



Transcript of Interview with Ryan Wong

Interviewed by Susie Dickson and Susie Ling on August 13, 2024

Susie Ling [00:00:00] Okay. We are very honored to be with Mr. Ryan Wong in San Gabriel on the 13th of August 2024.

Susan Dickson [00:00:19] San Gabriel Valley or Rosemead.

Susie Ling [00:00:21] Rosemead in San Gabriel Valley. And, my name is Susie Ling, and I'm also with Susan Dickson. And today is the 13th of August, 2024. This is the Chinese Historical Society's *Chinatown Association* project. Thank you, Mr. Wong, for being with us today. First of all, let's just start out with how your family came to be in Chinatown.

Ryan Wong [00:00:47] Okay. So we arrived in Chinatown in 1979, during the Vietnam War. My family's from Cambodia. Actually, Mom was born in Cambodia and Dad was born in Cambodia, but we're Chinese. I don't speak a word of Cambodian now. During the Vietnam War, we were kicked out of our homes and actually hiked over rugged terrains to Thailand. During our journey, we bumped into different armies - the Cambodian army or the Saigon soldiers or Thailand guards. So we are stuck between three different countries and nobody wants you. We were ping-ponging back and forth in this mountainous terrain for about four months before the Red Cross found us. And when the Red Cross found us, we were sent to a refugee camp in Thailand for about three months before we came straight here to San Francisco. And for some reason, my parents know to take the Greyhound down to L.A. So we came straight to L.A. And this is home ever since, for the past 45 years or so.

Susie Ling [00:01:59] What a story. Do you know where you were—what town you were born in, in Cambodia?

Ryan Wong [00:02:04] Yes. Yes, I was, again, I was only five, and this is just from hearsay. I don't remember much. Which, ignorance is blissful, I guess. Let me see. I was born in a town called Battambang. Battambang, which is the second largest town in Cambodia. That's where Angelina Jolie has her place now. We went back, my whole entire family, my extended family, 20 of us went back about, in 2018. So Grandma and Grandpa, my parents, are able to express and share all of their stories with our grandkids, which is a great trip, a great family trip for us.

Susie Ling [00:02:41] So on your trip out, you also came with your grandparents.

Ryan Wong [00:02:44] With my mom and dad.

Susie Ling [00:02:45] Just, and you had no siblings yet?

Ryan Wong [00:02:49] Oh, you mean coming to California?

Susie Ling [00:02:51] Yes.

Ryan Wong [00:02:52] Yeah. Mom, Dad, my dad has two or three other siblings that were with them, so I had a lot of cousins with us. There's probably about 25 of us.



Susie Ling [00:03:04] So you are of Chinese descent. Do you know your Chinese origins?

Ryan Wong [00:03:10] Yes. We are Chiuchow ren [潮州人 Chiuchow people], which is, it's also in the province of Canton. But we're right in between, well, I guess about half an hour drive away from Shantou, which is one of the big cities in Canton.

Susie Ling [00:03:26] And why did your family immigrate to Cambodia, I assume, in the 50s?

Ryan Wong [00:03:31] Yes, in the 50s. My mom's parents and dad's parents both immigrated out of China to Cambodia because of family and for better opportunities. So both my parents were born in Cambodia.

Susie Ling [00:03:48] It was not because of the communist revolution or—?

Ryan Wong [00:03:52] I've asked that question a couple of times. There's no opportunities in China. That's why they have moved out.

Susie Ling [00:04:03] Your family speaks Chiuchow?

Ryan Wong [00:04:05] Yeah, we are fluent. So Mom and Dad speak quite a few dialects besides Chiuchow. They speak Cantonese. They speak Mandarin. They're third generation restaurant operators. So they speak Spanish, too.

Susie Ling [00:04:22] Very wonderful. So you were, do you know what refugee camp you were in Thailand?

Ryan Wong [00:04:29] I don't recall. I don't.

Susie Ling [00:04:31] And then, you stayed there for about five months, and the family was actually very fortunate to come to San Francisco. Yes. And you have no clue why they then decided to head to Los Angeles?

Ryan Wong [00:04:44] No clue.

Susie Ling [00:04:45] And how did the grandparents come into this?

