed a *hui* or association. Some of the people got money from the movie industry with films like *The Good Earth*. Betty Soo Hoo was the baby star in that movie.<sup>5</sup> But we needed \$100,000. Of course at that time, Chinese could not go to a bank. *M' dak*. Santa Fe Railway put up the front money and we paid them back as we went along. I think they were motivated by their guilty conscience.

All of us Lee's worked at Man Jen Low Restaurant. At that time, we hired cooks and we kids were washing dishes and busing tables. We hired waiters for a dollar a day. We didn't hire Mexicans as dishwashers until the War years when labor was scarce.



Lee Family in front of Man Jen Low.  
(Courtesy of David Fon Lee)

5 Born in 1935 in Los Angeles, Betty Soo Hoo (Wong) was uncredited for her role as the baby in the 1937 classic, *The Good Earth*. According to IMDb, Betty's siblings include Walter (born 1932, in 18 film roles), Howard (born 1933, in 2 roles), Willie (born 1935, in 7 roles), Hayward (born 1936, in 14 roles), Eunice (born 1939, in 4 roles), and Roland (born 1944, in 2 roles). Walter Soo Hoo and his wife, Eileen, run Phoenix Imports (463 Gin Ling Way) and Hop Louie Restaurant in Chinatown.

There were gambling halls in Chinatown, but we never gambled. Our parents would have chopped off our fingers. Nobody in our family gambled. No gambling. We didn't even dare to think about it. It was mostly the waiters and the laundrymen that gambled. I asked a waiter once, "James, why do you lose your money gambling?" He said, "David, if I win, I have a chance to return to China. If I don't win, what do I lose?"

After I graduated from high school at the age of 20, I joined the Navy. They would have drafted me if I didn't join, so I jumped the gun. I wanted to join the Marines, but Chinese could only be stewards then. Since I served in the restaurant, I didn't want to be serving again. No, thank you. I became a parachute rigger for the Navy. I didn't join the Army because I don't like sleeping in the mud; I rather sleep in a bed. I was a dry dock sailor in Jacksonville, Florida; Alameda, San Francisco; and North Island in San Diego.

When I came home from the Navy, they put the apron back on me. *M' dak*. What a bright future. I ended up in the kitchen while my brothers were waiters. Because of my facial scars from childhood small pox, I was assigned the kitchen.

After the war, our customers were more Japanese and Caucasians. We changed the menu a couple of times. We had a full bar. Even the 442nd Reunions<sup>6</sup> would be at General Lee's. A lot of Japanese Americans worked at Grand Central Market, and they would come to Chinatown for a drink after work. We were more of a high end restaurant. We served lobster, shrimp, and squab. In the 1940s, entertainers like Gary Cooper, Frank Sinatra, Helen Hayes, Robert Gould, and Judy Garland would come to the restaurant.

One of our customers was the *L.A. Mirror* journalist, Paul Coates. He said, "The name, Man Jen Low, is hard for Whites to remember." He recommended the name "General Lee's". When I said that we weren't generals, he said "Prince Romanoff is not a prince. If he can do it, why can't you?" That's how we changed the name of the restaurant in 1950. If we used our real name Woo, Immigration Services would come and dig up all our papers, and it would be "Bye, bye. Go back to China." Attorney

6 442nd Regimental Combat Team is the Japanese American military unit in World War II, one of the most decorated in American history.

General Bob Kennedy gave paper sons amnesty, but we continued to use the name Lee. I also extended the restaurant towards the back. We added a big banquet hall.

Our parents didn't belong to any community organizations; my father didn't want us to get involved. We were all automatically members of the Gee How Oak Tin Association on Bernard Street for the Chan, Woo, and Yuen families. Whenever there was a celebration or event like Chinese New Year, restaurants like ours had to donate.

After my father passed away, we four brothers owned the restaurant and we worked together for most of our lives. I was the only one who tried to get out. I opened a laundry on Broadway in the Bing Gong building. It was dry cleaning and pressing. I tried to make some extra money using my G.I. Bill. I remember even making my father sit at the laundry to help out. Later, I opened Lee's Travel Service at 928 Mei Ling Way; that is still open.

In 1960, I travelled around the world. I had worked nonstop with no vacation. The doctor said I had to get away. When I went to London, I was touring their Chinese restaurants. There was a South American there that I talked to. He said that the best Chinese restaurant was in Los Angeles named "General Lee's." That really made me proud and happy.

### **Relations with the People's Republic of China**

After my travels, I started to move to the front of the restaurant. Chinatown was in a down cycle and I became more active in the community. In 1978, I was president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. I felt like we had to get out of Chinatown. I wanted to bring the Miss Chinatown banquet to the downtown Biltmore Hotel. The Japanese American organizations were doing big dinners. I wanted to charge \$25 instead of \$10. We set up Gold Tables, Silver Tables, and Round Tables. We escalated the presence of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

At that time, the leaders of the CCBA didn't even speak English. It was time to change. Some people hated me but I didn't care. The tongs and family associations needed to understand the times.

After Nixon went to China in 1972, I heard a lot of customers talking about China. One of my customers was Caroline Ahmanson.<sup>7</sup> She needed a restaurant to entertain her Chinese connections; she got me involved.

I became a founding member of the Los Angeles-Guangzhou Sister City Association. A lot of the Chinatown people hated me. I told them, "The whole world recognizes the five-star flag, why don't we?" Taiwan spent a lot of money to gain supporters in Chinatown. I don't care what people think. If you care, you'll never make it. Mayor Tom Bradley appointed me as a commissioner of the airport; I had political connections so people didn't want to touch me. I knew Tom Bradley. Even when he was with LAPD; he would come to the restaurant. I got more political.

In 1984, the Olympics came to Los Angeles. I coordinated with the City to make sure all those Chinese athletes got rice and Chinese food. I organized a banquet for the Chinese Olympic delegation at the Bonaventure Hotel on August 11, 1984. At first, the Chinese Consulate thought it would be about 500 people. We started selling tables and we ended with more than 2000 people. The China team did well, winning many gold medals. Even Mayor Bradley came to the banquet. It was a security nightmare but we did it. We celebrated the athletes. After that, even the Monterey Park community invited me and called me Dai Go 大哥, or older brother.

The Chinese government really appreciated my support. I'm a founding member of the National American Chinese Association. I've been to China dozens of times. They treat me now as a VIP. We got to stay in the Diaoyutai State Guest House in Beijing; we got to sleep in the same bedroom as Reagan. I've also met a lot of Chinese from other countries in South America, Europe, and Asia. Some of their ancestors emigrated in the 19th century too.

When the Far East National Bank opened, we had to hire a White man as the front man. At that time, there were no Asians qualified. When Cathay Bank opened, they only had half a million dollars from the meat markets and all the other small businesses. Far East was the second bank. Things have changed.

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7 Caroline Ahmanson (1919-2005), wife of Howard F. Ahmanson who founded Home Savings & Loan and the Ahmanson Foundation, was an active Southern California philanthropist associated with many arts, education, and cultural issues. She was a close friend of President Nixon and President Reagan. She was a delegate to the Committee on U.S.-China Relations (established 1966) and the Chair of the Los Angeles-Guangzhou Sister City Association (established 1981).

General Lee's closed around 1985, and Grandview Garden closed later. The Rice Bowl and Hong Kong Low closed at an earlier date due to the many young people who were involved in drugs and bad activities. Chinatown was hurt in those years.

Every month, I meet with the old waiters from General Lee's for lunch. Every second Tuesday, we have a group of 14 to 20 people. It is funny because we get together in Monterey Park restaurants. We talk about the old days. All of their children and grandchildren are successful. They raised their families and educated their children on their waiters' salaries. There are a lot of doctors, pharmacists, and even attorneys. Judy Chu is now in Congress. So the *m' dak* generation raised a *dak* generation.

### **Towards the Future**

What is the future of Chinatown? Hard to say. There are still restaurants, but it is also an art district right now. In the 1980s, there were a lot of Vietnamese immigrants, and there was a Saigon Plaza. There were Hong Kong and PRC immigrants. There are new housing and lofts. George Yu of the Chinatown Business Improvement District has started Summer Nights to revitalize Chinatown. When Chinatown started, my people had no place to go. Now we can go anywhere. Some of our young people don't even know where Chinatown is.

In the olden days, people looked down at Chinatown. But now they have a more respectful attitude.

I didn't get married until I was forty-five years of age in 1965. I was an old bachelor; I didn't want to get married. But now, I've been married for 48 years. I married a Nisei, Yuki Sato, who was born in Portland and incarcerated in Minidoka concentration camp. She is a Kabuki dancer under the name of Madame Fujima Rieyuki. Her mother, Nishikawa Kikuharu, was an odori instructor in Minidoka. Yuki worked in cosmetology in Beverly Hills for over thirty years. She had a previous son, Steve, and then we had a son, David, and a daughter. Both our boys died young. Our daughter is a kindergarten teacher. Our daughter has given us two granddaughters. Our son-in-law is Caucasian. When our extended family gets together, it is all chop suey. Every family is ethnically mixed now. I tell my daughter that General Lee's property will be hers one day.

## **A Tribute to My Father: Nowland Hong**

Interview by Jenny Cho

*Nowland Chin Hong is a graduate of Pomona College and in 1959, USC School of Law. He is a former Assistant City Attorney. Nowland was president of the Southern California Chinese Lawyers Association and national president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. This interview was conducted by Jenny Cho, CHSSC Board Member and author of several books, including Chinatown in Los Angeles and the forthcoming, Chinese in Hollywood.*

My name is Nowland C. Hong and I'm the oldest son of You Chung Hong (also known as Y.C. Hong, 1898-1977). He was a longtime lawyer in Los Angeles and the United States. I'm a practicing lawyer as well for the last 52 years in Los Angeles, presently with the firm of Best Best and Krieger.

My mother's name was Mabel Chin Hong. She was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. My younger brother, Roger, who has passed away, was my only sibling. The two of us grew up together in the same house in Los Angeles, along with several cousins, whom we were very close to.

