



### Transcript of Interview with Ernest Lee

Interviewed by Susie Dickson and Susie Ling on July 24, 2024

**Susie Ling** [00:00:00] Today is July 23rd [sic, actually July 24th]. My name is Susie Ling with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, and I'm very honored here, to be with Ernest Lee, the 2023 president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and also past member of the Lee Family Association. I'm also here with Susan Dickson [of CHSSC]. Thank you so much for being with us. So how would you describe CCBA to an 18-year-old.

**Ernest Lee** [00:00:33] An 18-year-old. To describe the CCBA [Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association], got to trace back to some of the history, because we have 130, over 130, actually over 135 years old. In the old days, it was like organizations of basically all the local Chinese. [It] was the place that they can be. They can negotiate, actually they can, they can engage with themselves. Also as an arbitration center, if you will. If they have disputes, they can come to these organizations, and then sometimes speak it out, or sometimes fight it out. But, as it progressed, during the Qing dynasty turn of the event, this is the place that Dr. Sun Yat-sen used as the source of revenue to finance the revolution to overturn the monarchy. So, so we have a long history of supporting the mainland China's regime. And of course, after the 1949, the change of hands, right, between the nationalists and the communists, the communists took over. And CCBA, we remain as the Republic of China, the nationalist's side. And up to this point, we still raise the national flag of the Republic of China, Taiwan, right now. And, so but, from the organization of financing the mainland activities, now we migrated to more like a family gathering organization for social welfare for the local Chinese folk, Chinese Americans. We also try to retain our heritage and maintain the Chinese education for the younger generation, since so they don't forget all the Chinese language and our heritage and things like that. So it's more like more like a social organization right now.

**Susie Ling** [00:03:04] That's very interesting. So over 130 years of presence in Los Angeles.

**Ernest Lee** [00:03:10] It evolved, if you will, from a function of a more like a Chinese city hall into like more like a social organization pushing for benefits for the Chinese, Asian, more like Asian and Chinese heritage Americans. And also, we also maintain cemetery that we get—that people can use as a place for burial, they can buy plots.

**Susie Ling** [00:03:42] Here in Los Angeles.

**Ernest Lee** [00:03:45] Of course, right now it's open. So we can, people can go buy from Forest Lawn [Memorial Park], Rose Hills [Memorial Park] if they will, but back in the old days, they are not allowed to do that. That's a change. But we retain that function so that we can, the people can use that for the benefit.

**Susie Ling** [00:04:06] So on a personal level, you've been with CCBA for how long?

**Ernest Lee** [00:04:10] Oh, I retired from my work in 2011. So, since then, I joined the Lee Family Association. And then the Lee Family Association is part of the CCBA, so I evolved into helping the CCBA organization. So I would say, little over ten years.



**Susie Ling** [00:04:36] Yes, you have and you are the current 2023, since 2023, you are the current CCBA president, which is a real responsibility.

**Ernest Lee** [00:04:45] Yes.

**Susie Ling** [00:04:45] So what are your personal goals as the newest leadership in CCBA?

**Ernest Lee** [00:04:51] Oh, I try to maintain the—see this organization, it, I would say, cherish[es] the conventions, the old ways of doing things, even though it might not be the right thing, but that's the way we've been doing it. So they will try to retain that as their rule, if you will. Basically "if it works, don't fix it" kind of mentality. So they have a lot of tradition, [00:05:23], tried rituals that you have to follow. You have to understand all this, all that. Number two is the Chinatown is not that big, even though it's a lot with 27 family associations. A lot of people are somehow related to each other [laughs]. [00:05:41] That's a lot of distant relatives that you need to know. So you got to know their relationships. Sometimes they're good relationship, sometimes bad relationship. You got to understand that and try to move within the constraints, if you will. Those are relationships. This is a—we, I guess I would say, we very much cherish the relationship from inside so you can do the actual function. You might be a good leader, but if you're not a good relationship builder, you might not get what you want.

**Susie Ling** [00:06:29] So given that, as the president of the CCBA and understanding your leadership to cherish tradition, what is a meeting like for you? Do you guys meet once a month?

