Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Chinese Americans in California Series

Thomas W. Chinn
A Historian's Reflections on Chinese-American Life in San Francisco, 1919-1991

Includes an interview with Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn

With an Introduction by Lim P. Lee

Interviews Conducted by Ruth Teiser in 1990 and 1991

Underwritten by the Thomas and Eva Fong Foundation

The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Project Description

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Use Restrictions

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

> Thomas W. Chinn, "A Historian's Reflections On Chinese-American Life in San Francisco, 1919-1991," an oral history conducted in 1990 and 1991 by Ruth Teiser, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993.

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Obituaries

Thomas Chinn

Tuesday, September 16, 1997
San Francisco Chronicle

Thomas Wayne Chinn, an eminent author, cultural historian and authority on the history of the Chinese people in America, died Thursday after surgery in San Francisco. He was 88.

Mr. Chinn was the founder, publisher and editor of the Chinese Digest, the first English language weekly newspaper for Chinese Americans in the United States. In 1940, he also founded the Chinese News, which he published and edited.

He was the primary founder of the Chinese Historical Society of America, now a nationally known organization, and served as its president in 1972 and 1973. From 1963 to 1980, he was editor of the Society's research papers and its monthly bulletin.

Mr. Chinn was born in Marshfield, Oregon, in 1909 and moved to San Francisco with his family in 1919.

In the early 1930s, he became increasingly interested in the history of the Chinese in California, later broadening his interest to the history of Chinese immigration in the United States.

Since his maternal grandfather arrived in California in 1849, he qualified for membership in the Society of California Pioneers. He also served on the board of trustees of the California Historical Society.

In 1966, he began serving on the Mayor's Citizens Committee, working within San Francisco's Chinese community and the broader multiethnic community.

In 1987 he received the city's prestigious Powers Memorial Award for distinguished service in enhancing San Francisco's "historic renown."

A member of the Boy Scouts of America since 1921, he also received the Silver Beaver Award for "distinguished service to boyhood."

In 1969, Mr. Chinn was editor of "A History of the Chinese in America — A Syllabus," which is now in its sixth reprinting. The same year, he presented a paper at the World Conference on Records in Salt Lake City, entitled "Genealogical Sources of Chinese Immigrants to the United States."

Between 1972 and 1976, he was the chairman of the first national Conference on the Life, Influence and Role of the Chinese in the United States.

A prolific writer, Mr. Chinn wrote dozens of books and articles, as well as making tape recordings of his reminiscences for the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California at Berkeley's Bancroft Library. The tapes have been transcribed into a 286-page book: "A Historian's Reflection of Chinese-American Life in San Francisco, 1919-1991."

He is also the author of a history of Chinatown: "Bridging the Pacific, San Francisco Chinatown and Its People," published in 1989.

A lifelong Freemason, Mr. Chinn was a member of E. Clampus Vitus, the Society of California Pioneers and the California Historical Society.

He is survived by his son, Walter W. Chinn, and his daughter-in-law, Fran Chinn, of San Mateo, three grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

A visitation will be held today at noon at the Green Street Mortuary, 649 Green St. in San Francisco. The funeral service is scheduled from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. at the mortuary, followed by interment at the Olivet Memorial Park in Colma.

Contributions in Mr. Chinn's memory may be made to On Lok Senior Health Services, 1333 Bush St., San Francisco, 94109.

— *J. L. Pimsleur*

Cataloging Information

CHINN, Thomas W. (b. 1909) historian

A Historian's Reflections on Chinese-American Life in San Francisco, 1919-1991, 1993, v, 286 pp.

Chinn family, Oregon; San Francisco's Chinatown, 1920s: Oriental School education, family associations, Boy Scouts, learning Chinese, trip to China, 1924; starting the *Chinese Digest*, 1935-1937; impact of WWII on attitudes toward China and Chinese Americans; interest in Chinese-American history, studies, Chinese Historical Society of America; linotype business, 1937-1980, career in printing trade: customers, printing United Nations Charter, fine printing; community service, historical societies; publishing *Bridging the Pacific*, 1989; discussion of ethnic and minority identity, changes in Chinese-American community. Includes an interview with Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn on family; education UC Berkeley; career with Western Union, 1929-1971; and the Square and Circle Club.

Introduction by Lim P. Lee, Former San Francisco Postmaster.

Interviewed 1990 and 1991 for the Chinese Americans in California Oral History Series. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Acknowledgements

The Regional Oral History Office, on behalf of future researchers, wishes to thank

the Thomas and Eva Fong Foundation

whose contribution made possible this oral history of Thomas W. Chinn

Introduction—by Lim P. Lee

I first became acquainted with Thomas W. Chinn when we were Boy Scouts together in the same troop in San Francisco in 1922. This led to a friendship that has continued to the present.

I remember when he first actively started his life's work in Chinese-American history. That was in 1935. Over the years Tom's inexhaustible fervor in all his endeavors led him constantly to new heights in the many activities he undertook.

Like a bulldog he was tenacious; he was thorough; his idea often differed from those of his many Chinese friends. What set him apart, for instance, was his constant desire not to follow the attitude of being satisfied with remaining in Chinatown; in daring to seek new friends and opportunities outside of these invisible boundaries.

Ever since I knew him he was an avid reader. He made the public library his second home. During his after-work hours, he attended Heald's College, took correspondence courses, and also attended UC Extension. He did not by any means desert his Chinatown. He was very active in many of its activities.