My father started out in Daggett, California which was known for its borax mines. His father worked for the railroads, and after it was completed, he found work in the borax mines. People my age will remember the twenty-mule teams and Boraxo Soap, an effective industrial soap. My grandfather and grandmother ran a restaurant in Daggett for a few years. Unfortunately, my grandfather became ill when my father was about two or three years old. He went to San Francisco for an operation, and my grandfather passed away from pneumonia at that hospital. That made it very difficult for my grandmother, my father, Aunt Helen, and a younger brother. The children were too young, and my grandmother really didn't know how to run a restaurant. They moved to the Bay Area. My grandmother found work in the day time rolling tobacco. At that point, Chinese had businesses in making cigars. In the evening, Grandmother did seamstress work. It was very difficult in those early years just to get enough to eat. Unfortunately, that little brother passed away, and we have no records of him.

My father's stature was rather small. When he was a young child, the uncle threw him up in the air but did not manage to catch him. My father

suffered severe spinal injury and dealt with curvatures of the spine. He was barely five feet. It didn't seem to bother him much. When I was growing up, he often doubled up with my mother to play tennis against another couple.

My father managed to go through public schools and did well. While in high school, he and a friend, Thomas Tom, opened an English language school for Chinese. The two of them taught English to Chinese so they could get around the Bay Area. The other schools that taught English were not that practical, but my father taught useful phrases. They earned a little side money which was very helpful.

For a while, they were living in Oakland. He would have to cross the Bay on the ferry. He would smell the coffee and doughnuts on the ferry, but he could never afford that.

After my father graduated from Lowell High School, he found a bookkeeping job at a Chinese restaurant in Boston. The owner was an extremely harsh person and the wages were low. It wasn't a pleasant experience for my father. He then heard of another position in Los Angeles as an interpreter for U.S. Immigration Services. He obtained that position in 1918 [and worked for 10 years]. He then brought his mother and sister, Helen, to Los Angeles. He rented a house on Gladys Street. My father made friends with a Japanese interpreter who told him that he was going to law school at night. He said it was a great opportunity. At that time, there were no Chinese or Japanese attorneys. But my father thought it wouldn't hurt to go to law school. He worked in the day and attended USC law school at night, like his friend. He had a small government salary but he managed. He found a bar in downtown Los Angeles that gave him a beer and two hotdogs for ten cents. My father never drank but the two hotdogs would be his dinner before going to school.

My father could not afford textbooks. He would borrow them from friends and then memorize that material. It was quite a feat to go through school without having any books. I do have one of the few textbooks that he did own. That's our family treasure.

During that time, he managed to get enough units to take the California Bar even before he graduated. In those days, the bar requirements were different than they are today. In those years, it was required you take an oral examination and a written examination.

When the Dean of the USC law school learned that he had taken the bar exam before graduation, he was furious. In 1923, the law school wanted a good rate of passage for the bar exam. But if my father had failed, it would have hurt USC's passage rate. The Dean convinced my father to finish the law degree. In fact, he graduated in 1924 with an LL.B and in 1925, with an LL.M.

My father decided to practice law. The people at immigration services thought he was crazy. They said he would starve to death because the Chinese didn't have any money and didn't use lawyers. But my father was acquainted with many in the community and knew there was a need for immigration services. So he hung up his shingle. At the start, it was probably difficult. My father spoke Chinese and English and picked up clients. In those days, Chinese couldn't have bank accounts so they would pay my father in cash. He said sometimes there would be a poor looking guy who would reach up his sleeve and pull out a large amount of money.

My father became a member of Chinese American Citizens Alliance. Some of the friends there thought it was important for the Chinese to become Americanized and to integrate into the society. That was a rather strange idea as many Chinese wanted to make some money and return to the old country. The idea of integrating into American life was a new concept. The Chinese Exclusion Act prevented the formation of many Chinese American families. As a result, much of my father's pro bono work was with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance so the Chinese could immigrate more freely and bring in their wives and children. Consequently, C.A.C.A. became an important part of his life—from San Francisco and Los Angeles. It was a very critical organization in his life. He worked very hard to repeal the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. He testified in Congress. Subsequently, it helped many families. During my father's practice, the immigration quota changed. He handled thousands of families.

I recall as a child that my father would visit his clients at Terminal Island in San Pedro. New immigrants would be jailed or housed there.<sup>8</sup> He would

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8 Before World War II, Terminal Island was a Japanese American fishing village serving large canneries such as Chicken of the Sea and StarKist. By 1938, the Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution was established; today it is a low-security facility. There was also an Immigration Detention Center. Terminal Island still houses the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement Detention and Removal Operations Service Processing Center. "Undesirable unauthorized aliens" are held here prior to deportation.

have to interview his clients there. He would have to work very late at night, and he wouldn't come home until the wee hours. He was very active in his practice. Other clients were all over the city and the county. Some clients would even come to our house on Saturdays and Sundays.

We believe my father was born around 1898 in San Francisco, but we are uncertain as the birth records were destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. He was admitted into the California Bar in 1923. In 1924, he got his bachelor's and master's degree in law. He was the first Chinese American admitted to practice law in California. He may have been the first in the United States but we are uncertain as there is some mention of a Chinese in New York. Nobody has been able to pin that down. Of course, he was the first in his family to earn a degree.

Although my father didn't enjoy public speaking, he did quite a bit of it. He never shied away from taking something on. There was a considerable amount of planning before he testified in Congress. It was historic. He made friends with Congress people as a result of his testimony.

Peter Soo Hoo was someone my father met through C.A.C.A. They got along and became close friends. The planning and the whole concept of New Chinatown originated from Peter Soo Hoo. I remember the whole Soo Hoo family would come to our house for dinner frequently. Peter was a person with considerable foresight. He could see things creatively. He was more exposed to the American way of life because of his employment with the Los Angeles City Department of Water and Power. They were close friends. Part of Peter's real leadership was to bring Chinatown to Broadway. There was nothing there. The railroads had dumped logs and other stuff on that property. There were red ants all over the place; the bites would burn something terrible.

My father's first office was on Alameda Street, on the second or third floor. As a child, it seemed there were endless steps going up. I remember it to be a dark place. I enjoyed visiting my father as he would take me to lunch. He moved to the Central Plaza of New Chinatown in 1939. There weren't many buildings at that point in time. My mother was very instrumental in designing his offices. She would research things very intently. As a result of her efforts, they engaged the services of architects Webster and Wilson to do the offices. My mother collected many German

books as Germany had much interest in Chinese architecture. They used those books to design the office building and the subsequent two buildings.

The furniture and interior were designed by Adrian Wilson's wife. It had a modern as well as a Chinese style to it. It was considered very nice. My father had a Chinese secretary who did all the Chinese correspondence. Although he spoke Chinese, my father's written Chinese was limited. At one time, he had two secretaries. Bernice Leung was his last secretary.

In those early days, there really wasn't much there while China City was already developed. Needless to say when Peter Soo Hoo Sr. came up with this idea, there was considerable resistance against moving away from Alameda and Union Station. But he convinced enough people to move away from the shabby buildings to this new area. He attracted new businesses.

My father owned 445 Ginling Way which contained his office. There were a couple of art stores on the first floor—one which was Peter Soo Hoo's. There was also a restaurant on the first floor called Forbidden Palace at 445. Subsequently, he built an adjacent building east with a restaurant called Joy Yuen Low. Then there was a third building right on Broadway with Li Po Restaurant, an art store, and Phoenix Bakery.

The gate was an early structure built as a tribute to my grandmother. Because of their hard life, my father wanted to put up a monument to his mother which is the gate. I don't know about the poem because it has changed. At one point, it contained propaganda during World War II.

The Los Angeles Chinatown Corporation was created that could deal with the railroad and own and sell property. The Corporation retains ownership of the streets in Chinatown. It sold off parcels of land. It was a critical part of Chinatown development. It was the legal entity that allowed for the creation of Chinatown. My father was on that Board.

My mother and father were both very involved in the Chinese American community although it was much smaller then. The men and women were in separate groups. In those days, only men could be members of C.A.C.A. but women were very involved in helping with the activities. There was a Chinese women's club. They put on many affairs particularly during Chinese New Year's. My mother also sponsored a Chinese girls' club, Kwan

Yin Girls Club. She thought it important for the girls to assimilate and learn American ways. I remember one of their big events was a Chinese New Year's party. They would have that in different places in the City. I know my parents were involved in Madame Chiang Kai-shek's visit for fundraising purposes.

My dad never moved out of the Hong building. He retired in the mid-1970s. Frequently when politicians visited Chinatown, they would meet at my father's office. It was a nice office and had historic photographs of President Nixon, Governor Reagan. I remember Senator Fong.

Through the C.A.C.A., the Chinese were always politically active. The C.A.C.A. was always involved in politics in some way. They thought it necessary to be involved. When I first joined the C.A.C.A., we would frequently have candidates for city council, mayor, sheriff, attorney general as guests and speakers. As Nixon and Reagan were from California, it did launch C.A.C.A. more into national politics.

My father was always very supportive. My father never pushed me to be a lawyer. It was only when I was completing college that I decided to go into law. He was very proud of my brother and me. I wanted to go to USC for undergraduate because several of my friends were going there. He concluded I would have too much of a good time. He said, "If you go to USC, I will not pay for your tuition." He was willing to pay for Pomona College, where I went. The two of us were huge USC football fans since I was about seven years old, we would go to the games together.

My father was a true pioneer. His determination and toughness brought him through life as well as his professional career. He was always very involved in the community; he thought that important. He was not a one-dimensional person by any means. He saw life on a broader aspect, for himself and for people around him. He was easy on us; he was fairly indulgent with my brother and I. My mother was the disciplinarian. He had difficulty growing up as a child and that gave him a different attitude towards us and towards life. He did things that everybody told him he couldn't do. It was rather an amazing story.

My brother, Roger, was also a pioneer. He was born in 1941. When he went to USC for architecture, he actually joined a fraternity—a Jewish fraternity. He liked the people there, and they welcomed him. My mother

became involved with the fraternity as well. She helped improve the house and the cooking. Roger accomplished a great deal as an architect. He was one of the few Chinese to be hired by a major architectural firm. Eugene Choy was one of the first architects, and there were others on the east coast such as I. M. Pei.