**Ernest Lee** [00:06:42] We meet once a month.

**Susie Ling** [00:06:43] And what would be—can you describe the meeting?

**Ernest Lee** [00:06:47] Okay, the directors meet every month. We have directors meeting every month. And the supervisors meet every four times a year. So all of the four times, there will be a joint session, they call it joint session. Joint session will be more like major decision day. We have to discuss and vote on it, we'll do that. But the directors meeting, we'll do the day to day, month to month kind of, operational kind of discussions. We have three major functions in the year. One is the outstanding youth recognition that is part of the whole tradition to remember the—the young people that died during the, I think that's one of the early revolution that overturned the Qing dynasty. The 72 youngsters that die at that event [1911 Second Guangzhou Uprising 辛亥廣州起義]. So we use that as the memory for that occasion. And so we go, recognize outstanding youth that can carry the torch, if you will, for the country to go forward. So that is, we do it every year and during the end of March, around the end of March, time frame. And then of course, the July 4th. Recognize the American Independence Day. And also that is our building anniversary, too. On this site, this is the 72, 72nd anniversary. Of course, we got this plot. The Chinatown moved into here, into this location. And I think the Chinatown Corp [Los Angeles Chinatown Corporation], the corporations that own the China[town] Central Plaza, they actually donate this land. Actually, they sold this land to us [for] one dollar [laughs]. Basically donate the land to CCBA so that they can build the building. So it's the 72nd



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anniversary. So we do that at the same time, we recognize it at the same time. Of course, the third event is the Double Ten {雙十節 or October 10th}, the national day for the Republic of China. And that is the big one. So we have to close down the street, and we have parade every year. And then, of course, we have the flag raising ceremony, and a flower offering ceremony [at] Dr. Sun Yat-sen's statue, plus at the end, in the night, we have the banquet, the usual banquet.

**Susie Ling** [00:09:51] Thank you.

**Ernest Lee** [00:09:52] Those are three major events, all pretty much, pretty tight, you know, because we—when you finish one, almost you plan for the next one. Next one. And then by the end of October 10th, you get ready for the elections [laughs]. So we're running on a yearly election. So, and, the president's job is only can repeat one more time. So two years term, well it's actually a yearly term, but you can have a second term and that's it, you're done. Then you let some other people move in.

**Susie Ling** [00:10:27] Well, you don't have much time.

**Ernest Lee** [00:10:29] Much time. Yeah. This one's my second term already.

**Susie Ling** [00:10:31] Yes. So do you have special interests that are on your agenda that you would like to achieve?

**Ernest Lee** [00:10:38] Actually one, the biggest one that I ran on my platform is to try to get the [Parking] Lot 45, you know the, that area, to move into, some sort of, getting developers selected and get into the low income housing kind of event. And that is already done. The RFP [Request for Proposal] is already out. It's near the final stage of selecting the developers. So I think, end of August or early September, the committee that [is] doing all this work will present their findings to the Board of Supervisors. And then they vote on it. I have, we have not heard who they selected yet, but I heard this—they have a shortlist right now.

**Susie Ling** [00:11:33] So you, on behalf of Chinatown, you feel that low income housing is a critical agenda for the CCBA right now?

**Ernest Lee** [00:11:43] Yes, yes. Because that particular plot was the—we have a side organization, a coalition called Chinatown, what was that, CCC L.A. Chinatown Community Coalition, I think. Which I'm still running [as] the current president.

**Susie Ling** [00:12:07] Concurrently.

**Ernest Lee** [00:12:08] Concurrently. But of course, I'm so busy with the CCBA work that I have my vice president sitting with that particular area and and we've been coming up with, we call it a—what was the key word they use? We have five major elements that we want to see in the, in that project. And low income housing is one of them. And the second one is I think we want some China-owned, Chinatown-owned merchants, shops. And we want a grocery store. Because, you know, we don't have a grocery store right now in Chinatown. And, no grocery store want to come here because they don't get—there's not enough business to sustain a major, big, like Ralph's, like Albertson's, that kind of



supermarket. Even the Chinese supermarket they don't, they said there's not enough revenue to sustain it. So you see, there will be a, there's a lot of the local stalls, if you will, but vegetable stalls, that's just isolated stuff. So we're pushing for some sort of grocery store in that area. The other is some sort of cultural community center. Those are the key elements that we want to see in the project. So we've been pushing that, and then, and the County people, they've been pretty, recognize our input. So they, the RFP they pretty much make sure that's in the request form. So that's special that that happened.

