

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Tyrus Wong  
 Chinese Name: 黃育堃  
 Date of Interview: 5/7/80, 5/31/80  
 Interviewer: Beverly Chan  
 Others Present: wife, Ruth, Kim Wong  
 Language: English  
 Summarizer: Stella Ling

Interview Number: 96  
 Number of Tapes: 3  
 Length: 1 Hour & 39 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side: <u>A</u>
1	001-010	Introduction.	
	011-017	Tyrus Wong (TW) was born on October 25, 1910 in Toisan, Canton, China. TW is from Nam On Lei (南安里) Village.	
	018-019	TW's Chinese name is Wong Tsai Yiu (黃齊堃).	
	020-030	TW's parents are from the same village. TW's father used to help out in a grocery store in America. TW does not remember what year his father came. He came as a young man and worked as a helper in a grocery store in Sacramento.	
	031-036	TW does not remember what year his father and mother got married. He may have gotten married before he came to the United States. America was called "Gim San" (金山) or the "Land of Gold."	
2	037-039	TW's father returned to China in 1921 in order to bring TW to the United States. TW was ten years old at that time.	
	040-047	TW spoke Sze Yup at home. TW does not speak any other Chinese dialects.	
	048-060	Before TW was allowed into the country, he had to stay on Angel Island for two and a half weeks. They asked him a lot of questions to see if his answers coincided with his father's. There was a lot of red tape for the incoming Chinese. Some people stayed on Angel Island for a month for no real reason.	
	061-063	TW did not pay any money at immigration but his father might have.	
	064-075	There was a large compound within which the Chinese immigrants stayed. Each room was about 100 feet long and 50 feet wide. There was a triple bunk bed in each room. The place was like a dormitory. Since TW was young at that time, he was always stuck on the top bunk.	

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	076-079	It was just like a prison to TW. Every child was allowed to play on the swings for about half an hour to an hour each day. All the grown ups were asked to stay inside.
	080-084	When it was time to eat, they would open the gate and blow the whistle and everyone would run downstairs. They had to eat as fast as they could and then go back upstairs. They had three meals a day. They were served Chinese food.
	085-089	They did not provide clothing. When TW looks back, he feels that it was unfair but they could do nothing about it at the time.
	090-093	TW was able to talk to the other men in the compound. It was all men in the compound, the women were separated.
	094-102	At the immigration office, they asked TW to describe his village in China. They would also ask straight forward questions like how many members there were in this family, and what his father's occupation was.
	103-113	There were three ships that came over together. They were called "Nanking," "China," and "Nile." They were passenger ships -- pretty good size oceanliners. TW came over in first class.
4	114-120	The voyage took about a month. The ships would just travel back and forth from China to the United States.
	121-126	The boat fare may have been about \$1000. A child may have had a half-fare. It was a costly trip in those days.
	127-136	TW was sent to the United States because they hoped that he would learn the language and then find a good job. TW's mother's job was to stay at home. TW was sent to America at such a young age in order to be educated.
	137-144	The \$1000 was probably the cost of a one-way boat trip. TW does not know exactly how much the fare cost. There was a lot of politics involved for Chinese to come over.
5	145-147	There were hundreds of Chinese voyaging to the United States on TW's ship.
	148-157	After riding in the big ship, they were transferred into a smaller boat that took them to Angel Island. All of a sudden, TW did not see his father anymore and was forced to follow the rest of the gang. TW cried.

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	158-160	TW's father explained to TW that he had to go through an island, but that did not mean anything to TW as a young boy. He did not even have a chance to say goodbye to his father.
5	161-165	TW's father waited in San Francisco for TW to go through immigration.
	166-175	TW cannot say that the immigration officers treated him either politely or impolitely. TW is bitter about the entire ordeal. People from other countries did not have to go through such treatment. Even the Japanese were treated better than the Chinese.
	176-178	Only Chinese people were present on Angel Island.
	179-194	At that time, the Japanese had a quota. The Chinese were detained on Angel Island because they had to wait for their turn. TW thinks that the Chinese were treated that way because of discrimination. The Exclusion Act was in effect at that time. It was not removed until Kennedy was President.
6	195-197	After being detained on Angel Island, TW proceeded to San Francisco. He stayed there for a day or two and then went to Sacramento with his father.
	198-205	TW was dressed in Chinese clothes at that time. TW wore a cotton Chinese jacket that his mother made for him. TW wore cotton Chinese shoes too. TW's hair was cut very short.
	206-210	In China, most of the kids had extremely short hair since the barber would only come once in two months or thereabouts. In addition, the weather was hot and they did not have long hair to contend with. Short hair was also easy to shampoo.
	211-217	TW's father had longer hair. At that time, they did not have queues anymore. They did away with the queues after the Manchu Dynasty in 1911.
	218-219	TW's father had no other relatives in the United States at that time.
	220-230	There was a large Chinese community in San Francisco at that time. The Chinese liked to gang together in those days for security. There were quite a few Chinese people in Sacramento.
7	231-233	TW's father came to the United States by himself simply because it was "Gim San" (金山).

## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	234-243	TW's father helped out in a grocery store. TW came to the United States in order to get an American education.
	244-247	TW attended McKinley Grammar School. There were a lot of other Chinese students there.
	248-252	There was a little Chinatown in Sacramento. The school was located outside Chinatown and the Chinese would attend it because it was nearest.
	253-256	TW entered first grade. He attended Chinese school in China.
	257-265	While TW was in elementary school, he was mainly interested in arts and hated arithmetic. At that time, TW was in Sacramento alone. His father came to Los Angeles to find a job.
	266-274	TW stayed in a room next to an alley in Sacramento. TW started playing hooky because he was not interested in school. Since he did not attend classes, he could not get promoted.
8	275-286	TW helped out at a Chinese grocery store. TW's father owed the grocery owner some money so he told TW to work there.
	287-290	When TW sent his report card to Los Angeles for his father to sign, his father found out that TW was playing hooky. TW's father sent him \$20 and told him to take the first train to Los Angeles.
	291-293	TW's father did not take TW with him at first because he did not have enough money and also because TW was going to school.
	294-308	TW's father brought him to a grocery store and complained to some people about how his son was left alone in Sacramento and played hooky and could not get promoted. A man by the name of Paul Wong from the Chinese Methodist Church in Pasadena suggested taking TW with him to the church in Pasadena in order to reform him.
	309-312	TW's father was working in a store in Chinatown at that time.
	313-319	TW was in Sacramento for four years, so he was 13 or 14 years old when he came to Los Angeles. He came to Los Angeles in 1926.
320-336	TW attended Benjamin Franklin Junior High School in Pasadena. TW attended an English class with all foreign students. It was a special class for students that were learning English as a second language. TW's teacher was Miss May.	

## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	337-344	TW attended this school for two and a half years. TW was living in a dormitory belonging to the Church. He was working as a houseboy in Pasadena. He also helped out in a fruit stand.
	345-348	Since TW was one of the students whose English was so bad, they put him in a special class to learn solely English.
	349-356	TW learned English every day for practically the entire school day. English was the most important subject in those days.
	357-362	TW attended a lettering class in Pasadena. The teacher commented that TW should be a commercial artist because he had a natural talent with his hands. TW also did all the school posters.
	363-368	TW got a scholarship for Otis Art School in Pasadena. TW was the youngest student in art school.
	369-379	TW was 16 or 17 years old when he entered the art school. TW never finished junior high school.
10	380-408	The scholarship was only for one semester at first. His father paid for one term as well. TW attended art school for five years. It cost \$90 a term during that time. Since TW worked hard, he was able to get a scholarship for each following year. His father only had to pay for TW's second term at the school.
	409-419	During that time, there was no such thing as graduation. TW left Otis in 1935.
	420-433	TW worked for WPA after leaving Otis. TW was paid \$97 a month for doing paintings and lithographs. WPA was a big help for all starting artists.
	434-444	TW worked for WPA for at least one year. TW did a lot of work for them.
11	445-446	From there, TW went to Walt Disney Studios.
	447-463	WPA stands for Works Progress Administration. TW was paid to paint, do lithographs, and do watercolor paintings. TW was allowed to paint whatever he wanted to and his works were used as decorations for public libraries and so forth. TW saw one of his own paintings at the Santa Monica Library a few years ago.
	464-470	Some of the lithographs TW made were rented out by the library to the general public.
	471-473	\$97 a month was considered good money. TW was glad to get that.
	474-484	Life was pretty tough for the Chinese during the Depression. TW lived with his father on Ferguson Alley during that time.