There were other Chinese lawyers when I started, but not a great deal. When we started the Southern California Chinese Lawyers Association, there were about 15 or 20 attorneys in the LA area. Now it has grown.

# Our Father, Daniel Hall, and the Chinatown Experience

By Inez Lui, Doré Wong, and Beaumont Hall

*Inez, Doré, and Beaumont are three of ten siblings who collaborated on this contribution. Inez and Doré are retired educators and Beaumont is a retired engineer. Their father, Daniel Hall (August 25, 1902-January 24, 1983) was a founding member of the LA Chinatown Corporation and the owner/builder of the Golden Pagoda. Mr. Hall was also the owner and manager of United Market, a founding father of Kow Kong Association, and was active with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, Chung Wah Benevolent Association, Four Families Association, and numerous charitable organizations.*

Our father never saw his own father, Grandfather having died before he was even born. He was the youngest of three brothers, born in the village of Kow Kong, near Canton, China. His young life was difficult and often the family had to survive mainly with what they could catch in the river.

When he was older, his marriage was arranged—as was the custom—but he admitted that he surreptitiously “sneaked a look” beforehand and gave his tacit approval. Now with a young wife, he decided to seek his fortune across the vast Pacific Ocean.

As many before them and many after them, our ancestors came to America seeking a better life. China had too many mouths to feed and so few opportunities to succeed, and America was rumored to be the land of plenty where “gold” could be found anywhere on the streets. Eyes, including those of our father, turned hopefully across the ocean to the shores of America.

After several initial circuitous excursions into San Francisco and Oakland, our father and his two brothers decided to settle in the city of Los Angeles where they opened a meat market right in the heart of the Civic Center. Unfortunately, not soon after, his two brothers died, one from illness and the other in a truck accident. Now the sole owner of the market, our father returned to China to retrieve his wife who had been staying with Grandmother. While he managed the store, our mother soon had her hands full taking care of Helen, Elza, Inez, Doré, Beulah (died at the age of three),

Angelina, and finally Beaumont—a boy, so important in the Asian culture. We later added Wellington, Dorothy, Franklin and Jonathan—but that is another story.



**Family portrait before Jonathan.**  
*(Courtesy of Hall family)*

When the city of Los Angeles decided to redevelop the Civic Center area in the 1940's, we were “booted out” of our first home at 132 North Main. The market had living quarters (loft) above and was located right across the City Hall. Other establishments affected were the many Chinese businesses and residences further east in “Old” Chinatown and China City. Many turned northwesterly, settling into what is now considered the “New” Chinatown area. Following suit, our parents moved to a two-story house on 971 Yale Street, not far from Castelar Elementary School, the Morgan Laundry and the French Hospital, all which proved auspicious for our then growing family of eight children. Our father then transferred his business to a new facility on Yale Street to provide for his prolific family soon to total ten. By then, we had moved to the adjoining lot, building a larger house at 975 Yale Street that uniquely met our particular needs. It was designed by Eugene Choy, a prominent Chinese architect at that time, but was later sold, demolished and rebuilt by the members of the First Chinese Baptist Church.

Living in this ethnically homogeneous environment had its advantages and disadvantages. Communication was taken for granted and culture was not dissimilar. And Chinatown was a total community within itself! There were markets, small specialty shops, restaurants, bakeries, banks, laundries, photographers, arcades, art galleries, medicinal herb shops, and miscellaneous small businesses with people galore who often lived above their stores or in close proximity. Chinatown was self-sustaining and profited from the many tourists who came for the Asian experience and merchandise.

Growing up, we benefited fiscally by being able to get local jobs in Chinatown working as a salesperson, a waiter, or the like, although minimal wages were the norm, especially for “precocious” teenagers. But it was exhilarating to ring up the cash register (Inez at the Golden Pagoda restaurant), sprinkle nuts over a banana split (Doré at the Phoenix Bakery), or to handle precious Chinese art objects (Elza at the Kwan Yin gift shop). We learned about finances hands on.

Our father had invested in Chinatown and was counted as one of its founding fathers. He developed property in the area and ultimately built the Golden Pagoda restaurant complemented by three adjacent store fronts. The restaurant replicated the pagodas of Asia and was painted a bright yellow gold with upwardly curved facades on each story. Neon lights at night insured distant notice and attracted the curious. Almost immediately, it was a commercial success. There was a bar downstairs with a piano player and a dining area upstairs with a view. Later, when Chinatown experienced its recession, the restaurant underwent a change in management. Currently, Hop Louie Restaurant is its sole occupant.



**Family in front of Golden Pagoda.**

Serving as a beacon to others within the city, Chinatown attracted many would be social philanthropists. The leaders formed organizations and clubs, and participated in many events that helped lure tourists and Chinese Americans to the area. Chinatown itself held special events—parades, fashion shows, and Moon Festivals where Hollywood stars also participated in the events. Then, to add to the celebratory efforts, David Soo Hoo reorganized the Mei Wah all-girls drum corps with Barbara Jean Wong, an erstwhile movie star, as lead majorette; we sisters Helen, Elza, Inez, and Doré dutifully paraded behind her, beating our drums. And of course, there were the perfunctory lion dancers who further enhanced the festivities. At one time, Chinatown even had a carnival where the parking lot was, complete with various rides, a ferris wheel, and game booths—even one that would predict your personality by analyzing your handwriting.

The founding fathers of Chinatown continued their civic-minded focus with organizations to help new and old immigrants gain a firm financial foothold. Some targeted only members with the same surname (e.g. Wong Association) while one, C.A.C.A. (Chinese American Citizens Alliance), served all. There were banquets, dinners, Miss Chinatown contests, fundraisers with sales of handmade Chinese artifacts, and fortuitous raffles. At its peak, Chinatown was active, vibrant, and alive.

In an individual effort, our father also helped many friends and relatives immigrating from his village of birth in China. He provided them first with a job—often at the market, then with room and board. Our mother’s role was to cook both lunch and dinner for them five days a week with food they were accustomed to—Kow Kong style. Fortunately there were many take-out vendors in Chinatown that sold barbecued chicken or pork that facilitated her labor.

Most of the local children attended Castelar Elementary School, greeting friends that mirrored them, or meeting strangers with Italian, French, Mexican or Native American backgrounds. Outside of Chinatown itself, the community was a mixed bag of ethnic groups, although to our youthful eyes they all looked the same. It was multiculturalism in its prime. Little Joe’s was located on the corner and en route to Castelar, the aroma of Frisco’s just-baked bread enticed us daily, masking the scent of antiseptics emanating from the nearby French Hospital. If you ever felt a craving for a bean burrito, it was just a stone’s throw away.

We would be remiss if we failed to mention Chinese schools, located within walking distance, almost mandatory from our parents' points of view. That came after "American School", also mandatory by state law. It was surprising how we got any homework done at all!

Our father worked long hours tirelessly, with diligence and determination to surmount numerous obstacles and difficulties. While he retained his primary language, he learned English after only three months of night classes when he first arrived. He had to learn on the job how to run a business, how to pay taxes, and how to hurdle sundry legalities. He courageously ventured out to the whole community and hustled to improve his meat sales, both retail and wholesale. He sold to customers near and far including to some Chinese businesses located in low income areas. He established good relationships with all, even with the Italian, Mexican, and Caucasian truck drivers who became lifelong friends. Soon, business was thriving and so was the family at home.

The market business was a huge enterprise with well over twenty employees and a handful of truck drivers who regularly delivered and hauled whole carcasses of meat into the store's freezers. Then our father, with his crew of novice butchers, would cut and neatly package the meat for specific wholesale destinations and retail consumption. A convenient retail counter for drop-by customers was located in front of the store and farther in, was an office, boxed by glass and drywall, that sheltered the "accountant" using his abacus and a bookkeeper more comfortable with versatile business machines. Here Helen, Elza, Doré, and Angelina would often volunteer leisure hours to check orders or send out invoices. We were duly rewarded later with treats from the Helms Bakery truck or the Good Humor ice cream van that rumbled down the street. Not to be outdone, as they became of age, Beaumont, Wellington, Dorothy, Franklin and Jonathan all contributed their share with various tasks at the market, while Inez primarily assisted our mother at home. It was a family affair.

As we matured and began branching out beyond Chinatown to the edges of the city, we experienced a particular isolation from the real world. It wasn't until junior high school that we suddenly realized we spoke a different kind of English, one full of neighborhood slang and idioms. We encountered other kinds of students, some with blond hair and blue eyes, who were living the American Dream. We found our own dreams limited. It was a rude awakening but ultimately we adjusted and we survived.

Our father continued to thrive until our mother died at the age of 55. He eventually retired and is now resting in peace at the Chinese Cemetery in East Los Angeles, once the only cemetery that would accept Asian burials. He left children who were immersed in the Chinatown experience but who no longer live within its boundaries. What remains are fragmented memories of the past.

The so-called Chinatown experience may have been narrow in scope but still proved valuable in our appreciation and understanding for what our newly arrived parents had to endure and what legacies they have left us. Our parents emphasized family unity and courtesy, and we still converse with one another civilly and cordially—all ten of us. They modeled certain cultural traditions such as the emphasis on education; all our siblings attained a college education and carry on that tradition with their own children. They left us with an appetite for Chinese food that we still relish while celebrating special Chinese holidays and events. They exposed us to Asian music, art, and film with resulting varying degrees of expertise—but at least with appreciation. They survived the early Chinese experience here with hard work and courage that left us our historical perspective in American history. Above all, they instilled in us a sense of service—to family, to friends, to community, and to each other. We owe them.