**Susie Ling** [00:14:07] That's exciting. So you feel that Alpine is getting too small, that Alpine Playground is too small?

**Ernest Lee** [00:14:15] The playground is—of course, that's the playground. The Lot 45 will be a combination of housing, plus a cultural center, more like a small cultural center. And, of course we'll have some local shops there, too.

**Susie Ling** [00:14:35] That sounds exciting. Did you mention that there were five points? That's one, two, three.

**Ernest Lee** [00:14:42] One. Two. Three. What was the other one? I'm trying to remember. Shops, cultural center.

**Susie Ling** [00:14:50] Housing.

**Ernest Lee** [00:14:50] And housing. One of the [points] is some sort of the, training center, job training center. I think the last one is a laundromat.

**Susie Ling** [00:15:04] I see.

**Ernest Lee** [00:15:06] If people want to use the laundromat locally, there's no laundromat. They have to go to either East Los Angeles or go to Lincoln Heights.

**Susie Ling** [00:15:16] Very inconvenient.

**Ernest Lee** [00:15:17] Very convenient for people.

**Susie Ling** [00:15:19] And how did you determine these five points? What made you—?

**Ernest Lee** [00:15:23] Well, actually, it was a coalition of—in that coalition we have people input from—in the early beginning, Chinatown Service Center was involved. Dr. Gay Yuen from the Chinatown, the Chinese American Museum was involved. Sissy Tran from SEACA [Southeast Asian Community Alliance], Southeast Asian. Of course currently, we still have CCED [Chinatown Community for Equitable Development]. And us, CCB[A]. So we have five groups, people from five different groups to approve, to negotiate this kind of input.

**Susie Ling** [00:16:07] Will you continue with the CCC-LA [Chinatown Community Coalition, Los Angeles]?



**Ernest Lee** [00:16:11] It will make sure that it is at least selected. We will select the developers. And then from the developer will want to make sure they feel fulfilled. Those five elements, if you will. Those five elements. Make sure that they actually happen [laughs]. And of course, they want to make sure that they can sustain that, too. We have to figure out some sort of mechanism to build it and sustain them, the five points, otherwise once they get it, it's "I will do it, you know," and then before you know it, oh, it's all gone to turn into some other area, some other function. We don't like that.

**Susie Ling** [00:16:55] So do you think it's important for CCBA to have an ongoing relationship with the supervisors and with the city? And you think that—how do we sustain that? How are we going to build that relationship?

**Ernest Lee** [00:17:09] We almost—we do have a good English secretary, Daisy Ma. You know, Daisy? She's been a good friend with us a long time. She knows a lot of the people. We both go back, way back. So she knows, she's the one to keep us involved. And the new president was introduced to the new supervisor or if they have a new councilman over the district. And then we'll usually have some sort of lunch. To show their faces and talk to the people. And they'll get us involved in those—and then we have to develop our own relationship with them.

**Susie Ling** [00:18:02] And so do you hope that CCBA will be able to continue this over the years?

**Ernest Lee** [00:18:06] Oh yes, we need to do that. Otherwise, we will not know what's going on outside of local Chinatown. So we will know any kind of benefit, any kind of things to watch out. And we also have a good relationship with the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]. The LAPD is very important. I know, I know some—

**Susie Ling** [00:18:24] With Robert Luna, right?

**Ernest Lee** [00:18:25] Some elements in CCCLA, they don't like LAPD, for whatever reason. They don't talk to the LAPD. I don't know.

**Susie Ling** [00:18:37] But you feel it's an important relationship.

**Ernest Lee** [00:18:41] For the safety of the neighborhood. That's one thing, because last year, was the last year some time, the shop across the street, from next to the Bank of America building, somebody broke in and robbed the place and hit and injured the shopkeeper, an employee. [They] beat her up pretty bad. So I got the LAPD here, and we actually have a big press conference, invite all the people here. We have a symposium. The captain actually, the captain came. Actually I don't know if it was the captain, it was the chief, right? The deputy chief came and they later actually they found, they caught the guy. They caught the guy in the middle of the press conference, to announce to the media.

