

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Gim Fong Interview Number: 89
 Chinese Name: 鄺 銘 兼 Number of Tapes: 3
 Date of Interview: 3/25/80, 6/25/80 Length: 1 Hour & 42 Minutes
 Interviewer: Beverly Chan
 Others Present: None
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Stella Ling

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side <u>A</u>
1	001-008 009-019 020-034	Introduction. Gim Fong's (GF) Chinese name is Fong Ming Gim (鄺銘兼) and he is from Fousan (佛山) village in Canton. GF's mother did not work. GF's father came over as a merchant in 1903. GF's father came from Fousan village. They had a house in Canton.	
2	035-036 037-040 041-042 043-045 046-054 055-063 064-070	GF's father did not expect to come back to the United States so he moved everyone back to China. GF was born in 1931 in Los Angeles. He went back to China when he was about 4 years old. He then returned to the United States in 1937. GF's father was 21 years old when he first came to the United States. GF has seven brothers and sisters. GF is the youngest boy and has a younger sister. GF thinks his mother came to the U.S. with his father in 1903. GF's uncle was already here at the time. He came here in the 1890s. He came to the United States to look for GF's grandfather who had disappeared. GF's grandfather came over as a doctor for the railroad workers in the 1890s. It was around 10 years later when they discovered he was lost. GF's grandfather came over with his two sons to work. GF's own father did not come because he was too young. GF's father was the only one that went to school.	
3	071-075 076-081	They never found out what happened to the grandfather. They used to kill a lot of Chinese in the old days instead of shipping them back to China. GF's uncle stayed in the United States. He started business and established himself so he sent for GF's father to help him out.	