Ryan Wong [00:04:49] Sure. So my grandparents were stuck in Cambodia and Vietnam. They never came to Los Angeles until about a decade after us. So my dad sponsored his parents to come, and they arrived about 12 years later after us.

Susie Ling [00:05:05] So when you moved to Los Angeles as a family, what were the first things that your parents started to do? Were they in Chinatown by then?

Ryan Wong [00:05:13] Yes, yes. We moved straight into Chinatown. And I was so blessed. I think, life, you go through life, meeting people, when you are able to cross paths with people who are helpers, if you will, and you don't know it, you don't recognize it, at that time, you're just going through life. And Castelar, my first grade. Again, I'm still trying to hunt down Mrs. Yee, my first grade teacher.



Susie Ling [00:05:40] Mrs. Yee.

Ryan Wong [00:05:42] She helped us quite a bit. I mean, my sister and I today, we still remember she helped us [with] donated clothing. We had nothing with us. There was mom, dad, my sister, and I living in a single bedroom. My sister and I, I guess, we sleep on these cots, which is in the kitchen that we put away during the daytime. And we'll lay out cots at night. And we did that for about three or four years.

Susie Ling [00:06:10] Your sister was born—?

Ryan Wong [00:06:11] My sister was born in Cambodia also. She's older than I am.

Susie Ling [00:06:14] Oh, she's older than you are. May we know what street this—?

Ryan Wong [00:06:19] Yes. I'm right up on College. So up that bridge. Right at Kaiser Permanente. Right across the street from that. So Figueroa Terrace.

Susie Ling [00:06:29] And tell us more about the apartment and your parents' adjustment?

Ryan Wong [00:06:34] Yeah. So obviously Mom and Dad doesn't speak English. But because it's Chinatown, Dad, either he knows a lot of friends from Cambodia that are already there, or he made new friends, I'm not sure. But we live in this, I guess I'll call it a studio. The studio, I know that, and I vividly recall even in the 1st grade, I don't know what Mom and Dad's paying for monthly rent, but we helped clean. It's a three-story building. Again, it's right on the corner of Figueroa Terrace and College. Every week, I would be help—my sister and I, and mom would be cleaning, back cleaning all the floors, we'll be hosing off all of the staircases. Trash day, we'll be pulling out trash. I mean, I guess all that was rent subsidy, I suppose. Mom never told us why. We just had to do it.

Susie Ling [00:07:27] And was Dad find[ing] employment?

Ryan Wong [00:07:30] No, that was part of our rent, I believe.

Susie Ling [00:07:33] Did your father find employment?

Ryan Wong [00:07:35] Oh, yes. Yes. Dad works for Maruchan, which is a Cup of Noodle company I believe still exists now.

Susie Ling [00:07:44] Oh, yes. And what was his position there?

Ryan Wong [00:07:48] I don't recall what he did at the Cup of Noodle company. I'm not sure.

Susie Ling [00:07:57] Okay, so can you remember your first days at Castelar?

Ryan Wong [00:08:02] Yes.

Susie Ling [00:08:03] And this is you [in the photograph]?



Ryan Wong [00:08:04] My lifelong, as of today, even today, from my 1st grade, I still keep in touch with 10 classmates. Even today, and I'm 50 today. Castelar is a, how would I explain it, was our life. I mean, we had nothing else to do, or we didn't know what else to do. School for us is having fun. I mean, I think it's all mindset, what you go through life, even now with my three boys, going through school. Your kids, your job is to excel. You're like a sponge. Learn everything you can. You don't know what skills, what academic, what subject you would need in the future. All you need to do is sponge it up first. When the opportunity presents itself in front of you, if you're prepared because you have those skillsets, you can be lucky. Okay. If you're not prepared and an opportunity presents itself, you can't take advantage of it. You won't be lucky. So I mean school to us, it's like a game. You need to know the rules so well that you can game the rules. I love to learn and you don't know what you're going to need in the future. So, that's what our parents always instilled in us. Because they are restaurant workers. They are seamstress. I mean, very labor intensive. School for us, I think Chinatown—what I've heard is that it was pretty tough back then, but I didn't think so. I mean, all the friends that I hang around with, they're all fun. They're all cool people to hang out with. They are my extended family. Meaning Mom and Dad, I hardly see Mom and Dad. They would be working at a restaurant that opens up eight in the morning, and they don't come back home till two a.m., so we never see them. Luckily, I think it's the friends that you make, the community that you build for yourself, that leads you down a certain path that even you didn't know you were making those choices, to go down those paths. So, I turned out okay. I mean, just try your best and—

Susie Ling [00:10:09] What was—

Ryan Wong [00:10:09] Things will fall in place.