**Susie Ling** [00:19:40] So you feel like, as you are the president, it is your job to sort of—

**Ernest Lee** [00:19:44] Make sure, yeah, make sure that something happens, this kind of thing happen we make sure that it got, we got noise. Because otherwise, see in



Chinatown, a lot of the people, the Chinese philosophy or the way of doing things is, they don't tell, don't go to the police, right? Don't make noises.

**Susie Ling** [00:20:12] The old way. Yeah.

**Ernest Lee** [00:20:15] All that way, do our way. Don't have to talk to the police. They treat the police more like—unless we have to—

**Susie Ling** [00:20:24] Outsider.

**Ernest Lee** [00:20:26] Outsider. We'll deal with it ourselves. Of course we brought up here, I say, you got to make noises. You got an extra big friend with the police. They'll come and watch you, watch out for you. In fact, that's what they told us. You've got to make friend. Whatever happened, make sure you report it. Once we got the statistics, I can, I can get more people, more police, more patrol, more officers to come to Chinatown. Right now, we look at the data. "No way, you guys are doing great, you know. You have no, no, no, no crime at all." But, one time we actually walk with them. We walk with the chairman of the Chinatown—what was that—Chester Chong. You know, Chester?

**Susan Dickson** [00:21:13] Yes.

**Ernest Lee** [00:21:13] You know Chester? Chester Chong. He's the chairman of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Chinatown Chamber of Commerce. And, he's the one that knows the local people pretty well. So he and I had walked with the chief down the street, talked with all the shopkeepers, and of course there's a lot of crime, they didn't report them.

**Susie Ling** [00:21:42] Interesting.

**Ernest Lee** [00:21:43] Burglar does come in and rob them every month, routinely, and they just, "oh, okay", just write it off [laughs]. They say, "Oh, we call the police, they don't come, so we just, you know, just let it go.

**Susie Ling** [00:21:57] Just let it go.

**Ernest Lee** [00:21:59] So, we get the chief pretty upset because he says, "Okay, next time, make sure I know."

**Susie Ling** [00:22:04] We have to, we have to work together.

**Ernest Lee** [00:22:09] Right, right. That's one thing that we want—but one bad, one bad thing is they try to recruit some Chinese-speaking officers. They just couldn't do it. They just couldn't find anybody. Very difficult to find a Cantonese or Mandarin-speaking police officers that they can move into Chinatown, that people can talk to them. Difficult, very difficult, we've been trying for many years.

**Susie Ling** [00:22:39] I'm sure they're going to work on that. Good. Actually, like many Chinese Americans, I don't live in Chinatown.



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**Ernest Lee** [00:22:48] Sure, yeah.

**Susie Ling** [00:22:48] And so is CCBA also, do you feel they should have a help in presenting, representing those of us that live in San Gabriel Valley or Torrance or other communities?

**Ernest Lee** [00:23:02] For example, like myself, I don't live in Chinatown, I live in Monterey Park. And that's the way of all the Chinese that used to live in Chinatown, once they got enough money, they start moving out. Because, it's got better education, better schools and better living conditions, more like a mainstream regular city. But our associations, luckily, all the family associations, the headquarters are still in Chinatown. I would say 99 percent, 95 percent, are in Chinatown.

**Susie Ling** [00:23:40] Which one isn't?

**Ernest Lee** [00:23:42] The Bow On Association. They are down on Ninth Street.

**Susie Ling** [00:23:46] Okay, a little further.

**Ernest Lee** [00:23:47] They are actually selling. They are actually selling their place. Paul's Kitchen is closing down. They are about to close Paul's Kitchen. They gotta to sell that place and try to move into Chinatown. They're looking for a place to look into.

**Susie Ling** [00:24:03] So do you think CCBA needs to expand its base, to help other Chinese Americans?

**Ernest Lee** [00:24:10] Not actively get into different—because there are so many cities that you can deal with, you have to deal with. But all the people that part of the association, the roots are in Chinatown. We look at, this is home. This is our home base. So we got to make sure the home base is strong, then we can go do our thing. Of course they have—we do invite a lot of the local elected officials, like the city council, mayors of Chinatown, I mean, Monterey Park, San Gabriel, Rosemead, Alhambra, all those people that come to our events. We ask them to come here, they usually join, pretty actively join us. And of course, the current mayor of San Gabriel, John Wu. He was one of the president of the local association, family association. Son of Chinatown [laughs].