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	082-084	GF's father was a buyer for GF's uncle. GF's mother was still in China.
	085-088	GF's father would return to China to purchase art goods. Most of their clients were Americans.
	089-093	The shop was located on Los Angeles Street, right across the street from the Plaza.
	094-096	GF's uncle was about 5 to 10 years older than GF's father.
	097-105	They had the shop until they tore down Chinatown in 1959.
4	106-111	GF's family lived on top of GF's uncle's warehouse.
	112-122	China was their home, not America. Since they were American citizens, they returned to the United States when Japan invaded China in 1937. GF was 6 years old when he returned to Los Angeles.
	123-129	At that time, GF's four older brothers were taking care of their own business. By then they had broken away from GF's uncle's business. Those brothers only returned to China to get married.
	130-134	GF's family lived in a big house in China. all the sisters-in-law lived together with them.
	135-139	GF's father was GF's uncle's buyer at that time.
	140-141	GF experienced a culture shock when he came to the U.S. in 1937.
	142-146	Someone owned a car in Canton in those days. It was a Ford.
5	147-153	When GF arrived at the harbor, he saw the speed boats which were flat and sharp at one end. GF thought someone cut the boat and made two since they only saw double-ended boats in China.
	154-156	GF also remembers the trucks he saw with a funny front end to it.
	157-158	GF was too young to remember going back to China.
	159-171	GF spoke Sam Yup dialect at home. He learned the ABC's in kindergarten in China but was not able to speak English when he arrived in the U.S. in 1937.
	172-176	When GF came, he went to Castelar Street School.
	177-178	GF's father tried to start his own business by 1937.
	179-187	In 1939, China City was born after "Good Earth" was finished. There was a whole settlement there as a result of the movie production.
6	188-194	GF's father had a shop in China City. He bought it from the movie company after "Good Earth" was completed. China City used to be located on Spring Street.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment.	Counter Number	Summary
6	195-200	Less than a year after they opened their store in China City, it burned down. The whole section where the sound stage was located was burned down. It was completely rebuilt.
	201-207	The fire was probably between 1940 and 1941.
	208-210	GF's father had his own arts store. GF does not know why they went into that particular business.
	211-219	GF's father tried to locate his store somewhere outside of Chinatown since his clients were mostly Americans, but the rent was too high. He owned a store on 7th Street but he had to close down. This was before he moved to China City.
	220-230	When GF and the rest of his family returned to the U.S., his father and older brothers were already here. His brothers were already married at that time and were on their own.
7	231-234	GF's three older brother started a business called the Fong Brothers on 7th Street and Figueroa Street.
	235-250	GF's three older brothers and one sister were all much older than the rest of the children. GF's brothers are 60 years old, while GF is 49 years old.
	251-257	GF's father was still working for GF's uncle from 1937 to 1939. He felt obligated to his brother because he was responsible for bringing him to the U.S. GF's father did not break away until he started the store in China City.
	258-274	At that time, the shops in China City were very small. The streets were very narrow. One was called Dragon Road because it was windy. Rickshaws were used by tourists.
8	275-280	One of the people pulling the rickshaws was called "Ma lang" in fun. He is now the blacksmith at Olvera Street.
	281-287	Tom Gubbins owned these rickshaws. He was an agent for Chinese actors and actresses.
	288-299	GF's father banned all his children from working in movies. They could not understand it at the time but do so now. He was scared that that kind of work made them lazy.
	300-309	GF rented props to the movie industries when they needed articles.
	310-321	Anna May Wong was a well-known Chinese in the movie industry. She lived in Old Chinatown. She has passed away now.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	322-329	GF's father only had the gift shop business. He retired from that business in 1970, three years before he died.
9	330-338	The store moved from China City to Los Angeles Street in 1953. The store was originally located on Dragon Road in China City.
	339-354	China City was no comparison to New Chinatown so everyone left China City. Mr. Macy bought out the property from each independent store owner. China City is presently Philippe's Parking Lot.
	355-364	About four or five shops of China City are still there. One is a barber shop, and there is a bar, but the rest is gone. The location is east of Spring Street.
	365-387	GF attended Hollywood School. It was war time then in the mid-1940s. GF's brother had a gift shop in Hollywood and he had to go to work in the defense plant. GF's sister-in-law could not speak English well enough to run the store, so GF helped them out. GF lived with them for about a year.