Susie Ling [00:10:10] You said it well. Of the ten friends that you still keep in contact with, can you describe who they are and were they also of Cambodian Chinese descent or not really?

Ryan Wong [00:10:23] Well, no, we're all a mixed pot. Some are from Vietnam. One particular person I want to shout out is, Roger Wong, that we just recruited to join the board of the Friends of Chinatown Library. Roger, I believe, is from Canton. No, he's not Vietnamese or Cambodian. He's a Toisan. So, again, bright kid, one of the smartest. I'm glad these are the nerd friends that I had. So we all have different groups of friends, and things just worked out for a reason. I'm glad we finally hooked up again for the Friends of Chinatown Library. Full circle.

Susie Ling [00:11:05] That is very special. Were you using the Chinatown Library at the school grounds at that time? Not yet?

Susan Dickson [00:11:16] It didn't even start until the mid 70s.

Ryan Wong [00:11:19] Yes, I was there. I was here in '79.

Susan Dickson [00:11:22] Oh, that's right.

Ryan Wong [00:11:23] So one thing I was sharing with my family recently is I didn't even know the background of how the Chinatown Library came about. I mean, I'm so



impressed. I am the beneficiary of other donors, other people that came before us. We just thought it was a part of the school. It was a government establishment. So, yes, we hang out at the library every day. Every day, even the weekends. Again, we had no car, we had no bikes, we had nowhere to go. And school is just a five minute walk away.

Susie Ling [00:11:58] Less than that. What did you do at the library?

Ryan Wong [00:12:02] We have, I know we have these games, so I—I actually don't like to read, but I know we want to beat the game, so there's always these reading clubs. And you try to read it as fast as you can, just so you can check off that you read a book for some prize or something. That's all I remember doing at the library. Besides hanging out to do homework and checking each other's homework.

Susie Ling [00:12:24] Very nice. Your parents seem to find it important that you also join the Confucius Chinese school.

Ryan Wong [00:12:32] Yes. I think Chinese is important, but, Dad, I believe Mom and Dad has multipurpose of that. I think the main reason why they signed us up was to keep us off the streets. School at Castelar was from eight a.m. to, I believe, two-thirty or so. And then Chinese school starts at three or four all the way 'til six. So again, they basically put us away from eight in the morning to six at night. And we walked. Everybody walked to school, to Castelar in the morning. In the evening, we all walked back. When I mean we, I mean all my cousins, just 15, 20 of us. I mean, it's like a big babysit, all going together. But Chinese school is—I do want to shout out Chinese school. Today, I'm the managing partner of one of the largest Chinese American CPA firm in Southern California. And man, I wish I studied harder in Chinese school because half of my clients are Chinese speaking. Even today, I'm still learning Mandarin. Yes, I did force our three boys to go to Chinese school as well.

Susie Ling [00:13:47] Same one or different one?

Ryan Wong [00:13:47] No, we live in Arcadia now. So they go to the Arcadia one, Monday through Friday. And I even hired their Chinese school director to give me a one-on-one Mandarin session every Sunday. And I'm still doing it now for the past ten years. Can you believe a 50-year-old still trying to learn Chinese? So Miss Li would come in with a tax question? She'll ask in Mandarin, and I have to answer back in Mandarin. And it's been ten years now, and I always joke that she is a darned good tax planner now.

Susie Ling [00:14:22] She can take your job.

Ryan Wong [00:14:23] [Laughs] But my Chinese is still very mediocre.

Susie Ling [00:14:28] When you mentioned you had 15 to 20 cousins that were hanging with you, are you talking about blood first cousins or just family?

Ryan Wong [00:14:37] No, these are my first cousins. Again, dad has four or five siblings that came with him from Cambodia. And all my cousins and I, we're all about the same age. So we all went to Castelar together. And then dad and his siblings get into businesses



together, too, so they go to work together, while us second generation hang out together. It's like a school of fish, but we all go everywhere together.