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-008	TW remembers buying 10 cents worth of pork in those days. That was all they could afford. That was about a quarter pound of pork.
	009-010	Otis is located in Los Angeles. When TW attended Otis, he lived with his father in Chinatown. When TW had money, he would take the street car to school. When he did not have any money, he would walk to MacArthur Park.
	019-020	TW's father was unemployed at times.
	021-031	There were bread lines in Chinatown. The Chinese were proud people. TW's father did stand in line to get stamps in order to go to a grocery store to get food. TW does not remember the details.
	032-040	TW worked at school while he was attending school. He washed dishes in the cafeteria in order to pay for his meals. TW would occasionally sleep at school. There were no dormitories there. TW would sleep on the floor.
2	041-045	TW helped wash dishes at night. He was also a waiter for lunch. TW would get free meals there from the leftovers.
	046-047	TW was in class for eight hours a day. He painted and drew in class.
	048-052	There were no other Chinese there. TW was the only Chinese there. There was a Korean and a Japanese.
	053-066	TW worked for Walt Disney for four and a half years. At first TW did the in-between frames for the Mickey Mouse cartoons. The animator would do the major frames and TW had to do the in-between frames in order to get the series to move. TW hated that job.
	067-069	TW was paid about \$2.50 a day at Walt Disney Studios.
3	070-073	TW was an apprentice in animation for a few months.
	074-077	TW did a series of sketches of Bambi on his own. He brought it in to show them. They asked him what he was doing and he told them he was in in-betweening. They said that they put him in the wrong department and told him to do Bambi.
	078-079	TW was very happy. He was able to do the continuity sketches and set the mood for the sketches.
	080-082	TW did Bambi for four and a half years. It took a long time to produce Bambi.
	083-087	They no longer needed anyone to work on Bambi since they were finishing up the picture. One of TW's friends working at Universal Studios told TW to go over to Warner Brothers.

## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	088-091	TW made some sketches and brought it over to them. They liked what he did and he worked there for over twenty years. TW worked on continuity sketches and set sketches.
	092-094	TW earned approximately \$100 a week working as a cartoonist at Disney Studios.
	095-098	TW transferred to Warner Brothers around 1942 or 1943. He moved during the war.
	099-103	TW earned about \$125 a week at Warner Brothers. TW considered that to be pretty good pay during those days.
4	104-109	When TW first came to the United States he was slightly homesick. TW seldom wrote to his mother in China. Someone would write for his mother and send the letters to TW occasionally. She did not write very well.
	110-112	TW's mother stayed in China the whole time. TW did not return to China to visit.
	113-118	TW has an older sister. She never came to the United States. TW's father did not return to China before the war.
	119-121	Most of TW's friends in his youth were Chinese since he lived in Chinatown.
	122-124	TW spoke Chinese with his family. After a while, a little English was mixed into their conversations. TW speaks English with Ruth.
	125-131	TW always considered himself as a Chinese but he has been Americanized to a certain extent.
	132-135	TW never felt sorry about being Chinese. He was mad when he was chased out of a theater at one time, but he never regretted being Chinese. TW is proud about being Chinese.
	136-149	TW was chased out of a movie theater when he was in Sacramento. He was with an American friend. His friend was allowed to sit downstairs but TW was told to go upstairs. TW was mad and demanded his money back. They told him to give them back the ticket. TW tore up the ticket and ran like hell with them chasing after him. That was in the 1920's.
5	150-159	TW also experienced housing discrimination. He would see a "For Sale" or "For Rent" sign when he was looking for a place to stay. The landlord or landlady would tell him that the house was already taken. About a week later, when TW passed the place again, the sign would still be up. That occurred a year after TW was married--in 1938.

## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	160-162	Those houses were located in white neighborhoods. As a result of such discrimination, TW would simply look for another place instead.
	163-169	When TW found his present residence, he told the owners to go around the neighborhood and ask the people if they objected having a Chinese buy that house. Both Dr. O'Riley and Dr. Baker had no objections and even said that some of their best friends were Asians. When TW found out there were no objections, he bought his present home.
	170-173	TW found their present residence because it was pretty close to Warner Brothers. It is only a half an hour away.
	174-179	When TW was already working at Warner Brothers, one of his friends there recommended this residence. His brother was in the real estate business. His brother said that there was a place in Sunland. TW did not even know where Sunland was at that time.
	180-190	TW went to see the place and told his wife that he wanted to buy it. They had to borrow money for the down payment. It is a two and a half acre property.
6	191-202	Now TW is not concerned about what his neighbors think. In those days there was a Japanese family close by but it was a white neighborhood. It is still a white neighborhood.
END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B		
1	001-004	Introduction.
	005-014	TW thinks that there will always be some discrimination against the Chinese.
	015-022	Both at Otis and at work, TW associated mostly with Caucasians.
	023-032	TW never asked any Caucasian girls out. He did not have a car. He also felt self-conscious about being Chinese. At school, no Caucasian girls asked TW out.
2	033-039	At Warner Brothers, some white women did ask TW out. TW rejected them because he was already married.
	040-047	TW felt self-conscious while he was at Otis. He felt self-conscious because he was Chinese and he was afraid that he was not wanted.
	048-050	TW also felt self-conscious at Warner Brothers. He feels self-conscious even today.



## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	051-055	TW's children were born in the United States. They are much more Americanized than he is. They hardly speak any Chinese at all.
	056-066	TW attended Chinese school in Sacramento for about two or three years. TW did not have any money at that time so he worked as a janitor at school. TW cleaned up and swept floors along with another guy. The other guy is in Napa now. He is a big grocery man.
	067-070	There were about 50 or 60 students at the Chinese school in Sacramento. TW did not attend Chinese school in Los Angeles.
3	071-072	TW did not send his own children to Chinese school. His children were not interested and so TW did not push them.
	073-077	TW used herbal medicine when he lived with his father. There is nothing like herbal medicine to cure a cold. In fact, TW still uses herbs today. TW finds it better than American drugs. TW did go to see American doctors.
	078-082	TW likes ginseng tea when he can get hold of some. They use Chinese herbs all the time such as in soup.
	083-088	TW used to play baseball when he was young. TW's father hated baseball and would scold TW when he caught him playing.
	089-093	TW thinks that his father gambled for recreation. TW watched Chinese gamble once in a while. Gambling does not interest TW at all--it is a waste of time and money.
	094-096	They did not have much recreation while they attended Otis. They would go landscape sketching and that would be considered recreation.
	097-111	TW went to the movies quite often. There is one Chinese opera record that TW would like to have but cannot get a hold of. It is a Cantonese opera. TW mostly listens to Western music.
4	112-113	TW did not write to anyone aside from his mother in China. He did not even write to his mother very much.
	114-122	TW did not join any associations in Chinatown. TW lived away from Chinatown and he did not speak the language well. Those kinds of organizations did not interest him.
	123-126	Y.C. Hong was an important Chinese individual during the 1930's. He is an attorney.
	127-131	TW never worked with James Wong Howe or Anna May Wong while he was working for Warner Brothers. He knew both of them but he never worked with them.

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	132-145	Anna May Wong played parts in Dr. Fu Manchu-type movies. Looking back, those were pretty stereotypical roles. Nevertheless, TW admired Anna May Wong for landing these roles. Anna May Wong was also the little Indian girl, Tiger Lily, in Peter Pan. She also played the role of a dancing girl in some other movies.
5	146-160	At that time, TW did not like the way they portrayed Chinese in the movies. They were recently making some new Charlie Chan movies in San Francisco and there was a protest against them because people felt that it was insulting to the Chinese. They call it the "fortune cookie language."
	161-164	They are now going to make Charlie Chan over in Hollywood. A lot of Chinese will try to get into the picture.
	165-174	Caucasians would play the important roles in the movies as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. The Chinese complained and asked them why they did not get Chinese people to play the parts.
	175-177	TW did not make any protest because he is not the type of person to make protests.
	178-180	TW only worked in one picture. TW did not do anything objectionable. He was a lantern carrier in a Chinese funeral.
	181-188	TW knew Y.C. Hong personally. He was the first Chinese attorney.
6	189-198	Before World War II, most of the Chinese were engaged in jobs such as owning restaurants or grocery stores. Only in the last ten or fifteen years did the Chinese begin to acquire professional jobs. There are a lot of Chinese engineers now.
	199-200	TW does not know what the average income was before World War II.
	201-217	Most Chinese liked to live together due to the tradition of self-survival. Nowadays, Chinese are different and live in Caucasian neighborhoods.
	218-221	TW does have many Chinese friends. Most of them are Americanized.
	222-231	TW does not know of anybody involved in politics in China. TW does not know of any Chinese involved in politics in Los Angeles. Delbert Wong is a Chinese judge.