10	388-406	GF did not have any close friends from Hollywood which was a white neighborhood. People were neither hostile nor friendly. There were only two other Chinese boys at the school. GF did not make friends as he did at Castelar. He had to return home after school anyway to help out in the store.
	407-415	During recess at Castelar School, GF spoke Chinese most of the time. The teachers tried to discourage them from speaking Chinese.
	416-435	GF attended Central Junior High School. He then went to Poly Technic High School on Washington and Grand. The population was mixed.
	436-438	There was another Chinese community on Ninth Street.
	439-457	GF had some Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese and white friends.
11	458-474	When GF was young, he had a strong desire to be American. Then when he was in his 20s and 30s he tried to be more Chinese.
	475-477	GF's mother discouraged GF from dating white girls.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-010	When GF got married, they tried to rent an apartment in 1957. The landlady had already taken their deposit but some tenants did not like it so she told GF it was already leased.
	011-020	That was the first time GF experienced discrimination. They did not take any legal recourse. The apartment was located on Wilshire Boulevard near Western. At that time the neighborhood was predominantly white.
	021-038	GF lived in a tortilla flat in China City from 1937 to 1957. It was like a one-story commune with separate living quarters but community bathroom and kitchen. It was called a tortilla flat because the owner had a tortilla factory downstairs.
2	039-044	They lived there because they could not afford any other place. One would be happy to earn \$20 a day. The rent was about \$20 to \$25 a month. They never lived in a home since they came to the United States.
	045-049	GF's uncle lived in a better flat in Old Chinatown on Los Angeles Street.
	050-055	When you are young, you do not think about your living conditions. Very few of GF's classmates had real homes to live in.
	056-060	After that, they moved to 39th and La Salle in 1949.
	061-065	The younger generation brothers and sisters started their present business in Chinatown. That was when GF's father moved from China City to Chinatown.
	066-068	GF's father had to have someone help him write receipts and take care of the deliveries. GF had to help his father with the business because he was getting old.
3	069-071	One of GF's brothers is an engineer, another is an artist. GF's sister is a designer. GF is the only one that remained at the store.
	072-078	No one was interested in the store and wanted something more conventional. GF wanted to be an aircraft mechanic. After he got out of the service, the business became his life.
	079-082	GF was an aircraft mechanic in the service but realized that he did not want to do it for the rest of his life. GF got used to his business after a while.
	083-091	GF learned how to do cloisonne from his neighbor. She was doing American designs and GF learned to make Chinese designs. He tried to duplicate the Chinese colors.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	092-094	GF remembers playing store with his sister when he was seven years old.
	095-098	GF's sister used to always have a notebook and used to always sketch dresses and now she is a dress designer. Their whole family was born with artistic talent.
	099-102	GF's mother took care of the children. She did not help at the store because she did not speak English very well. GF's father did not speak English well but he got by. He could not write English.
	103-113	GF's older brothers helped their father establish the business. GF's uncle had to work hard and fight his way to stay alive.
4	114-121	GF's family used Chinese herbs when someone got sick. They would use aspirin too. GF's mother prepared tea -- "leong cha" (涼茶) for minor discomforts. The children never questioned taking Chinese medicine.
	122-130	GF's parents did not do anything for recreation. When the children got older they would go out on their own. They would go to the YMCA or camping.
	131-135	One lady, Mrs. Morris, was very nice and would take them to the beach. She passed away.
	136-144	GF's father was against playing mahjong. He forbid his children to gamble or even to play cards. GF's father was very strict. They were not allowed to smoke or drink.
5	145-148	GF's two brothers, a sister, and himself used to live with their father.
	149-159	GF attended Chinese school from grammar school to junior high school. Classes were from 4 to 7 o'clock. It was very dull and GF did not learn anything. GF's father forced them to go.
	160-167	The Chinese school was located on Spring Street and was sponsored by the Chinese Methodist Church.
	168-169	Chinese school was not useful. GF did not retain very much.
	170-174	GF's older brothers did not attend Chinese school because they learned Chinese in China.
	175-177	GF was too young to learn any Chinese while he was still in China.
178-183	GF's mother did not tell GF any Chinese folk stories when he was young. GF's father used to tell them stories but they do not remember them. They did not communicate much with their parents.	