Susie Ling [00:15:02] What was Chinese school like for you? Can you describe the structure?

Ryan Wong [00:15:09] I have to qualify first. So school, I am—I love, I don't want to say I love school, but I love learning. My career now too, clients pay me to research other stuff that I don't know yet, and we get paid to learn new stuff, I mean I thirst for knowledge. But I—Chinese school is a place where they teach you things that Castelar doesn't teach you. They're kind of like your parents. How can I explain it? The Confucius way of thinking, filial piety, doing the right things. It's not about—I don't think I learned any math or science in Chinese school. It's just Chinese language, how do you deal with elders, how do you deal with people. Those are all the subjects that I remember. I don't remember math or science from our Chinese school. So it's more like—because the parents are not around, they are the parents. That's what it feels like. It shapes us. Yes.

Susie Ling [00:16:16] I thought it was more of a language institute. It's not?

Ryan Wong [00:16:20] Yes, it is. I mean all my Chinese—you know, I met my wife from Chinese school. [Laughs] So, 1st grade through 6th grade of Chinese school, they teach you Cantonese. I mean Chinese is all the same written character, but we speak Cantonese. First to 6th grade. And even today, a lot of people still make fun of my Chinese school is because all of our staff are faculty, somewhat Republic of China, Taiwanese associated, but taught in Cantonese, which is rare because only Chinatown speaks Cantonese, right? All the Chinese schools around here are all taught in Mandarin. But I did went to junior high and high school, we call it—6,7,8 and 9,10. Yeah. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12[th grade] of Chinese school, that is taught in Mandarin. So once you pass 6th grade, it's taught in Mandarin. Luckily, it's the same written characters. Imagine starting over.

Susie Ling [00:17:26] Why did your—so your parents were using it as a babysitting tool at first.

Ryan Wong [00:17:34] That's what I believe.

Susie Ling [00:17:35] But then as you got older, you were more than capable of taking care of yourself.

Ryan Wong [00:17:41] Yes. Well, now. Well, I think because when you start something, you have to finish, just because it stops in 12th grade. I guess if they had college, we probably would still be forced to be going to Chinese school.

Susan Dickson [00:17:55] Well, you want—talked about the competition that they had in Chinese school. Do you want to tell us about that?

Ryan Wong [00:18:02] Okay, yeah. So I—joking between me and my friends versus my wife where I met in Chinese school, she and all her cousins are there more to hang out. So, Vivi, my wife, is with all her first cousins. They're always at the back of the room. And our Chinese school teacher, they're so polite, they never shout at us. They never hit us on



the hand with a ruler. No, that's just a myth. So I'm always in the front of the class, because to me, again, it's a game. I want to beat the game. I'm always 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place. The main reason I did it is because there's always the prize. The prize at the end of the year, it's like 200 bucks or 3[00]. That's a lot of money back then. I started working at age fourteen. I was only making \$3.35 an hour. I mean, 200 bucks is a lot of money. So we did it for that reason.

Susie Ling [00:18:59] So what was the game that you had to—?

Ryan Wong [00:19:01] No, no, I mean.

Susie Ling [00:19:03] What was the contest?

Ryan Wong [00:19:05] Chinese school is a—of all the quizzes, of all the tests you get, you get a certain score. So each person get a tally of a total score. So by the end of the school academic year, whose got the highest score wins 1st place, 2nd place, or 3rd place. That's how our Chinese school works. And that's for every single class. There's always the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd prize for every single class of Chinese school.

Susie Ling [00:19:26] And did you receive those prizes?

Ryan Wong [00:19:27] Every year, I'm always 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place.

Susie Ling [00:19:31] Congratulations. So you are rich.

Ryan Wong [00:19:34] And all this, my parents have no clue. Because even our report cards, you remember, they're always working as long as the principal doesn't call them, no news is good news. So luckily, we turned out to hang out with the right people that think school is fun. So.

Susie Ling [00:19:54] Is Vivi, your wife, also of Cambodian Chinese descent? I'm curious.

Ryan Wong [00:19:59] So she is, she's born in the—whole family born in Vietnam. We met on this side of the world. So I came to California in August of 1979. She came in September of 1979. Coincidentally, we met at this side of the world.