**Chinese school at  
Cathedral High, 1943.**  
*(Courtesy of Hall family)*

# Madame Wong's Restaurant: Catherine Yee

Interview by Jenny Cho

*Chinatown's infamous Madame Wong's Restaurant at 949 Sun Mun Way was known as a punk rock, power-pop, and new wave innovator in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Bands like the Police, Oingo Boingo, and the Ramones performed at Madame Wong's. In 1970, Esther Wong—and her family—took over the original 1938 Rice Bowl Restaurant. Madame Wong's West opened in Santa Monica between 1978 and 1991. Esther Wong died in 2005. This interview was conducted by author and CHSSC Board member, Jenny Cho.*

I was born October 9, 1935 in Shanghai, China. My father was Chu King Chong, and my mother was Yu Ah Fung. I'm the third oldest. My sister is Esther Wong and she was born in 1917. My brother was Johnson Chu. I had a younger sister who passed away and several half-siblings.

My parents were both students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. My father imported Nash automobiles into China before the War. My sister came to the U.S. several times before World War II and immigrated in 1949. My brother-in-law, George, was from Hawaii. George was a pilot for the Flying Tigers and he met Esther at a party in Shanghai. I came in 1956 to join my sister in Los Angeles. At first, I worked for California Bank, where Esther worked too. My father spoke the King's language, and we all spoke English at home. I was a graduate of Maryknoll Convent School in Hong Kong. I attended Pasadena City College, Los Angeles City College, and then Cal State Los Angeles; Esther was educated in Shanghai.



**Esther Wong,  
the "Godmother of Punk."**

In the 1960s, my husband had a part-time job with Hong Kong Low in Chinatown. One night, he came home and said that the Rice Bowl restaurant was for sale. My sister became interested. We purchased Rice Bowl for about \$40,000 and remodeled it. This was around 1970 and that's how Madame Wong got started. We started with a five-year lease. Because my brother-in-law was from Hawaii, my sister decided to put in a Hawaiian show. It went well for a couple of years.



**The original Rice Bowl Restaurant.**

*Source: <http://gogonotes.blogspot.com/2008/04/1979-chinatown-punk-music-wars.html>*

One night, a taxi driver, Paul Greenstein, came in and said, "You know, I can promote this place so that it'll be packed every night." I said, "Sure," and didn't really pay any attention. He came back and said it again. He wanted us to put on bands as we already had a stage. He got even more serious. He said, "Give me one day and I'll show you what I can bring in here." We thought that it wouldn't hurt and gave him Tuesday night to see what he can do. That Tuesday night, Madame Wong in Chinatown sold out every single bottle of beer, every bottle of liquor, and every grain of rice. That place was packed all night. That's how we started. He convinced us he could do more and he started booking more bands.

We closed around 1985. Our landlady, Elaine Chow, had passed away and we didn't want to continue. The place was upstairs and it was too small. We had plumbing trouble. The rent was going up and our new landlord didn't like the entertainment business.



We continued our business in Santa Monica at 2900 Wilshire Boulevard. It was previously the Fox and Hounds Restaurant (1947-1978) and they were not doing well. It was a stand-alone building. Our business as Madame Wong's West really boomed in Santa Monica.

When we started, did we have experience? Heck, no. My husband knew how to find a cook and he knew how to wait on a table. But, I guess it's human nature; we always thought we knew how to do better than others. A friend said, "No, don't get into the restaurant business. You're not going to succeed." She had failed. But we thought we could do better. I was working in the day at a car dealership and then for JPL. Restaurant business is always night time work.

## Pageants, Parades, Festivals, and School Boards: Robert L. Gin

Interview by Susie Ling

*Robert L. Gin started volunteering in Chinatown in the late 1960s and never stopped. Bob has especially been involved with the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, Golden Dragon Parade, and Lotus Festival. Bob has also served for numerous years in the leadership of the Alhambra Unified School District PTA. He is now president of the Alhambra Unified School District Board. His wife, Diane Gin, was 29th Congressional District Woman of the Year in 2012. A school teacher for thirty-five years, Diane also served on leadership with the AUSD PTA. This is from an interview with Susie Ling on August 28, 2013 in Monterey Park.*

### My Family Background

I was born and raised in Los Angeles. My parents were from the Hoiping area of China; they came over in the 1940s. My grandfather was a paper son. He was a houseboy for a newspaper person in Santa Barbara. One of the Chinese community elders was fatally shot, and it fell on my grandfather to take the remains back to the village. After Santa Barbara, my grandfather had a bar in Los Angeles. Then they owned New Star Restaurant on Fifth and Wall in Skid Row. It served American food for the local clientele. Next, my grandfather bought another restaurant on 39th and Western in Southcentral LA. My father worked at the one on Skid Row. Two weeks before the Watts Riots, Dad bought a liquor store on 102nd and Avalon. We saw all that bigotry. I worked in the family business for forty years.



Robert Gin in Monterey Park.

My family first lived together on 42nd and Flower. My uncle got married and the house got too small. My father tried to buy a home in San Pedro, but they wouldn't sell to Asians. We bought a house in Monterey Park in 1957.

I went to Brightwood Elementary, my four daughters went to Brightwood, and my granddaughter is now in first grade at the same school. One of my daughters now teaches at Brightwood.

Monterey Park was quite different in the 1950s. There were some Japanese Americans and a handful of Chinese Americans. I started school at Robert Hill Lane Elementary as Monterey Park was still part of LAUSD. When we were eight or nine years old, we used to walk through East LA College to get to Robert Hill Lane. Brightwood School was completed when I was around the fifth grade. Asians were about half of one percent of Alhambra High School when I graduated in 1968. It was mostly White and Hispanic. Then I went to East LA College and finished at Cal State LA.

Being Chinese American was "different." We were called names at school, but I just had to let it pass. I only went to Chinatown or Adams/San Pedro district with my grandfather to get some produce. Chinatown seemed strange to me. I did see lion dancing and didn't think too much of it then.

When I was a senior in high school, I took a California history course. I couldn't think of a topic for my paper. I finally decided to write on Chinese Americans. I went to the main Los Angeles Library and I could only find a few sentences in five or six books. I did see an article in the *LA Times* on the Chinatown immigrants. I discovered that Chinese were discriminated against since the 1880s.

Back in high school, I helped an advisor, and I enjoyed volunteering. Like other teens, I was trying to find myself. My mom and dad didn't want me to get involved; they wanted me to work.

### **Involvement in Chinatown**

When I was about 19, I got involved with people who were starting Chinatown Teen Post. Eva Lee was the mother of one of my classmates. There were also Gilbert Hom, Janet Lim, and Marian Wong. They said, "Why don't you join us?" I didn't know what we were doing but I said okay. We needed to raise money and I became the liaison between Chinatown

Teen Post and Chinatown Chamber of Commerce for about three years. Chinatown Teen Post was an afterschool program in the Chinatown West Plaza then.

That led to my doing 24 years with the Miss Chinatown pageant, 12 years as the chair of the Golden Dragon Parade, and continuous involvement with the Lotus Festival. I enjoy it. I was working for my dad and volunteering became my outlet for personal growth. I wanted to see what I could do.

Chinatown Chamber of Commerce focuses on bringing more business into the community. I started working with the parade in 1976. While I was Chair of the Dragon Parade, I wanted to bring in celebrities and personalities into the community. I wanted the kids in Chinatown to see the rest of the world. I got some talk show hosts, football and baseball people, and actors and actresses. Actors George Takei and Mario Machado came every year. I built up a nice relationship with the PR people at ABC. They said, "You tell us who you want, Bob." There were Susan Lucci, Rosalind Chao, Pat Morita, David Soul of *Starsky and Hutch*, Henry Winkler of *Happy Days*, Victor Sen Yung of *Bonanza*... By the mid-1980s, the parade included almost two dozen floats. There were marching bands from local communities and more government officials. Now, there are about 100 floats, bands, and cars.

There was always politics. In 1979, LA City Councilmember Art Snyder wanted to carry the Taiwan flag. As the chair of the parade, I had to go tell him, "Councilman, you need to put that flag away or I'll have you arrested." He replied, "Are you asking me or telling me?" I said, "I'm telling you." I was 29 years old at that time and scared to death under my breath. After that, I decided that the Chinese Historical Society could carry the American flags in the front of the parade. Many of the Chinatown leaders like Wilbur Woo, David Fon Lee, Irvin Lai, Bill Hong (of Hong Kong Low), and Helen Young would encourage me to do my best and didn't put on many restrictions. I didn't know anything about parades when I started. I learned a lot from Kingman<sup>9</sup> who was the parade chair for many years before me.

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<sup>9</sup> Dong Kingman Jr. is the son of the great watercolor master, Dong Kingman 曾景文 (1911–2000). Born in Oakland, Kingman Sr. was an artist with the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and then a graphic artist for the movie industry.

In 1898, there was a Chinese lion and dragon unit in Los Angeles' La Fiesta Parade. That continued. The Chinese Merchants Association was responsible for obtaining and maintaining the dragon. In the early 1960s, the dragon would visit every Chinese business along the parade route. By the 1970s, the Chinatown parade included participants from local schools like Nightingale Junior High, Castelar Elementary, and those from Boyle Heights. It included the Chinatown associations. It used to be on Friday nights from Temple to Bernard Street on Hill Street. Bruce Lee was Grand Marshal one year. We changed the parade to Saturday afternoons. We finally got the police permits to go down Broadway and Hill.



**Los Angeles Chinatown Parade.**

In the 1980s, I asked George Takei to be Grand Marshal; he was best known for his acting on Star Trek. Some of the people in the Chamber objected because Takei is of Japanese American descent. I took a stand in support of Takei. I walked out. The Chamber called me back last minute and I put the parade together in one month. I finally told George that story a couple of years ago; he didn't know.



**Local schools participating in the Chinatown Parade.**

In 2013, the Grand Marshals were LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and LAPD Chief Charlie Beck. In 2012, they were author Lisa See and Disney's Mulan and Mushu. Despite the fact there are now New Year parades in Alhambra/San Gabriel and Orange County, Golden Dragon Parade is second only to the Rose Parade in Los Angeles. Thousands come. It's got everything from Scottish bagpipes to taichi groups to Mexican dancers. Of course, there are lion dancers and dragon dancers. It is a community parade; it is our identity.