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1 Side B

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	184-185	GF was interested in other things such as airplanes and bombers.
	186-191	GF spoke mostly English to his siblings. They spoke Chinese to their parents but after a while they had to mix English in with the Chinese. GF's parents spoke Chinese to each other.
	192-205	GF's parents did not really object to their children being Americans. After GF's father became a citizen, he did not want to go back to China anymore. He felt that America was his country. He did not want to return to China also because he experienced hard times when he was there.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Tape 2 Side A

1	001-005	Introduction.
	006-008	After GF's father became a citizen, he lost his desire to be buried in China.
	009-012	When GF's father was 95, GF asked him if he wanted to go back to China and he did not.
	013-019	GF's father communicated with his second wife in China. GF has a half brother in China. GF does not remember his step-mother at all. She is still alive but is said to be blind. Her son is taking care of her.
	020-026	GF's father used to send money back to his second wife. Having more than one wife used to be a way of life in those days.
	027-035	GF's father never really objected to what his children wanted to do. GF's father told GF that being a mechanic would not be easy. GF learned the hard way.
2	036-037	Other Chinese parents probably gave their children the same amount of liberty as GF's parents did.
	038-046	GF's father would not let GF try out for sports teams when he was in high school. There used to be marathon races between rickshaw boys in China. GF's father saw these and felt that running was bad for you.
	047-051	GF's father probably had a few years of high school which GF's did not have. GF's father was considered well educated.
	052-055	People that were illiterate would seek the service of educated people in order to write letters to China or to the United States.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	056-059	GF's uncle did not get any formal education because he came to the U.S. when he was young.
	060-066	GF's father was a de facto member of the family association. GF did not join the association.
	067-071	These associations are now located on Broadway.
3	072-076	GF wanted to join the boy scouts but GF's father refused because he did not want to have anything to do with uniforms. It was hard on him when the children were drafted.
	077-082	GF's mother would do grocery shopping in Chinatown. When she shopped on Broadway, she took GF with her to purchase the goods since she did not speak English herself.
	083-087	GF's mother did not make an attempt to learn English because she felt it was too difficult. She did not know how to read or write Chinese either.
	088-089	GF does not know anything about his mother's side of the family.
	090-091	GF's mother lived until she was 80. GF's father lived until he was 98.
	092-102	The majority of the Chinese in the United States later felt more fond of the U.S. than China. GF knows a Mr. Sung who was a professor at USC. He returned to China after the war because he was a Communist.
	103-105	GF did not hear of Chinese that returned to China after they retired.
4	106-113	In those days, a Chinese would earn money in the U.S. and then return to China to live. Now many people do not want to go back because of the political situation in China.
	114-116	GF's father was happy in the U.S. but had problems communicating.
	117-120	GF's father felt that a Chinese education was important but GF did not. He would just fool around at Chinese school.
	121-124	GF would like to return to China but not to live. He did not think about returning to China when he was growing up. GF has never heard of anyone who said they wanted to go back to China.
	125-133	GF's older brothers all had arranged marriages. The younger generation children found their spouses on their own.
	134-140	[GF shows the interviewer a picture of his family, taken in Hong Kong in 1937.]