Susie Ling [00:20:14] And she was a refugee from Vietnam.

Ryan Wong [00:20:17] From Vietnam? Yeah. Also went to Castelar, also Chinese school. Yeah.

Susie Ling [00:20:21] And her family also immediately came to Chinatown.

Ryan Wong [00:20:27] Correct. Straight from Vietnam.

Susie Ling [00:20:28] Because of the accessible resources and employment opportunities, et cetera. And she also has a gaggle of cousins, as you do.

Ryan Wong [00:20:37] Yes, yes, yes.



Susie Ling [00:20:38] Interesting. Now you mention that you did not know that the Confucius Chinese School was actually established by the CCBA [Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association] in 1952. You had no understanding—

Ryan Wong [00:20:49] Correct. No, I did not know that until this past weekend when I was reading about the CCBA.

Susie Ling [00:20:54] And it was the intention of CCBA to help the community. And it seems like in your example, they were actually able to exactly provide the resources that that your family needed.

Ryan Wong [00:21:10] Yes, yes it did. I mean, I—so because my three college age kids are already moving out of the house, so we have a lot more time to be more involved with our community now. You know, there are so many, so many nonprofit organizations that sprung up to help the community that those that are benefiting now doesn't even know where it came from. And it's our turn to be giving back now. I think it's, life comes full circle. And I think what the Chinese school, it basically created an afterschool care and an afterschool habitat—

Susie Ling [00:21:48] Community.

Ryan Wong [00:21:48] —where you get to learn other things that normal Castelar Elementary School doesn't teach you. But I'm sure most kids that were there at that time, we said, it felt at times felt like, we'd rather be playing basketball or hanging out with friends at some store somewhere. Looking back, again, I wish I had studied harder.

Susie Ling [00:22:13] Well, as you said, you learned other skills, like social skills and camaraderie and forming relationships. It was not easy being Chinese in Los Angeles, and did the school perhaps also provide a buffer for you? You know, from.

Ryan Wong [00:22:36] I think it's because—

Susie Ling [00:22:37] —the harder elements?

Ryan Wong [00:22:38] I think because of the buffer it created, we didn't feel that we weren't liked. We didn't know. We didn't, we didn't feel anything at all. We were in our, in our circle, in our safety net, that somebody else created for us. Again, we did not feel we were not welcome. We felt Chinatown was ours. It was our home. It was comfortable.

Susie Ling [00:22:59] That's great. Well said. Did you go to Belmont High?

Ryan Wong [00:23:04] No, I was bused out. So we get to Castelar at six in the morning, and I was bused out to Van Nuys High School.

Susie Ling [00:23:11] And you did not feel the pressure of being an immigrant kid at Van Nuys High School?

Ryan Wong [00:23:21] No, because again, we had like, I don't know, eight buses, nine buses. I mean, we were the majority, I think. So no, at any moment of my 50 year life so



far, I don't feel that I'm not the mainstream. Everywhere I've been so far is because of the path that someone has set for us. Maybe it's also because we also hang out in big groups of friends all the time. So the friends are your family. But we never felt that we were picked on.

Susie Ling [00:23:55] Wow. So even driving to, busing to Van Nuys, you're still coming back to the Chinese school?

Ryan Wong [00:24:07] Yes. So, throughout our junior high and our high school time again, we have to get to Castelar by six in the morning for our school bus to pick us up. And it's probably eight or nine stops before it gets to, I went to Mount Gleason Junior High and Van Nuys Math/Science Magnet High School. Pick up at six, we don't get to Van Nuys High School till eight a.m. So two hours commute. In the afternoon and coming back is even worse, right? School, get out at three. But with the afternoon traffic, we don't get back to Castelar until six p.m., so six to six. But six to six, these two hours commuting to school and three hours commuting back, those are your friends time. We're all on the bus. We're all having fun. We're all singing. We're all chanting. So that is our bonding time. So we don't see it as a bad thing, we look forward to that. I know it sounds odd. I mean, why would you look forward to the commute? But that's a fun time.

Susie Ling [00:25:05] Very interesting. So you stopped going to Chinese school?

Ryan Wong [00:25:09] No, no. Chinese school—

Susie Ling [00:25:10] [Laughs] What time?

Ryan Wong [00:25:11] So once we come back at six, it's too late. So we switch over to weekends. So we go on Saturday and Sundays.