**Susie Ling** [00:25:20] For example, last—was it last year—we had a very uncomfortable situation in Monterey Park with the shooting. How did you, as president of CCBA what—?

**Ernest Lee** [00:25:33] We got into active, pretty fast, because we have three associations [committees], right? One is the cemetery committee, and the other is the welfare committee. So the cemetery committee, we can offer them a burial plot, if they're willing to use it. And the welfare committee can help them with whatever they need. And we team with Chinatown Service Center. Which is why a lot of the medical psychological counseling, that kind of thing, actually from that tragedy, they opened up a, they call it the Resilience Center [MPK Hope Resiliency Center] in Monterey Park.

**Susie Ling** [00:26:21] Yes.



**Ernest Lee** [00:26:24] That help people for counseling, any uncomfortable thing they want to talk about. They got some government money. I think County gave them some money to run the counseling part of that. So—which is good, there's a lot of—

**Susie Ling** [00:26:42] That is wonderful because the need was urgent.

**Ernest Lee** [00:26:46] Yeah, there's a lot of need that is not recognized, especially in Chinese, within Chinese community. You know, mental illness is like a taboo. It's like, "Hey, we don't talk about it. Oh, you just deal with it." There's no doctor for you. So it's good that people recognize that. And the government recognized that, give us to open up that center. At that time, we team with, CCBA teamed with Chinatown Service Center, and also the newly founded, I think they called it Chinatown Community Alliance.

**Susie Ling** [00:27:28] So many initials.

**Ernest Lee** [00:27:29] Three of us, three of us, that actually had a press conference, that announced that we can help the victims of that tragedy.

**Susie Ling** [00:27:39] That's wonderful. Another topic I had was you mentioned Daisy Ma as very critical to, as in the leadership of CCBA. So what is the changing role of women in CCBA?

**Ernest Lee** [00:27:56] We do have, as you look at the pictures [on our walls], Mei Lau [Wah] was the first female president. Actually, when she was the president, I was the vice president [laughs]. So, for the supervisors, we do have like several females. So I think the female, we recognize the need for female to be equal part of the [association]. For me, I have no problem with that. But for the older folks, I think [laughs]. I think that they still have some, they will not say [they] don't like it, but they will say, "Let the men do it first." Because, you look at all the family associations. A lot of the family associations still run by men. The women will have a women's club. They put all the women on one side. You guys go through, deal with the singing, dancing, cooking, that kind of thing. And normal business will be run by the men. We're slowly, slowly changing that. Some of the associations, they allow female presidents. So it's slow. It's a slow, slow, slow progress. Actually some of the—like Soo Yuen [Association], some of those association is they deliberately say it's a man, it's a fraternal association. It's no female. The female is not allowed, when they have meeting they're not allowed in the building. So it's pretty funny.

**Susie Ling** [00:29:47] Another issue that we all deal with, is we need to attract younger Chinese Americans to join.

**Ernest Lee** [00:29:54] That is an ongoing challenge. Not just younger, the ABC. The American-born Chinese.

**Susie Ling** [00:30:04] Chinese.

**Ernest Lee** [00:30:07] Currently, I would say like about less than ten, American-born Chinese, actually they are part of the either supervisors or directors [of CCBA].

**Susie Ling** [00:30:15] That's not bad.





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**Ernest Lee** [00:30:16] Not bad. They actually pretty involved. The Eng Family Association, the president is ABC. They have two brothers. One is the CACA [Chinese American Citizens Alliance] Wayne Ng. The other is Kenny Ng. Kenny's also CACA, too. We call the Ng brothers. They're really, really fun to be with and they are actually actively involved with the CCBA activities. So we've got to attract more people like that.

**Susie Ling** [00:30:53] And how are you going to do that?

**Ernest Lee** [00:30:55] I don't know. Difficult. Difficult.

**Susie Ling** [00:30:59] Do you think that CCBA also needs to reach out to our Latino neighbors or African American neighbors? What, how do you feel about that?

**Ernest Lee** [00:31:09] Not in the near and foreseeable future, because we have our bylaws that is pretty much established that only the Chinese is—our mission is to push for Chinese culture, heritage, get better for Chinese American. So in order to reach out for other ethnic areas, we got to really think about it. I don't see, we probably need some major change of the bylaw. Which is probably very difficult to do that right now. People more, right now, involved with getting the communists and nationalists to work together as a One China initiative. Right now is that Taiwan and mainland fighting with each other kind of thing, and that, we have some sort of like conflict within ourselves. So we probably want to deal with that before we start reaching out.