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2 Side A

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	141-143	Danny Ho Fong is the most successful one in the family. He designs rattan furniture.
5	144-145	GF's oldest brother owned the Ivory House down the street.
	146-148	GF's third oldest brother, Hall, is a designer.
	149-161	GF does not consider the arranged marriages of his brothers to be happy ones.
	162-166	GF was in the military service during the Korean War in 1963.
	167-178	If by a certain age you are not married, then the family gets mad and sends you back to China. That system is still popular among some people.
	179-188	GF wanted to have a son but never got one. American born Chinese in the 1940s preferred to have sons rather than daughters in order to carry on their name. GF did not care because his family was so large.
6	189-191	GF's family has about 20 or 30 grandchildren.
	192-198	GF's father discouraged his children to have interracial marriages. GF wanted to have an interracial marriage but his father discouraged him.
	199-202	The next generation in their family is different. There are more interracial marriages.
	203-218	GF's uncle's first wife was Caucasian in the 1910s. She lived in Chinatown and raised five children. GF does not know if they experienced a lot of criticism. Their children are still living today.
	219-231	GF has met his uncle's wife. No one else in their family had an interracial marriage.
	232-239	There were more interracial marriages after the war.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

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Tape 3 Side A

1	001-007	Introduction.
	008-014	GF has not really felt sorry about being Chinese. When he was 8 or 9 years old, he wished that he was not Chinese. After a certain age, one realizes that there are advantages of being Chinese.
	015-020	In GF's experience, he wished he was white instead of Chinese at one point in his life. He was being discriminated against in a way.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	021-031	GF did not tell his parents about his desire to be white. After a certain age, he realized the depth of the Chinese culture. GF wanted to marry a Caucasian when he was in his teens.
	032-040	One can speak and dress like an American but one cannot change his appearance. GF accepted his Chinese identity at a certain age.
2	041-042	GF's business in Chinese arts and crafts also helped him accept his identity.
	043-050	GF's father's store sold antiques and things like those sold in GF's own store.
	051-060	In GF's father's time, there was a series of four stores in China City. There was a basket shop, a silk shop, an antique shop, etc.
	061-070	Before World War II, all the Chinese families were in the same shoes. GF does not know of any prominent figures in the Chinese community at that time.
3	071-076	Most of the Chinese before World War II were merchants. There were a few that were architects and engineers.
	077-083	GF does not remember the average income at that time. In GF's shop, \$10 or \$20 a day was considered a lot of money.
	084-088	GF's mother would buy 10 cents worth of meat. That would be about a quarter pound of meat for ten cents. Things were very inexpensive at that time.
	089-091	Rent was not very much.
	092-103	GF very seldomly went to the movies. They used to buy the defective toys after Christmas. Only one family friend gave them toys for Christmas. Chinese would never accept charity.
4	104-116	GF's family was considered a low-income family. They could have made a lot of money working in the movies since their family was large, but GF's father would not allow anyone to work in front of a camera.
	117-129	GF's family lived about a block away from the store. They lived upstairs in an old building. About three families would share the living quarters. There would be a community kitchen. They used to be hotels, not apartments.
	130-133	GF does not remember how much the rent was. It may have been \$30. GF's mother did not work. She could not speak English.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	134-139	GF's family lived close to two other Chinese families. They would close the door in order to isolate themselves in one section. The Chinese tended to live close to one another.
	140-144	After the fire in China City, they rebuilt the place. They finally moved because there were no big restaurants there and thus the business was bad.
5	145-146	GF's family moved out of China City in 1953.
	147-151	GF feels that Chinese moved from area to area together in waves. GF wants to go where he is wanted.
	152-161	GF moved to Monterey Park 15 or 20 years ago. There were already some Chinese there but it was an integrated community. Now, there are a lot of Chinese in Monterey Park. GF feels comfortable, safe, and accepted in Monterey Park.
	162-165	GF came from the Crenshaw neighborhood. It became an entirely Black neighborhood.
	166-176	GF's father lived there from 1949 until he died, which was about 20 years. The younger generation would do things like throw rocks at him. There was nothing they could do to stop them.
	177-183	There was no use talking to the police. GF's father stayed in that area until GF's mother died. Then they sold the house.
6	184-195	The Chinese believed in paying everything in cash. They did not believe in any credit system in buying a house. GF's parents would put their money in savings accounts.
	196-198	It used to be possible to buy a house 30 or 40 years ago for \$8,000.
	199-218	GF's family did not gamble. There were gambling houses everywhere but GF did not hang around those places. Gambling was not legal at that time but they would do it anyway.
	219-221	GF does not know any Chinese involved in politics in China or in Los Angeles.
	222-225 226-238	GF makes it a point not to get involved in politics. GF's parents must have sent money back to China. They did not tell the children about it. GF did not send money back to China himself. GF's parents sent money back on New Years every year until they died. Someone other than GF is taking care of that now.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	239-250	GF's father was not affected by the Depression. The poor people were not affected by the Depression. GF's father was still working for GF's uncle at that time.
	251-255	99% of their clients were Americans. The Chinese collect antiques now but they could not afford it at one time.
	256-271	GF thinks the Chinese have done better than the general population in Los Angeles. The Chinese sacrifice for the next generation whereas some Americans do not do that. GF has seen many prominent American families go downhill.
	272-286	The Jewish are more aggressive than the Chinese people. They have an advantage since they are white. They help each other while the older Chinese generation did not. GF thinks that there are comparisons made between Jewish and Chinese people. They are both hard-working.
8	287-295	GF had to wear a badge during World War II in order to prevent people from mistaking him for a Japanese.
	296-307	Since GF was in Chinatown he did not think much about World War II.
	308-318	GF's friend was caught during the Korean War by the Americans because they mistook him for a Korean.
	319-336	The people in Japantown wanted to sell a lot of their things at the time but the Chinese businesses did not want them. There was a boycott on goods that were made in Japan. They had to erase the labels otherwise people would not buy their merchandise.
9	337-341	GF had no opinion of the Chinese portrayal in movies because he did not watch movies in those days.
	342-357	GF's mother did not like the way the Chinese were portrayed in American movies.
	358-370	GF's father did not want his children to be in movies because it was too easy. He felt his children would be corrupted.
	371-383	When they were kids, they did talk about becoming Americans. GF's own attitude changed after he returned from the service.
10	384-405	GF's father wanted one of his children to become a doctor but none of them did. GF's father did not wish to be in another profession because he knew he did not have any education.
	406-420	GF wanted to be an aircraft mechanic. He even had his own shop but it was rough. GF was too skinny and had to do heavy work.

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	421-436	GF's children have a good education. Their career is their own decision. One of GF's daughters is at USC and wants to take up business administration. GF does not know what the other daughter wants to do.
	437-457	GF's father joined business associations in Chinatown and in China City.

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A

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END OF INTERVIEW

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