All I want is for someone to say, “You did a good job. I had fun.” When I started, I didn’t know how to do anything. I was a one-man show. I made the signs; I called the car companies; I typed up the letters; I did everything. The night before the parade, I had fifty of my best friends help out. After the parade, I would rest for two months and then start planning for the next year. I was doing Lotus Festival at the same time.

### Lotus Festival in Echo Park

I met Helen Young<sup>10</sup> who started the Lotus Festival in 1973 with actress Sumi Haru and Judith Luther-Wilder, a businesswoman and community activist. It was held at Echo Park, known for its lotus flowers since the 1920s. There had been some racial tension issues, and the festival was sponsored by the LA City Department of Recreation and Parks to celebrate different Asian cultures. When I got involved, Helen asked me to help start a dragon boat race. I said, “Sure, I’ll get a team together.” She answered, “No, Bob. I don’t want a team. I want you to organize the whole thing.” I didn’t know anything. I even called the UCLA and USC crew coaches for



**The Lotus Festival in Echo Park.**



**Judith Luther-Wilder and Bob Gin at Lotus Festival, 1980s.**

tips. I ended up making up my own rules; we were going to have fun. Lotus Festival started as a one-day event with about 5000 people. It grew to two days and about 150,000 visitors. Helen was remarkable; she had vision. She went to NBC to get them to do their morning show there. She got KTLA involved. I’ve been with Lotus Festival since. I’ve chaired it as have Gat Lum and Jerry Wong.

People would say, “This is a great festival. It is so family-oriented. We had a great time.” There was entertainment for adults and for kids. There was food. And those compliments would keep me going for another year. That was gratifying. I like the smiles on people’s faces.

### Chinese American Citizens Alliance

Oh yeah, I’ve been doing that for the last five or six years. I was president of the Greater San Gabriel Lodge which was established around 2000. The organization itself was founded in 1895 and the Los Angeles Lodge has been around since 1912. San Gabriel hosted the convention in 2009. The president had asked me to chair the convention, but I hadn’t even been to one. I didn’t even know what it entailed. If they ask me to chair it now, I see how it can be organized. I see how the puzzle pieces can be fit together. In 2011, the convention was in Houston and in 2013, I attended the Biennial Convention in Oakland.

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10 CHSSC’s first publication, *Linking Our Lives* (1984), is dedicated to Helen Young. Helen was involved with Council of Oriental Organizations, Monterey Park Chamber of Commerce, LA-Guangzhou Sister City Organization, Chinatown’s New Year Festival, East West Players, and many other community organizations. She was a founding officer of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

## **AUSD PTA and School Board**

I was president of Brightwood PTA for seven years. And then I was vice president at Alhambra High and president at Keppel High. I became president for the district PTA for three years. My wife said, "You wouldn't be doing this if you didn't enjoy it." I learn a lot from other people. You have to have a good team.

I went to many school board meetings and I started to think that I could provide better leadership. I kept thinking about it and looking at the issues of the district as a whole. I feel this could be a great district if you just put the pieces of the puzzle together. My first concern was the physical maintenance of our facilities. Why can't we get water faucets fixed? Why do secretaries file the same work order for two or three years? Why can't we improve the landscaping? I don't have an education background, but I learned. I listen and I hear. I talk to staff and teachers. I am concerned about programming and curriculum.

When I first got elected, I had to take a governance class. They asked, "What would you like to be your legacy?" I want Alhambra to be the best district in the state of California. I want to be pro-active and get on the cutting edge of education. You can't let kids fall into the cracks. We need to work as a team, as a family. I've been on the Board since 2002.

## **Pay It Forward**

Chinatown will have a reason to be there. People care about Chinatown. It used to attract immigrants and then professionals would move to the San Gabriel Valley. But now it's changing again. It is redefining itself with lofts and art galleries. Walmart replaced the 99 Ranch Market. Chinatown of the future won't have the same flavor as Chinatown of the 1970's and 1980's.

Today, Monterey Park's Keppel High School is 83% Asian. I tell the kids, "You are our future generation. You are the future politicians and leaders. Let me know what I can do to help you get there." Now we've become the mentors; we need to leave them the history. They live in a totally different world. The Asian Pacific Islander School Board Members Association (APISBMA) was established in 1988; I was president in 2008-9. There were about eighty or ninety Asian school board members in California. When I went to Alhambra High School in the 1960's, you can count the Asian students on that campus on two hands.

I hope the younger API will appreciate being Chinese American. My wife and I grew up with a lot of Chinese traditions. And my children know about our activism. They grew up as "Lotus Festival kids"; that was fun for them. My daughter has been involved with the Lotus Festival. I don't think they should forget their grandfather nor their great-grandfather. Young API need to know about our struggles as indentured servants and against the 1882 Exclusion Act. They need to know they are part of the continuum. I got to see a lot of history being made.

# Chinatown Service Center: Vicky Wong

Interview by Susan Dickson

*Vicky Wong is Youth Program Director at Chinatown Service Center. Established in 1971 with one bilingual worker and volunteers, CSC now has branch centers at Alpine Towers, Cathay Manor, Youth Center, and Monterey Park. This was an interview by CHSSC President, Susan Dickson, on October 9, 2013.*

Both my parents are from Shanghai, but I was born in Hong Kong. I speak Shanghainese, Mandarin, and Cantonese. I graduated from high school in Hong Kong, and came to Los Angeles for college. I have two brothers and one sister and all of us came as students, before my parents immigrated. When my dad came over here, he was already retired. My undergraduate work in Child Development was at Cal State LA, and my Master's in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) was from Azusa Pacific University.

While I was going to school, I didn't know anything about Chinatown. After I graduated from Cal State LA, I found the Chinatown Service Center. At that time, Chinatown Service Center was under the umbrella of the Chinese Methodist Church where we had two rooms. They only had one person employed, Joyce Law. The others—like me—were all volunteers. The main goal at that time was helping new immigrants. The immigrants did not speak the English language and needed a lot of assistance when they were reading a letter or even contacting the government agencies. I helped them fill out forms, call government agencies, or call their children's schools for information. I would be translator and go with them to the hospital. Anybody who lived in the community could get help, not just members of the church. Even if it was under the umbrella of the church, we were a social service agency.

In 1975, we got incorporated. As a non-profit, we started getting funding. The first funding from the government was the employment program. At that time Joyce was still the only employee, but there were board members and members of the church assisting her. Pearl Young started with Joyce, and, when funds became available, she became staff. When we moved out of the church, we moved across to the property that is now the Best Western Hotel. Before, it was an old building with one floor.

In the early years we didn't have an official program to help with the gang problem in Chinatown. We got some funding from the Lutheran Church as seed money to help with the youth. Many of these youth were involved with gangs. They are not really the hard core; they just do things together. Chinatown Service Center became a hangout for them. If they needed any services, we just gave them the resources. There was not really a structured program for them at that time. It was just a place for them to talk, a place for them to complain because they had a lot of problems with the police. At that time, this was the Wah Ching gang. There was an Asian gang unit in LAPD in the community that knew all of the Wah Ching members so sometimes the kids complained that the police were stopping them and searching them. I never felt scared. Young people are young people and they need attention. If they are not getting attention from adults, they just come together to make their own group. They respect me.

In 2001, Executive Director Debbie Ching felt that there was a need for a Youth Center because of the increased number of youth in the community. By the time we started this, the gangs were not as active. They had kind of disappeared. The older Wah Ching had jobs so the gang was not as big any more. When we started the Youth Center, we did afterschool programs.

In the 1990's, Chinatown Service Center had a Parent Center at Castelar, but I wasn't involved. We had funding from the City for the Los Angeles Bridges program. We were the lead agency with two other agencies in the central city. It's an afterschool gang-prevention program. The majority of the kids who come are from middle school. We work very closely with Nightingale Middle School; we have an office there. We utilized the staff room at Castelar for the afterschool program for many years. When Castelar remodeled, we moved back to Chinatown Service Center and continue to serve about 40 kids. The kids are referred to the program by the school teachers and counselors. Kids also come because they hear about it from their friends. The goal is not just to help make sure that they finish their homework, we want to make sure that they cooperate in their classrooms and don't get "unsatisfactory" in their behavior. We are pretty successful. A lot of the eighth graders have culminated because of their good grades.

Chinatown Service Center started by helping people with their basic needs in housing and transportation. Now there is more need to do employment for adults and elderly services. We have counseling and

behavioral health. We have more families needing those services. Now we have a health clinic that includes dental and medical care. Anybody can get service as it goes by a sliding scale based on income. We take Medi-Cal. It depends on what type of funding we have. Some clients might get free services. It had been getting tougher; but now with Obamacare, I think that it is going to open up to a lot of people. We are involved in getting information out about Obamacare.

Anybody who lives in LA can come to the Service Center. We had quite a lot coming from the San Gabriel Valley. Right now we have a part-time clinic in Alhambra and senior services. We have an office in Monterey Park. For the whole agency, we service about 10,000 throughout the five departments. Right now our funding source is mainly from the government. We also have donations, our annual dinner, and money from foundations. Writing grants is more competitive right now so we are still struggling for funding for the youth programs.

Whenever we can afford it, we take the kids on field trips. Just recently, we did some fundraising with our state park concerts so we brought the kids for some ice skating and archery. We also asked these kids to volunteer. One of the last events was at the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank. We went there to help them to sort. Even though our kids are low income, they had never experienced this kind of environment. Many of them are never asked to do anything at home such as cleaning or chores so it was really an eye-opener for them. A lot of people donate food to the Food Bank and some of it is rotten, and we had to sort it. The kids started out not wanting to get involved, but they ended up working very hard. They didn't say, "Oh, I don't want to touch this, it is dirty." This field trip was very successful. Our kids may not have too much money to spend, but they are well-fed and well taken care of by their parents. They learned that there are poorer people out there.

There have been a lot of changes in the community since I have been here. I am seeing a lot more non-Chinese moving in the community. It's simple things like you usually don't see dogs on the streets but now you see people walking their dogs. Kids are telling me that their neighbors are changing, that they are non-Chinese. Because Chinatown is getting more crowded, the new immigrants are having to move out of Chinatown to El Sereno. Initially, immigrants would live in Chinatown, then you would go

to Lincoln Heights and Echo Park, but now I am seeing some of our youth with El Sereno addresses.