**Susie Ling** [00:32:24] Well the truth is, many of us Chinese, like myself, are from the Philippines or from Malaysia or from Vietnam, so—

**Ernest Lee** [00:32:31] Yeah, as long as you have Chinese heritage, you are saying you are Chinese, even though you're [from] whatever a country. I think we recognize that, that's no problem. For example, one of the the president, he just passed away. [Peter Leung was from Vietnam. He's a Vietnamese American, born in Vietnam. But he says, "Hey, I'm Chinese." So he became one of us.

**Susie Ling** [00:33:12] So, where do you think CCBA will be in 50 years?

**Ernest Lee** [00:33:18] In 50 years? Oh god, that's—I don't want to guess [laughs]. I think as long as the, I think the organizations probably still will be here as the CCBA. Whether it retain all the family associations or increase [membership], I don't know. I just don't know. But I would say that it will not go away. This is our roots. The root for the—we call it the traditional American Chinese. This is the older, older generation, if you will. We have newer, we call it new Chinese, actually they are from Taiwan or from mainland China currently. They try to join the associations, family associations, but that is more like a first screening for those new Chinese, we call them new overseas Chinese. Because they, number one, they don't like the flag, the Republic of China flag. They say, "Oh, this is outlawed in China. This is no longer China." But for us, this is the original China. So there's a bigger conflict between Taiwan and mainland that got to be solved before we can expand to different Chinese areas, if you will. So I think in the future, this organization will be still here, I think 50 years from now.



**Susie Ling** [00:35:02] You know, if I may point out, you are from Toisan yourself.

**Ernest Lee** [00:35:07] Oh yes, born in China.

**Susie Ling** [00:35:07] And you are—I don't think you've been to Taiwan.

**Ernest Lee** [00:35:11] Oh, I've been to Taiwan many times.

**Susie Ling** [00:35:12] Oh, you—but you feel some loyalty or some connection to Taiwan?

**Ernest Lee** [00:35:18] Yes, I was born in mainland. I was brought up in Hong Kong. Hong Kong, at that time, it was still very much against communists. Communists is the enemy.

**Susie Ling** [00:35:30] Yes. When it was a British colony, yeah.

**Ernest Lee** [00:35:34] Yeah, a British colony. And then a lot of the, they call the Republic of China people, they actually, they ran away from mainland China. They settle down in Hong Kong. So my education, I was brought up that communists is no good, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. In fact, a lot of my family was, some of their relatives, were executed by the communists. So I have some, what you call it, built-in hatred against the mainland China. And of course, now, after so many years, this—well, I recognize it's just one big China. Like my daughter-in-law's from Hanzhou. You know, she's born in mainland China. It's like a regular guy, regular person. So I don't have hatred for them anymore. But of course, they are running a single party dictatorship. You just cannot stand off. You can say privately, but don't let people know about it. Otherwise, they'll come get you.

**Susie Ling** [00:36:53] I'm going to ask you a difficult question. CACA, for example, does not fly the ROC [Republic of China] flag and flies the California flag as the second flag.

**Ernest Lee** [00:37:04] A lot of the associations don't fly the ROC flag anymore. Like Lee Association, we lower the ROC flag in 2009. They lower it and just fly the American flag and the Lee Association flag. Lot of the associations is like that. But of course, there's still couple, several major one, like the Lung Kong [Family Association]—what was the other one—Hop Sing [Association] and Bing Kong [Association]. Those are the major associations, they still fly the Republic of China, the ROC flag.

**Susie Ling** [00:37:59] [Laughs] So you have to play the mediator?.

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:03] I'm president, I got caught, sometimes caught in the middle. Like early part of this year, they lower the Taiwanese government, the president's portrait. Actually they said, "Okay, why don't we just take the pictures down." We used to have Biden's and—

**Susie Ling** [00:38:27] Yes, the Taiwan president—

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:30] The Taiwanese president together. They said, "Why don't we just remove it? We don't have to deal with it anymore." And I got in the way of a lot of major conflicts [laughs].