Susie Ling [00:25:18] And Sundays.

Ryan Wong [00:25:19] Because we no longer go Monday to Friday, our parents switch us over to Saturday and Sunday.

Susie Ling [00:25:24] And what is that schedule?

Ryan Wong [00:25:27] That's I think 12 to three or something.

Susie Ling [00:25:32] You know, you must have heard there's cartoons and other kinds of—

Ryan Wong [00:25:39] I mean, we—I know Susan asked me to look for some pictures, and I don't even think we owned cameras back then. So I found a few from my cousins that I will share later.

Susie Ling [00:25:50] Thank you.



Ryan Wong [00:25:50] But I'm the opposite now. Now on every vacation that we go to, and we do four to six vacations a year, and I take at least a thousand pictures. I love taking pictures, just that none I found from my childhood.

Susie Ling [00:26:06] Because you guys were always just kind of making do and didn't really have vacations or—?

Ryan Wong [00:26:14] I don't think we had a vacation when I was young but no, I can't blame Mom and Dad. They are working hard as well. And they were probably working harder than we were going to school. But everything, everybody does things for a reason. That's why today people say why our generation spoiled the younger generation? Because we always want to give them what we couldn't have, right? Hopefully, without spoiling them, we're just trying to introduce them to other ways of life, that's all.

Susie Ling [00:26:44] After Van Nuys High School, can we ask what your path was?

Ryan Wong [00:26:50] Yes, yes. Okay. Because of the Confucius teaching, I am quite old school, I think I'm very old school. Traditional old school way of thinking. I'll start with what I mandate for my boys, first. When they graduate from Arcadia High, undergrad, you must go to California university. Okay? For your graduate, you can go anywhere you want in the world. Now, with that same mindset, when I graduated from Van Nuys High, I only applied to the UC's, just Southern California. So I went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] for my undergrad. Again, school was easy. I guess I'm just good at test taking. Graduated summa cum laude. One B plus my whole life. Went straight on to the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] as a field tax auditor. Then I left to Ernst & Young, that's one of the big four public accounting firms, who paid for my USC [University of Southern California], Master's in business taxation. So, school is a stepping stone. Everybody needs it. Don't fight it. You might as well learn all you can so you can go up to your next career path. By the time you want to learn, like me, trying to pick up Chinese, is a little too late I think.

Susie Ling [00:28:09] It's never too late. In 2003, the Chinatown Library was established in its permanent location. Now, we're very proud of it, you know, brick and mortar structure. And you, of course, had moved on, but now you're coming back to the Chinatown Library.

Ryan Wong [00:28:34] What do you mean by that? Sorry. When I was there, it was already there the whole time.

Susie Ling [00:28:39] It was in a bungalow at Castelar, remember?

Susan Dickson [00:28:42] No, no, no, it was attached to the school. It was the former—I think, I wasn't there yet, but—

Ryan Wong [00:28:51] The Chinese school or the library?

Susie Ling [00:28:53] The library. It was a room, you know, like an auditorium. Then it became a trailer.



Ryan Wong [00:28:59] Yes, yes.

Susan Dickson [00:29:01] Not when I was here.

Susie Ling [00:29:04] Well, now it's off the grounds of Castelar.

Ryan Wong [00:29:07] Okay. Okay. Sorry. I thought you were referring to the Chinese school. So the Chinese school has always been there, but yes, for the library, it used to be part of the auditorium before it moved to the corner facing French Hospital. Yeah. So again, we just thought it was the library. We have no idea that it was part of the school that got pulled out. We had no idea.

Susie Ling [00:29:31] But now of course as I was saying, it has its own identity as a branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. I believe it's the second most busy library in the Los Angeles system. And you have now come back to Friends of the Chinatown Library. Expand—explain again what your goals are, on an individual level, and then for the institution.