With the BID (Business Improvement District), we see more visitors coming into Chinatown. Our kids go volunteer for BID events. Chinatown is now really crowded with outside visitors. Ten or fifteen years ago, Chinatown was dead; there were no events. Now, more people know about Chinatown. I used to hear, "Don't go to Chinatown because it's dangerous. There are gangs." It's changing right now. The parking is really bad in Chinatown so the Gold Line really helped.

Now the mainstream businesses are coming into Chinatown. When Walmart started hiring people, they utilized our Workforce Center. I know that a lot of people are really against it, but Walmart is really beneficial to the elderly. The seniors like to shop there. The majority of the seniors live up the hill. They don't have to walk down the hill. I am neutral; I just look at the convenience for the residents.

Personally, I think that the immigrants of Chinatown will begin decreasing. They are moving to other areas. This is a transitional community for a lot of immigrants. A lot of them have been here for ten to fifteen years and they are able to afford to move out of Chinatown and to the San Gabriel Valley. The city where most of them go is Rosemead. I think that I will see a different Chinatown in the future.

Chinatown Service Center has been changing since we started. At first, we had 100% Chinese-speaking clients. But in the last ten years because of the funding sources and the different people living in the community, we have been serving other ethnicities besides Chinese. We need to hire staff that speaks Spanish because Latinos are the biggest group besides Chinese. Ninety percent of the Southeast Asians that live in Chinatown and Echo Park are ethnic Chinese so they speak Chinese.

With the young Chinese Americans that grow up here, we are trying to expose them and teach them about Chinatown so hopefully, they will come back and help. One problem that I have seen all along is that many American-born kids are not able to communicate with their parents in Chinese. Sometimes if you asked kids where their parents come from, the kids will say, "I don't know." I think that it is a communication problem

because the parents are busy surviving and earning money. The immigrants that were born in China still have their language skills.

Ten or fifteen years ago, if you had asked me about the Anglos, I would tell them to come to Chinatown to learn about the culture, but Chinatown is so mixed right now. You will see more mainstream people living in this area rather than the new immigrants.

I think that in Chinatown we are still trying to preserve the Chinese culture even though there is gentrification. It is a big change, but you still can't change the flavor of the Chinese culture in this community.

## Chinatown Business Improvement District: George Yu

Interview by Susie Ling

*Since the inception of the Chinatown Business Council, Kim Benjamin is President and George Yu is Executive Director. The mission of the Los Angeles Chinatown Business Council (LACBC) is to "creatively plan, manage and facilitate the rebirth of historic Chinatown as a multinational culturally defined, economically vibrant and socially engaging community". Incorporated in September 1999 as a non-profit 501(c)(6), it is one of 39 Business Improvement Districts (BID) recognized by Los Angeles City Council; others include*



**George Yu,**  
**Executive Director of Chinatown Business Improvement District (2013).**

*Larchmont Village, Little Tokyo, Los Feliz Village, Sylmar, Wilshire Center. Los Angeles collects a special assessment from business properties within the district and the Chinatown Business Improvement Council is charged to equitably distribute the benefits with emphasis on revitalization of the community. There are eighteen board members on the Chinatown Business Council representing businesses, property owners and other community organizations. See <[www.chinatownla.com](http://www.chinatownla.com)>. This is from an interview in August 2013 by Susie Ling at 727 North Broadway.*

## 727 North Broadway in the 1970s

I was born in 1959 in Hualien on Taiwan Island. My parents had business in Guam and I was raised in a bilingual household. I came to Los Angeles when I was nine years old. I went to Disneyland for my tenth birthday, and I thought I had died and gone to heaven; it was an incredible experience. We lived in Torrance and then Whittier. I graduated from La Serna High School in Whittier in 1976.

That summer right after high school, I started working on this building, 727 North Broadway. 727 North Broadway was built as the Food Center by the owners of Ding-Hao Acme, the number one food purveyor in Taiwan. The Lee family has extensive global holdings and is very well-connected. 727 had Gobi Mongolian BBQ, Maggie's Cake Shop, Country Restaurant, a seafood restaurant, Mandarin Deli—the original pot sticker restaurant, Sam Woo BBQ, and a sushi bar. In the front, there was Szechwan Palace and Great Shanghai. It was awesome. And most of these restaurants were open until 2 am and 3 am.

A Los Angeles foodie's blog sums it up, "1979 marked a significant step forward with the opening of the Food Center, the street to street, all food mall that opened between North Broadway and Hill St. Patterned after "Sihk Gaai" in Hong Kong, the Food Center was stuffed top to bottom, end to end with new restaurants offering the best Chinese food in the metropolitan area. And these weren't Hong Kong Low or Lime House restaurants. These were brand new restaurants, with the large anchor spaces taken by Szechwan Palace and Great Shanghai, pioneering restaurants for their genre in Los Angeles." (<http://chandavkl.blogspot.com/2012/12/when-chinatown-dominated-los-angeles.html>)

Pioneer Builders was my dad's construction company, and we were doing tenant improvement work. I was working with my hands. Country Restaurant had a Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon-look that nobody appreciated in 1977. It was ahead of its time. I remember it was very difficult putting up all that fire-retardant wood; the city codes were crazy because it was already a sprinkler building. I was young and impatient and had a terrible time cleaning the grout off the mosaic tile at the ice cream store. We put in the first Mongolian BBQ cooktop that you now see in all the malls. We had to get all of these new ideas approved by the Health

Department. I was working with a wonderful Taiwan-born architect, Wang Ipin; Eddie Liu was the AIA. I had some great mentors.

My parents were from northern China, and my father was a high ranking officer in the Chinese Nationalist Army. He was the right-hand person to General Sun Li-jen. He and Sun were amongst a small handful that graduated from Virginia Military Institute before the second World War. In 1949, he went to Taiwan and met my mother who was from a mandarin family with some means. Mom worked for USAID. I knew even at a young age that we would eventually immigrate to the United States. There was no future under Taiwan President Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly parents influence our thinking. I came from a scholarly heritage; I had attended a small private school in Taipei. I grew up with a few Japanese Americans in Torrance. In Whittier, there were no other Chinese then; it was an assimilated community. My mother and the extended family were horrified that I was working with my hands and in Chinatown. I don't speak Cantonese. I even put school on hold. But from 1976 to 1978, I was at 727 N. Broadway daily; we built one restaurant after another.

## Chinatown in the 1980s

I moved on to a series of other construction projects. In the early 1980s, I worked at 977 North Broadway, the Far East National Bank building. I would be working late at night, and there would be these young punk rockers—all non-Chinese—coming and going from Madame Wong's. It was strange.

By 1988, I was tired of the construction life. Mrs. Lee, the property owner at 727 N. Broadway, had asked me many times to come back and manage this building. I came back. The building had fallen into serious disrepair. There were vacant storefronts. The parking attendant told me that the record was twenty homeless people sleeping downstairs during the winter; they would bathe in the water fountain—which has since been removed. The basement parking lot would flood during every rain. There

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11 Sun Li-jen 孫立人 (1900-1990) was a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, and considered the "the ever-victorious general" during World War II. In 1950, he was Commander in Chief of the Republic of China Army. He served as Chiang Kai-shek's chief of staff in 1954 and 1955. Sun was then accused of plotting to overthrow Chiang. He was placed under house arrest in 1955 and freed in 1988 after Chiang's death.

were rats not only in this building, but all over Chinatown. In the evenings, there was almost no traffic in Chinatown. It was a nasty situation.

In 1976, my father had also purchased a piece of property at 168 West Garvey, between Garfield and Atlantic. It was like ships passing in the night. I was driving from Monterey Park to work in Chinatown daily while the Chinese community was gravitating towards Monterey Park. There were more Southeast Asians coming into LA Chinatown. They were from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but they were ethnic Chinese. Chiu Chow are hardworking old-style Chinese, but they are not Toisanese.

So why did I come back to Chinatown? I always enjoy a challenge. Tell me it can't be done and I'll go do it.

We rebuilt 727 North Broadway. It had been originally constructed by a Chinese company, and there were a lot of shortcuts taken to save costs. It sure cost more in the long run. We got back to 100% occupancy. In the late-1990's, Chinatown was again at a low point but we were doing well at 727 N. Broadway.

There are always economic cycles. From 1938 through the 1970's, Chinatown was unique and exotic. There were no alternatives to General Lee's or Mama Quon's restaurant. A Chinatown friend told me once, "There used to be 19 bars; we need more night life in Chinatown." But with the start of Monterey Park and Americans knowing more about food, there came to be real Chinese food alternatives. Grandview Gardens was very good for its time but by the 1980's, things were different. Then Old Pasadena and other districts started competing as night life. There was an amusement park era with Universal CityWalk and Americana. Now there's LA Live, the Old Bank District, the Arts District, Koreatown, and Little Tokyo. There's no shortage of places to go and get entertained.

In 1988, I also started tenant improvement work at Bamboo Plaza. I did a lot of management-related maintenance work too. We developed long term relationships along the way. We saw the rise of Empress Pavilion. It opened in 1989 with a seating capacity of 600; it was such a phenomenon in Los Angeles. In 2013, that dim sum restaurant was evicted from the building after years of failing attendance. 99 Ranch Market closed its doors in Bamboo Plaza after a short run.

## Chinatown Business Improvement District

In 1999, Henry Leong<sup>12</sup> reached out to me. A group was getting together at lunch meetings at Golden Dragon to revitalize Chinatown. At the second meeting, I said, "To revitalize Chinatown, you must make Chinatown clean and safe. And you need to bring back the families." We decided to pool some monies: \$2500 from this building and from that building. Cathay Bank promised \$100,000. Kim Benjamin had just purchased Dynasty Center then. Kim, the new non-Chinese in the group, came in with \$10,000 and increments thereafter. He embarrassed the community into parting with our money to revitalize Chinatown. By June of 1999, we were a privately-funded "clean and safe campaign". We provided forty hours a week of maintenance and private security. At that time, we didn't even know what a Business Improvement District is. I kind of ran Chinatown the way I ran the 727 North Broadway building. Until January of 2001, it was a volunteer job for me. My property owner allowed me leeway.