**Susie Ling** [00:38:38] Is it still up there?

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:41] No, it's not anymore. We just retain these two [George Washington and Dr. Sun Yat-sen].

**Susie Ling** [00:38:43] That's different.

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:44] Yes. That is different.

**Susie Ling** [00:38:45] Yes.

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:46] In fact, lot of this, CCBA would in all over United States, they don't have those two.

**Speaker 3** [00:38:47] Anymore.

**Ernest Lee** [00:38:47] They just keep those two. Those are the founding fathers of these two countries.

**Susie Ling** [00:38:59] Did you have the Trump portrait up when he was president?

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:03] We had it. The Trump [portrait].

**Susie Ling** [00:39:05] Yeah. Interesting.

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:07] Interesting, so. There was a big push to get that down.

**Susie Ling** [00:39:11] Both of them down.

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:12] Both of them down. And we just don't have to deal with them anymore. Of course the one side says, "No, no, we can't do that." The other, "No, no, no, we can't do that." Fight, fight, fight, fight.

**Susie Ling** [00:39:22] So you have a very difficult job.

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:25] I was caught in the middle of them [laughs].

**Susie Ling** [00:39:29] Maybe you have more questions, but I have one last question for you. When you, sir, walk around Chinatown, what does it mean for you to be in this building and, you know, walk around the community?

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:42] Oh, I feel that Chinatown is like a home. Home base, if you will. Our roots in Chinatown. Even though it changes a lot.

**Susie Ling** [00:39:56] Did you ever live here or work?

**Ernest Lee** [00:39:57] I work here. I work in here, and I came to it in 1971. I worked at this supermarket down the street here, B & C Market. I lived in Lincoln Heights, so my—my uncle had a garment factory in Chinatown. My mom worked at Chinatown. My dad, he's a



sewing machine mechanic. He walked the neighborhood fixing sewing machines. So yeah. Chinatown is always, always feel like home. It is our home base, even though we now live in Monterey Park and go all over the place. But when we come to Chinatown, it's still, it is our home. And it's too bad, I can see it, the face is changing. A lot of the shops are no longer there, they're even vacant or took over by another non-related business.

**Susie Ling** [00:41:00] And there's also a lot of incoming gentrification, right? Like, you know, they were talking about a Walmart. They were talking about more upper class housing.

**Ernest Lee** [00:41:14] Right, right.

**Susie Ling** [00:41:16] It's kind of eating away.

**Ernest Lee** [00:41:18] The street here, right? College, that way, and Alpine. Right, no, Alameda. Used to be a, what you call it, those little shops, right? Remember those shops? And they get rid of that, and put office building right now. Right next to the Gold Line station. It's changing. And of course, the big block right next to the Golden Dragon Restaurant. That's supposed to put up a 27-story building. I don't know what happened, they tore down the building and doesn't even make it. And that one, is a some sort of like sneaky development. Because when that lot was declared a development area, city council don't know about it. The county people don't know about it. Nobody know about it. It turned out is they acquire through Caltrans. Just so close to the Gold Line station. Caltrans has some jurisdiction over there. They actually sold it to a developer in Canada. Local people don't know about it, but how do we know about it? They already signed the contract, they got development done, they're ready to tear down the place. So there's a lot, there's a lot of things we don't know about is behind the door. Even though we try to get in, it's very difficult.

**Susie Ling** [00:42:54] Did you have any more—?

**Susan Dickson** [00:42:56] Well, you've been such a good person [to interview]. Okay, so, we were talking about the police. So at one time, there was the Chinatown substation and it closed. Do you think that they would ever consider bringing something like that back to Chinatown?

**Ernest Lee** [00:43:15] Okay, that actually was initiated by the [Fay and Harry] Gee Family. I think they still own the place. They own the place. They convert it to a like a substation, they're actually footing the bills for substation. I don't know if they got money from the local government, city council or whatever, but I think the Gee family actually put that up. They actually allow like two or three officers, they can take breaks inside for four hours a day, at the substation.

**Susan Dickson** [00:43:58] Downstairs.

**Ernest Lee** [00:44:00] Yeah. So of course, when the original members passed away, nobody tried to [maintain it]. Descendants say, "Oh, this is too much money. What am I going to do with that?" They locked it up and say no more. We were talking to some of



them, but the Gee family, they're going through a lot of changes. The older folks passed away, and the younger folks, they don't want to deal with it.