Ryan Wong [00:29:58] Okay. How I got involved, with the Chinatown library. One of my junior high friends, from Chinatown area. She was asking, I guess, because Mr. Hoover Louie was preparing a tax return for a while, and she was asking to see if I would be interested in helping out the Chinese library there [to] prepare some tax returns. I initially said, sure. I mean, I have 60 people here. I can volunteer one of my people to do the tax return. As we started talking, there was a board position open, and Vivi and I attended a couple of the board meetings, just as normal members. And that's how we got more and more involved in the Library, and we started to realize—now Vivi, my wife, she volunteers quite a bit. I mean, she's a full-time volunteer at the Arcadia School District. Since our kids started at 2nd grade, 3rd grade all the way 'til 12th grade. I mean, she's involved with the PTA [Parent Teacher Association], the PTSA [Parent Teacher Student Association]. But we see that volunteering at Arcadia versus volunteering at Chinatown is, oh my God. It's night and day. It seemed like at Arcadia, I mean our community there, I don't think anyone needs help. It's just to keep the moms busy, it feels like. But now in Chinatown, when we, whatever we're doing, in the one hour that we provide, it feels like it has a much further reach. And I mean, one of my partners here, John Lin, his wife, teaches at Castelar. One of my CPA partner's wife teaches at Castelar. And I've been challenging her for a while. This is 10, 15 years back. There's no PTA, no PTSA at Castelar. I would love to sponsor. We will contribute to start. And she couldn't find enough parents to even be interested. And it kind of makes sense because everyone's so busy doing what they do for themselves, right? There's no time for them to take a step back to see what else does our community needs. So no, we are blessed that we can finally be able to see how the community can benefit from us now. The other way around. Again, I think things happen for a reason.

Susie Ling [00:32:33] What are your goals as president of the Friends of the Chinatown Library?

Ryan Wong [00:32:37] Oh, I'm still so impressed with one of the librarians there, Lynn, she seems to be a community activist. And whatever the library's doing now, it seemed to me that's not even just library functions. It's community events. So those are what's getting us



more and more excited to be involved. But that's probably a better question for my wife, which I thought she should be president. [Laughs]

Susie Ling [00:33:08] So your goal perhaps is to support the staff, as they are very competent and already have a direction.

Ryan Wong [00:33:17] Yeah.

Susie Ling [00:33:17] So you're—okay. Now as someone, my last question, as someone who's been, as you said, with Chinatown or knowing of Chinatown for 45 years or so, what is your concerns and impression of Los Angeles Chinatown today?

Ryan Wong [00:33:38] I mean, nothing to do with the library or Castelar. It just feels like when you drive down through Chinatown or when you have relatives or friends coming into town, I mean, we go to Chinatown just to visit Chinatown, but it doesn't feel like Chinatown anymore. It feels like it's a forgotten town. I mean, it's sad. Emotional. That's how everyone interprets it. But how can we turn it back to the shiny day of what Chinatown should be? That's a bigger question.

Susie Ling [00:34:12] Like in the 1980s when you were there?

Ryan Wong [00:34:15] Yes. Yes.

Susie Ling [00:34:16] Were you involved in Chinese New Year at that time and running around the streets?

Ryan Wong [00:34:20] So, we're talking about all different types of associations. So, Chiuchow does have an association and it's still there now, but they moved on to Broadway and Savoy, I believe. So every year, the Chinese New Year parade, we are always part of that organization because they give us, like 20 bucks each just to hold those, that certain type of display. There would be like 50 of us that are all part of that organization. So that was fun, too. Something for us to do and to celebrate culture and Chinese New Year.

Susie Ling [00:34:57] So most of your—are you saying that there was a huge Chiuchow young people group at that time?

Ryan Wong [00:35:05] So, Chiuchow, although I'm Chiuchownese, I cannot recognize another Chiuchownese. We could not recognize each other until you say something. So at UCLA, I have eight best friends from college. Two are my partners now here at the CPA firm, and we are two Chiuchownese. We didn't know. We just happened to be one meeting another. And as we're speaking, another one joins. So eight of my best friends from my UCLA days turned out to be all Chiuchownese. But again, we cannot recognize each other and all of our family, all from similar backgrounds, either from Vietnam or from Cambodia. That's how we all made it here. So I guess you just build on those similarities among your background.

Susie Ling [00:36:02] It may be more than coincidence then, it sounds like. I think there's a drive that you see in each other that might be a commonality, unspoken commonality.



Ryan Wong [00:36:15] Although it's such a small ethnic group. My three boys used to be fluent in Chiuchownese before going to primary school. So after they come back from 1st, 2nd grade, no, they don't want to speak Chiuchownese anymore. [Laughs] Use or lose, right?