In August of 2000, we formed the Business Improvement District. You have to go through a petition phase and then a balloting phase. Fifty percent of the property owners that are paying the assessment must approve the management district plan and the formation of the Business Improvement District. 97.2% of our assessment returns to our district. Our mission is to revitalize Chinatown. We look forward to ten years at a time.

I'm anti-bureaucracy. I'm almost an anarchist. I hate what our public sector has become. It's become "why you can't do that." Instead, I want to get things done. We work incredibly hard to promote the Golden Dragon Festival and the Moon Festival. Chinese New Year parade is now second only to the Rose Parade. We used to have marketing meetings with people who never ran a business and people who never went outside of Chinatown. You have to know what's going on in Old Pasadena. I'm involved in the Historical Neighborhood Council and am good friends with Solano Canyon, Little Tokyo, Arts District.

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12 Henry Leong is President of Quon Yick Noodle, established by his father in 1956. Henry is founder of the Chinatown Safety Patrol and has been president of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce. Henry is also active in community organizations such as the World Affairs Council and Rotary Club of Los Angeles Morning.

Nowadays, if you want something done in Chinatown, you call us. You don't call the City, you don't call the police, you call us. We were called the Business Improvement District, but the correct term is "Community Benefits District." Even the Associations, Castelar School, Alpine Recreation, and the Library call us. There are daily graffiti issues in this community. You see our red shirt security guards biking around the community. With hard work and consensus building, we've gotten to this point.

Chinatown Business Improvement District developed walking tours and Chinatown Summer Nights. We get the food trucks to come to Chinatown; they each have a social media following of 70,000 to 120,000. We just started our own tweet. We work to make connections with mainstream media like the *Los Angeles Times*. Chinatown is now on the upswing. During the first Summer Nights, the restaurants Master Chef, New Dragon, and even Full House ran out of cooked rice! I went to Golden City after an art gallery event and they ran out of Tsingtao! Now, we are all better prepared.

Roy Choi's Chego Restaurant is now at 727 North Broadway. Roy Choi was the founder of Kogi Truck which started the food truck phenomenon. In the summer of 2013, Nguyen and Thi Tran's Starry Kitchen opens at the 75-year old Grand Star Jazz Club. That's one of our successes. What a perfect match. There will be new cooks in a kitchen that Grand Star's Grandmother Quon used to cook in. The Trans are respectful of this history. And the young diners know it is all authentic.

When we set out as the Chinatown Business Improvement Council, I said from the beginning that our target audience is not the Chinatown Chinese. We must even reach further than the 626 Chinese. We must reach out to the 10 million plus of Los Angeles County. Our kids growing up in Los Angeles don't only have Chinese friends. They have a different perspective of our City. We have to make Chinatown relevant to all of Los Angeles or our own kids will never come back to this community. Over the past few years, we've seen some younger Chinese American professionals coming back to help with their Chinatown family business.

I brought Shirley onto the staff. Xiayi Shirley Zhang, 25 years of age, was born in Sichuan and emigrated when she was six. She lived in Toronto's Chinatown and then the suburbs of Detroit before coming to Los Angeles to attend USC in 2005. As a student, she enjoyed Koreatown and Little

Tokyo. But she decided to live in Victor Heights, or the "Forgotten Edge," in Chinatown. She loves the downtown vibe. One of two staff members, Shirley keeps a bike at the office for quick trips around Chinatown and the community. Shirley Zhang was Miss Chinatown 2011. Her Twitter account describes herself as "born in china, naturalized in canada, living in america. part diva, part dork, devoted foodie, eternal optimist. 90012."

## **Voices of Santa Barbara Chinatown**

# The Yee Clan in Santa Barbara Chinatown: A Family Legacy in Gold Mountain

By Raymond Douglas Chong

*Raymond Douglas Chong is a fifth generation Chinese American, born in Los Angeles Chinatown. Raymond has researched his father's family in "Gim Suey Chong: His Life from Hoyping to Gum Saan" (GSJ 2009) and now presents us with his mother's legacy. Raymond has worked for several municipalities in California and Texas as City Traffic Engineer.*

## Introduction

On the Gold Coast of California on edge of the azure Pacific Ocean, between the Santa Ynez Mountains and Channel Islands, a small enclave of Chinese dwelled in a Chinatown in the heart of downtown Santa Barbara, the "American Riviera." From about 1863 to 2006, the Chinese worked in laundries, restaurants and hotels. They lived in an insular community near El Presidio de Santa Bárbara. The Yee (Yu) Clan from Hoyping (Kaiping County) of Guangdong province was the most prominent family in Santa Barbara.

During the 1840–50s, many peasants arrived to seek their fortune amid the rich gold fields beyond Sacramento from Toisan (Taishan), Hoyping (Kaiping), Yanping (Enping), and Sunwui (Xinhui). By 1855, in wood junks and sampans, the Chinese were fishing the abundant marine life on the coast between Oregon and the Baja peninsula of Mexico. Chinese were plying the sea near Channel Islands near Santa Barbara for abalone that was prized for its meat and shell. The Chinese built the roads and railroads including the Santa Ynez Turnpike



Old Chinatown.

Road in San Marcos Pass and the Southern Pacific Railroad between Saugus junction and Goleta in 1887. The single men also labored in the vegetable farms, toiled in hand laundries, and tended the gardens. In resort hotels and private homes, they served as houseboys and cooks. Merchants provided the basic needs of this labor force. Around 1865, Ah Lim opened a cookhouse (restaurant) on State Street to feed the hungry workers. Many Yee clansmen settled in Santa Barbara on the Gold Coast of California.

## Santa Barbara's Chinatown

The first Chinese residents arrived in Santa Barbara in about 1863. As they became settled, they operated stores, restaurants, and laundries. Early Santa Barbara Chinatown was formed on the three blocks of East Cañon Perdido Street, around State Street—the City's main street—and Anacapa Street. Wooden 2-story buildings housed storefront businesses with apartments and gambling halls on the upper floor. At its peak, about 500 Chinese lived and worked in Chinatown.



Old Chinatown Santa Barbara.

Gambling halls and opium dens flourished as a form of recreation to escape the tedium of a cruel bachelor society.<sup>13</sup> In 1894, Chinatown consisted of grocery stores, rooming houses, a temple, a tong hall, barber shops, labor contracting office, opium dens, gambling halls, and an opera house. Sing Sung Company, Sing Hop Company, and Sun Lung Company were in the abalone industry. The joss house had a gold leaf and hand carved shrine from China.

“The Chinese celebration in dedication of their new altar went off with a Fourth-of-July bang yesterday. During the noon hour they exploded \$50 worth of fire crackers in front of the joss house, while within the devout Mongolians bowed themselves to the floor, until their heads cracked. Candles and incense were burning, and their offerings included all descriptions of roast meat and fowl, and all the while the aged priest in his flowing robes was in respectful attendance. The altar is a gift to the joss house from the boys of the Sin Lung Company (sic), whose headquarters are in the store next to the opera house; the boys are nearly all engaged in abalone fishing. The altar, including freight and duty, cost \$1,000” (*Santa Barbara Morning Press*, October 4, 1898).

Various tongs—secret societies—were present amid the Chinese community. They controlled the illicit businesses of gambling and opium. From the joss house and Masonic temple at 27 East Cañon Perdido Street, next to the Lobero Theatre, the Hop Sing Tong and Bing Kong Tong harshly ruled Chinatown. In 1925, two Bing Kong Tong assassins killed Han Gin, the leader of Hop Sing Tong, in a brief tong war. The sensational assassination led to the demise of the tongs as Santa Barbara Police Department outlawed them.

On June 29, 1925, a strong earthquake struck Santa Barbara. Old Chinatown was mostly destroyed and demolished. From the ashes, realtor and entrepreneur Elmer Whittaker built a new Chinatown in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, a block on East Cañon Perdido Street between Anacapa Street and Santa Barbara Street. With the Great Depression and World War II, the hub of businesses slowly faded as the Chinese population dwindled.

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13 These types of business enterprises were also patronized by many customers from outside Chinatowns.

## Gip Wah Yee, Wah Hing Chung Laundry

The ancestor of the Yee family was the Reverend Chung-Sheung Yee, a prominent personage of the Northern Sung Dynasty. Jung Nim Yee was born about 1841 in Ung Yung Lee Village of Hoyping District in the fertile Pearl River Delta. In 1862 on a sailing ship from Hong Kong to the Port of San Francisco, he arrived in Gum Saan. Jung Nim Yee was a tailor on 715 1/2 DuPont Street in San Francisco Chinatown at Hing Gee Company. He married Soo Hoo Shee in 1874. They lived in an apartment on 723 Sacramento Street. Gip Wah Yee, a son, was born in 1877. After the deaths of his father in 1881 and his mother in 1890, Uncle Jung Gim Yee, a laundryman, took Gip Wah Yee to Santa Barbara in 1890. Later, Gip Wah Yee was a cook in Stockton, California, and in Williams, Arizona.

Gip Wah Yee returned to Santa Barbara in 1901 to work as a French cook at the famous Arlington Hotel. He bought Wah Hing Chung Laundry (established in 1897) at 21 West Carillo Street in 1907. In 1925, he moved the laundry to a wood building on 113 West De la Guerra Street.



Gip Wah Yee and family in China.

In Ung Yung Lee Village, Gip Wah Yee built a gray brick home. He first married Wong Shee in China in 1904. He later married a second wife, Quong Shee, in China in 1921. In 1922, he brought to America his second wife and his sons from his first wife, Thick Cheong Yee (Dan Yee) and Yak Kan Yee (James Yee Chung). They arrived at the Port of Seattle on the S.S. Silver State from Hong Kong. Chester, Helen, Mabel, and Ada Yee were subsequently born in Santa Barbara at the old Cottage Hospital. They all lived in the family compound within the laundry.