**Susie Ling** [00:44:32] Interesting.

**Susan Dickson** [00:44:33] They only had one son, David. And once he—

**Ernest Lee** [00:44:38] I met him at one of these spring banquet. He said, "Ah well, now I don't need that income [laughs]. We just leave it like that, you know, don't want to deal with it."

**Susan Dickson** [00:44:51] Okay, well, I know that you have volunteered a lot to try to keep a Chinatown here. So what are some of the other things that you've done besides Lot 45 to try to keep the character of Chinatown, kind of keep gentrification at bay? What are some of the things that you've done?

**Ernest Lee** [00:45:15] I'm trying to think of something that is—to tell you the truth. Because CCBA is all kind, it's all—actually, it looks like that now, it's a lot of work. Engagement and development, these I don't deal with. So. Actually, I do not have time to think about those areas. [I] regretfully say that. Because I came in with a lot of agenda, a lot of things I want to do, it just, it turned out there's so much work. Not just work, but in CCBA you have to deal with different parties, events, straight back from April. It's like [being] a host.

**Susan Dickson** [00:46:06] I know. You have to go to all the [events].

**Ernest Lee** [00:46:13] [Indistinguishable] We go to every one of them. It was not just the Chinatown, the Taiwanese different organization, they're all [involved], it's kind of celebration. So I had to go to that. At least I don't have to go to the Vietnamese and Cambodian, that side. It just, you just have too much involved.

**Susan Dickson** [00:46:39] Okay. Well, how is—I mean, Munson had actually given us this question, so how is CCBA with the immigrants that are coming into this country? I mean, do they join associations? Do you try to help them out or—?

**Ernest Lee** [00:46:57] Some of them. Not actively go with. We as an organization did not actively go to those. Usually if we know about this organization, they come and talk to us or something. We ask them, "What's your background? Are you a Lee? If you're a Lee, go join Lee Association. If you're a Wong, then go join Wong Association? We get them into the grassroots. Go to the family association first to see if they like it. Some of them like it, like a lot of the Lee's, right now. We join the fun. We like to join your activities. That's good. Some of them are like, "This is not my cup of tea." So you deal with it.

**Susan Dickson** [00:47:39] Well, is part of it language?

**Ernest Lee** [00:47:41] Not really. It's just, they have different things to do. A lot of the young folks, they get into sports like volleyball, play golf, ping pong. For us, older folks [laughs]. Well, a lot of older folks, they're all, every day they play mahjong [laughs]. In this association, I'm 72, I'm a young kid [laughs] in this organization. And I joined the other



organization. I think when I was about say 56, 58. I was young kid. All the people are older, 80s and 90s. 90s, you'd be amazing, at 90, still running around, you know, at 90 years old. So we could be—I think we perceive or blame ourselves as the older, traditional Chinese association. Other than the younger associations, which they like to have picnics, they like to have dancing, they like to have this and have that, and sports, and they will like to play mahjong. And eat [laughs].

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:00] Do guys play mahjong in here?

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:02] Not here, but almost every association, they have a, that's the pastime, they play mahjong.

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:10] It must be fun.

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:11] Keep the mind active.

**Susie Ling** [00:49:14] Yes.

**Susan Dickson** [00:49:16] Well, is there anything that you want to say when, before you came here, and we forgot to ask you about?

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:26] Not really, I think. Who's the gal that interviewed the Lee Association?

**Susan Dickson** [00:49:30] Laureen Hom.

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:31] Laureen, where did she go?

**Susan Dickson** [00:49:33] At San Francisco? No—what is it—San Jose State?

**Susie Ling** [00:49:37] State University.

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:37] Oh, she went back to school?

**Susie Ling** [00:49:39] No, no, she's the teacher. She's a faculty member.

**Ernest Lee** [00:49:42] Faculty. Oh, that's good.

**Susie Ling** [00:49:43] Her family's up there, so. Well, I'm going to thank you again on behalf of the Chinese Historical Society. I'm with Ernest Lee, the president of CCBA. And my name is Susie Ling. And I've been here with Susan Dickson on July 23rd, 2024. Thank you. Today is the 24th, sorry.