Susie Ling [00:36:35] Do they speak Cantonese?

Ryan Wong [00:36:37] Yes, they speak Cantonese. They are—so we forced them to go to Mandarin school, so it's conversational, but again, it's use or lose. We have to practice it. If not, English is the only language.

Susie Ling [00:36:53] Well, you really enlightened us as far as you know, the function of Chinatown and the associations, especially in the 80s. And then a little bit in the 90s when you were older. Do you have any—?

Susan Dickson [00:37:09] Okay. I wanted to go a little bit back to Chinese school. So how many students were in a class at Chinese school?

Susie Ling [00:37:18] How many classes?

Susan Dickson [00:37:19] Yeah. How many classes were there?

Ryan Wong [00:37:21] Okay. So first, so kindergarten through 6th grade. We started with that, junior high and high school came in later. So each grade has two classes. Each class has about 40 kids. And our playground wasn't that big, because it's right behind that Pace Head Start area of Castelar. So ping pong was the biggest sport there. Everybody plays ping pong. The national anthem. So right before the beginning of school session, we have to [recite] the Taiwanese national anthem. I still can recite it by heart. I don't know what it says. [Laughs] I don't know what it means, but I can recite the whole anthem. So again, Chinese school. I wish if they can turn it—again, us as parents now, you can't make a kid do anything but you as the parent, you have to trick them to want to do it. How do you turn it around to make them want to do it? If they can make it fun? Oh, geez, I think it's—but it seemed like it was a drag for everybody. We don't want to be here, but we have to be here. But if you can change that mindset, I think it goes a long way.

Susan Dickson [00:38:41] Now, how expensive was it to go in those days?

Ryan Wong [00:38:48] I don't, let me see—I know that when we got that price at the end of the year, probably 20 bucks, 40 bucks each month. It must be affordable if my parents could have done it.

Susan Dickson [00:39:09] So things are depending on who the teachers are there, did you ever do anything like Chinese painting or any of the cultural things?

Ryan Wong [00:39:20] So besides singing all of the folklore songs, one of my favorite topics is the Chinese calligraphy. I still write that just for fun nowadays. It seems like artwork.



Susan Dickson [00:39:37] So let's see. But was there ever a break and then you played or something in between classes or things like that?

Ryan Wong [00:39:48] There is recess, so recess is about 15, 20 minutes. We probably—two breaks and three sessions of class each day.

Susan Dickson [00:40:01] Now, how did they pick who's in what class? Did they have like an advanced class and then another class or how did that go?

Ryan Wong [00:40:09] So, like, for all of my cousins, when we all first got there, we were all in kindergarten. So everybody gets into the same class, and then as you progressed, they will move you up. No, it's not like we're 1st grade, you have to go to 2nd grade, you have to go to 3rd grade. It's whether you progress or not.

Susan Dickson [00:40:30] Okay. I'm trying to think—anything else about the school—

Susie Ling [00:40:31] Did all your cousins go all the way through 12th grade, too?

Ryan Wong [00:40:35] No, no, most of them left right at 6th grade. So that's their way out.

Susie Ling [00:40:41] When they finished the Cantonese program. And they were old enough to stay home. Did your parents stay in Chinatown through your high school years, it sounds like?

Ryan Wong [00:40:50] Yes. We moved three times. It's just two house down each time, on Figueroa Terrace. But my parents move away when I started UCLA, that's when they moved down to Orange County. Because they started a business down there.

Susie Ling [00:41:08] A restaurant?

Ryan Wong [00:41:09] Yeah, a restaurant business.

Susan Dickson [00:41:13] So his mother still cooks a lot for the family.

Ryan Wong [00:41:15] Yeah. Actually, my brother and I were just at mom's house for lunch today.

Susie Ling [00:41:21] You're a fortunate person.

Ryan Wong [00:41:23] Oh, she loves to cook.

Susie Ling [00:41:25] You're a fortunate person. Are we done? So, thank you, of course, Mr. Wong, for sharing with us your understanding of Chinatown. Today is August 13th, 2024, and this is Susie Ling with Susan Dickson finishing up for the Chinese Historical Society. Thank you.

Ryan Wong [00:41:45] Thank you.