Gip Wah Yee died in 1930 at the Chinese Hospital in San Francisco Chinatown. He had seven children from his two marriages living in China and in America. He is buried in the ancestral hill near Ung Yung Lee Village.

After her husband's death, Yee Quong Shee faced difficult times as a single mother. She and her four children lived on 814 Orange Street in a modest wood bungalow. The children all attended Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. They were enrolled in the Chinese language school in Chinatown. On Sundays, they attended the Chinese Mission at First Presbyterian Church with other Yee relatives. Yee Quong Shee helped at the Wah Hing Chung Laundry. After the laundry closed in 1942, she along with other Chinese American women packed lemons in Santa Barbara.

The advent of World War II brought opportunities to the Chinese Americans. Chester worked at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, California. Later, he was drafted and served in the U.S. Army Air Force as an officer. He was stationed in Alaska as a navigator on a B-29 Superfortress bomber. Helen worked at the Marine Corps Air Station in Goleta for four years. She was a secretary, a supply clerk, and finally, a payroll clerk. In Santa Barbara, Mabel was learning artwork. Ada worked for an optometrist in downtown.

The Yee kids married and moved out from Santa Barbara. All three sisters married at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Barbara on East Anapamu Street, across from the library in downtown. In 1946, Mabel married Jimmie Young of Erie, Pennsylvania. In 1947, Ada married Harding Lee of Fresno, California. In 1953, Helen married Bill Tom of Baltimore, Maryland. Chester married Mary Young of Erie, Pennsylvania, sister of



**Chinese at First Presbyterian Church.**

Jimmie Young, in San Francisco in 1952. Chester completed his business education at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Chester worked for the state's Division of Workers Compensation. He later practiced with a private law firm. Helen was an office manager for the Los Angeles Unified School District. Mabel worked for Teledyne. Ada was a homemaker. Their mother, Yee Quong Shee, died in Los Angeles in 1977. She is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Hollywood Hills. There are 18 grandchildren of Gip Wah Yee and Yee Quong Shee.

### **Sun Yoke Tong, Sun Tong Laundry**

From Ung Yung Village, Sun Yoke Tong arrived in 1921 to the Port of Seattle on the S.S. Keystone, a steamer, from Hong Kong. He was the "paper son" of Woo Ying Tong of Los Angeles. He eventually arrived in Santa Barbara Chinatown to be with Gip Wah Yee, his uncle.

During the early years, Sun Yoke Tong lived and worked at the Wah Hing Chung Laundry. With his meager savings, Sun Yoke Tong established Sun Tong Laundry in downtown in 1938. Woo Ying Tong, his "paper father," founded the Cantonese Chinese Noodle Factory in Little Tokyo of Los Angeles. The business later became the Peking Noodle Company.

The Yee clansmen worked long hours during the week. They faced racial discrimination with little opportunities for upward mobility. They were separated from their wives and children in China, especially during the Civil War in China and World War II. It was an insular society of bachelors in Chinatown. The men socialized together and closely bonded during their free times; they were usually found in the evenings and Sunday afternoons at Sun Tong Laundry on 30 Cota Street. Tip Gin was Sun Yoke Tong's best friend and a sharp dresser. They ate communal meals, shared stories, played games, and gambled. They wrote letters to their loved ones in China. Many left Santa Barbara for better jobs in San Francisco.



**Sun Yoke Tong.**

In 1928, Sun Yoke Tong married Quan Shee. They eventually raised six children: Seen Hoy and Donald in China, and Rose, Lily, Wallace, and Jeanne in Santa Barbara. In early 1948, Sun Yoke brought his pregnant wife, Quan Tuey Hai Tong, to America on the S.S. Gordon. They arrived at the Port of San Francisco on February 17, 1948. The next day, she gave birth to twin girls, Rose and Lily. Wallace and Jeanne were born at the old Cottage Hospital.

The Tong family first lived together in the “warehouse loft” of Sun Tong Laundry. It had kitchen, baths, and bedrooms. In the back of the laundry, Quan Tuey Hai Tong had a chicken coop for eggs. Wallace fed the chickens. Sun Yoke Tong brought their first home on 429 West De La Guerra Street in 1952. In 1957, they moved to a Spanish Mission bungalow on 220 West Cota Street.

Rose, Lily, Wallace, and Jeanne attended Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. They were busy growing up with school, sport activities, and helping at the laundry. During the summers, they frequently swam at the Santa Barbara Beach along Cabrillo Boulevard. Wallace played baseball with Bing, Eddie, and Dorothy Yee in the back lots of downtown. They went to Sunday School at the Chinese Mission under Miss Graham at the First Presbyterian

Church. Rose and Lily latter attended Santa Barbara City College. Wallace graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara in Goleta.

The older daughter, Seen Hoy Tong, arrived in 1952 at the Port of San Francisco on the S.S. Wilson from Hong Kong. She briefly attended Santa Barbara Junior High School. In 1955, she married Gim Suey Chong of Los Angeles and gave birth to two sons, Raymond and Michael. Our Chong family frequently visited Santa Barbara which included lavish meals and excursions to the beaches, parks, and Mission Santa Barbara.



**Bachelor Society at Sun Tong Laundry.**

Sun Yoke Tong's laundry was his first step to his American Dream. The first laundry was located at 30 West Cota Street on the westside of State Street in downtown. Sun Tong Laundry moved to 26 East Ortega Street on the eastside of State Street in 1946. With their frugal savings, Sun Yoke Tong and Quan Tuey Hai Tong brought several properties in Santa Barbara. They built a small real estate empire. In the summer of 1967, they retired to live their golden years in Mount Washington of Los Angeles. Sun Yoke Tong died in 1988 and is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale with Quan Tuey Hai Tong, who died in 1996. They had eight grandchildren.

The first laundry site at 30 West Cota Street has been vacant for many years. The 26 East Ortega Street laundry was demolished by the City of Santa Barbara for a parking garage. The Santa Barbara Antique Market Place stands at the site.

### James Yee Chung and Tommy Yee Chung, Oriental Gardens Restaurant

James Yee Chung (Yak Kan Yee) was born in Ung Yung Village in 1910 as the son of Gip Wah Yee and Wong Shee. In 1922, he arrived at the Port of Seattle on S.S. Silver State from Hong Kong. He was raised at Wah Hing Chung Laundry. He attended Santa Barbara Junior High School and Santa Barbara High School. In 1928, he returned to China to marry Nuey Szeto. Together, they raised three children. Bill was born in China; Tommy and Barbara were born at the old Saint Francis Hospital. Nuey Yee Chung and Bill arrived in 1937. After the death of his father, Gip Wah Yee, James Yee Chung operated Wah Hing Chung Laundry.

James Yee Chung sought better business opportunity and opened the Friendly Café on 718 State Street in 1936. In 1940, he opened Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant at 330 West Cabrillo Street along the West Beach. In 1942, he moved this restaurant to 320 West Cabrillo Street and then in 1947, to 126 East Cañon Perdido Street in Santa Barbara's Chinatown. At the back of the restaurant was the family compound. This landmark restaurant was well-known for the finest Cantonese cuisine, gigantic egg rolls, and powerful Mai Tai's from the bar.

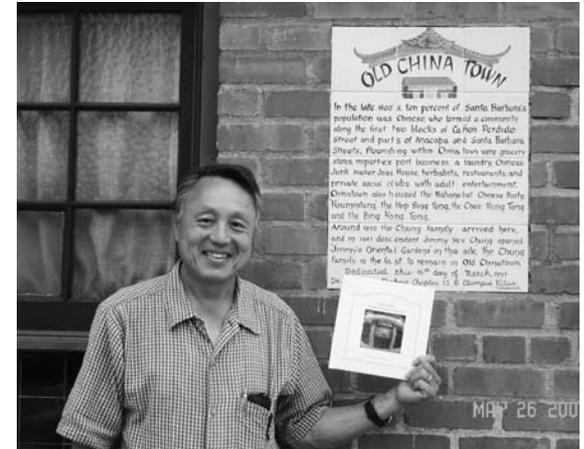
Nuey Yee Chung (Ma-Ma Chung) raised Bill, Tommy, and Barbara. They were enrolled at Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. Tommy played varsity football and attended the University of San Francisco. The children helped out in the kitchen and in the dining room during their free times. On Sundays, they attended the Chinese Mission at First Presbyterian Church.

James Yee Chung died in 1970 and Nuey Yee Chung followed in 1999. They are at rest at the Santa Barbara Cemetery that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. They had five grandchildren.

Tommy Yee Chung, James' second son, started to work for his father in 1967 and assumed management of the restaurant in 1970 until its final day. Julie, his wife, operated the kitchen. Esther and Pearl served the patrons. Sal provided support. And Willie, the bartender, mixed the high-octane

drinks in the bar. Tommy operated Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant as a venerable comfort station and watering hole for the eclectic community until Saturday evening, July 26, 2006.

During his retirement, Tommy enjoyed travels with Julie, his wife. He treasured Andy, his handsome son, and Eng, his pretty daughter-in-law. Tommy adored Nicholas, his grandson. On Monday, July 29, 2013, Tommy passed away after a valiant battle against cancer.



Tommy Yee Chung.

### Reflection

The last vestige of Santa Barbara Chinatown is preserved at the old Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant. In front, a stony tile plaque acknowledges the transitory presence of the Chinese community in Santa Barbara. The Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation is preserving and interpreting the primal remnants of Chinatown.

In particular, the Yee Clan of Ung Yung Village in Hoyoying played a major part in the world of the Chinese in Santa Barbara. Gip Wah Chung, Sun Yoke Tong, James Yee Chung, Tommy Yee Chung, and their descendants added to the vibrant tapestry of the Chinese community. The Wah Hing Chung Laundry, Sun Tong Laundry, and Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant briefly dotted the panorama of Santa Barbara. The Yee Clan left a family legacy in Santa Barbara Chinatown.

**Editor's Note:** Ella Yee Quan's article, "Santa Barbara Chinatown, The Early Years," is in CHSSC's Bridging the Centuries.