Interviewee: Tyrus Wong

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2 Side A

Tape: 3 Side A

Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	232-238	A lot of Chinese sent money back to China. TW's father sent money home but not much. TW's mother may have taken up some odd jobs in the village.
	239-245	In China, some women would work as wet nurses and help take care of the babies.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

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1	001-008	Introduction.
	009-014	A lot of the Chinese that came to the United States were bachelors. Some of them were married in China and sent for their wives.
	015-018	The men that were not married would return to China and find a wife through a relative's introduction.
	019-020	TW was born in China but he married an American born.
	021-022	Quite a few Chinese men born in China would marry American born women.
	023-029	TW was not married by a matchmaker. By the time he got married, only those people that were very old fashioned would have a matchmaker.
	030-031	TW was married in 1937. They were married in Bakersfield.
	032-037	Most of the American born Chinese men would marry American born women. They seldom returned to China to get married.
2	038-046	TW does not care about having sons or daughters. Many years ago, the Chinese preferred sons because they were the bread winners. TW's wife feels the same way as TW does. TW has three daughters.
	047-050	TW's father had already passed away when TW got married. TW's mother was in China.
	051-056	Some of TW's friends may prefer having sons rather than daughters.
	057-063	There are very few Chinese artists. TW is surprised because he expected the Chinese culture to push Chinese towards the arts but many people are interested in making money and go into business.
	064-069	There are a lot more Chinese artists today. Back in TW's days, there were very, very few Chinese artists. There were more Japanese than Chinese artists. TW was the only Chinese in his art school.

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	070-077	TW's father sometimes discouraged TW from becoming an artist because there was no money in that kind of profession. TW just loved to paint.
	078-080	TW does feel that artists do not make as much money as other professions. It is very difficult for an artist to make a living.
	081-087	WPA really helped TW start his career as an artist. WPA was only around for a few years.
	088-094	TW's job at Walt Disney was not considered commercial art. Commercial art is advertising such as art in newspapers, magazines, and the like.
	095-108	It is hard to define commercial art. TW painted Christmas cards for several years and that could be considered commercial art. Anything that you can make money from can be considered commercial art. TW does not like the word "commercial" art because of its vagueness.
4	109-119	TW may be self-conscious but he always felt that there was a little prejudice because he is Asian. There was not too much discrimination at Disney because they were all artists. People did not care what race you were at Disney. Maybe there was prejudice but TW did not feel it. At Warner TW did feel prejudice.
	120-124	At Warner, TW may have known that he was just as good as another artist but they would rather have the other artist work on a particular set rather than have TW.
	125-132	They were paid according to a union scale at Warner Brothers. They were paid according to seniority. The union automatically prevented any discrimination in wages.
	133-148	TW was interested in painting. He did not want to be a grocery man. Painting was more of a challenge. TW does not have a business sense.
5	149-166	TW felt that he was outwardly accepted by his non-Chinese co-workers. Times have really changed in the last ten or twenty years. Things are a lot better for the Chinese than they used to be.
	167-173	The fact that prejudice may have existed did not hinder TW's success in his career.
	174-183	TW thinks that he is a hard-working man and that his efforts is the key to his success. The people at Warner Brothers treated TW very well. TW told them that he did not want to be restricted by time cards.

## Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	184-192	Probably a half of TW's friends are Chinese. They probably would have associated more with Chinese if they lived in Chinatown. When TW lived in Chinatown, he associated with Chinese more than with Americans.
	193-195	TW did not purchase his first car until the 1930's.
	196-198	TW moved to his present residence in 1951.
	199-202	Before 1951, TW lived in Hollywood. Most of his friends there were Caucasians.
	203-209	TW's friends were not necessarily from work.
	210-221	TW never joined any social organizations aside from the Chinese Historical Society. TW does not belong to any religious groups.
	222-244	TW's family goes to Chinatown quite often, especially to eat in the restaurants. They go there about once a week. They will also go to Chinatown for shopping purposes.
7	245-261	Being Chinese, TW wanted to work hard so that people could see that he was a good worker. He did not want people to say that he was a lazy Chinese artist.
	262-276	When you work with Americans all the time, you are bound to pick up some of their habits. When there is an opportunity, TW does not want to undersell himself.
8	277-286	When TW is at work, there will of course be some people that will brag about their work. TW stays humble in groups.
	287-298	TW has not become more outspoken as a result of working with Caucasians. During union meetings, TW will not speak up because he does not want to get involved. He is more reserved in that respect.
	299-324	TW belonged to an illustrator's union. There were about 25 or 30 artists at that time. The sketch artists and the set designers belong to the same union, whereas art directors or cameramen have their own separate guild. You have to be a member of a union in order to obtain work.
9	325-359	TW had to be a union member when he joined Warner Brothers. You are asked to attend union meetings and are sometimes fined for not going. There are no other Chinese members in TW's union. The purpose of a union is to protect the workers' jobs.
	360-376	TW does not think being an elected official of the union would interest him. TW does not know if being Chinese would jeopardize his chances of being elected.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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