After he organized the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1963, he threw his heart and soul into nurturing the small group into a nationally recognized organization. The small museum that opened in 1966 drew visitors from around the globe and is operated free of charge.

Tom finally retired in 1980, at the age of seventy-two. But he has continued to keep himself busy—writing, giving occasional talks, attending different affiliations' meetings whenever possible.

Being the genial and generous person that he is, he has devoted over half a century helping people from all walks of life who wanted information on the Chinese in America. His society and the many similar new organizations are testimony that Tom has not labored in vain.

I believe the autograph in a new book on the Chinese by a college professor friend best describes him: "To Thomas, who set us all on the exciting path of discovering our proud heritage."

Lim P. Lee
Former San Francisco Postmaster
January 23, 1993
San Francisco, California

Interview History—by Ruth Teiser

Bridging the Pacific, San Francisco Chinatown and its People is the first comprehensive account of a typical and significant segment of this major bi-cultural community. The book's publication in 1989 was the fortunate result of Thomas W. Chinn's many years of study of people of Chinese heritage who, like him, are Americans who have brought together two cultures in California. Mr. Chinn is a thoughtful man of inquiring intellect, a self-taught researcher and scholar who has spent most of his life in San Francisco. His absorbing interest in his fellow Chinese-Americans and their history began when at the age of fifteen he visited China for the first time, going to his father's village where he heard recollections of "sojourners" who told him tales of their lives in California.

While much material about Chinese people in California has been sentimentalized, romanticized, sometimes sensationalized, and is often condescending, Mr. Chinn writes and speaks as a level-eyed but tactful observer with high regard for accuracy. A career in journalism and printing, as well as excursions in other work-a-day occupations, have given him an understanding of the realities of life for Chinese-Americans. In his selection of material to present in *Bridging the Pacific*, his moderate views and consideration for his fellows of dual cultures prevailed. Much is known but little admitted about earlier generations' conditions of immigration. Avoiding reports which might prejudice their and their descendants' status as citizens or legal residents was a problem for the author, who chose instead to present a number of informative accounts of his own family.

The interviewer, who had met Mr. Chinn in the 1960s through printing industry associates and had later interviewed him about his own work in Chinese-American oral history, saw the possibility that an informal account of his career could be significant in itself and lay a foundation for important further historical documentation of the background of contemporary Chinese-Americans. Mr. Chinn was generous in his willingness to participate, as was Mrs. Chinn, whose reminiscence adds a second perspective.

The twelve interview sessions were held in San Francisco between December 1990 and March 1991, the first in a meeting room in the downtown apartment building where Mr. and Mrs. Chinn live. Subsequent sessions were held at the home of the interviewer on Russian Hill. Outlines of suggested subjects for discussion were provided in advance by the interviewer, and both Mr. and Mrs. Chinn came well prepared. Mr. Chinn brought notes. Both reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and made minor corrections and a few additions.

The Regional Oral History Office is grateful to the Thomas and Eva Fong Foundation for making possible this important contribution to the history of the Chinese in California, and to Thomas and Daisy L. Wong Chinn for the thought and candor which went into their accounts. Historians, present and future, will find them valuable for the light they throw upon the lives and accomplishments of an important part of the American population. Our hope is that this interview will inspire the creation of others, to engender a new body of material to add to our knowledge and understanding of Americans of Chinese heritage.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Willa K. Baum and under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer/editor
January 1993
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Biographical Information

Regional Oral History Office Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California Berkeley, California 94720

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name: Thomas Wayne Chinn

Date of birth: July 28, 1909

Birthplace: Oregon

Father's full name: Chin Wing

Occupation: Cook

Birthplace: China

Mother's full name: Chinn Lee Shee Wing

Occupation: Housewife

Birthplace: China

Your spouse: Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn

Your children: Walter Wayne Chinn

Where did you grow up?: First 10 years in Oregon; then San Francisco

Present community: San Francisco

Education: Public schools, Oregon and San Francisco; Heald's College; University of Calif. Extension, S. F.

Occupation(s): Typographic business-owner

Areas of expertise: Chinese American history

Other interests or activities: Reading; all sports, and Chinatown and City civic activities.

Organizations in which you are active: (Historical) California Historical Society; Society of California Pioneers; Chinese Historical Society of America; S. F. Corral of Westerners; E Clampus Vitus. Others: Boy Scouts, Y.M.C.A., Masonic, Scottish Rite, Shriners.

Biographical Information

Regional Oral History Office Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California Berkeley, California 94720

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name: Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn

Date of birth: Nov. 8, 1908

Birthplace: San Francisco, Ca.

Father's full name: Walter Fie Wong

Occupation: Herbalist

Birthplace: San Francisco

Mother's full name: Annie Haw

Occupation: Housewife

Birthplace: San Francisco

Your spouse: Thomas Wayne Chinn

Your children: Walter Wayne Chinn

Where did you grow up?: San Francisco (briefly Stockton and Hanford, Ca in early years.

Present community: S. F.

Education: Oriental Grammar School, Girls' High School, 2 yrs U. C. Berkeley.

Occupation(s): With the advent of teletype Communications in 1930, was hired as teletypist by Western Union. Retired as branch manager in 1971.

Areas of expertise: General Chinese American history.

Other interests or activities: Music, football, tennis, handicrafts and community service.

Organizations in which you are active: Charter member in 1963 of Chinese Historical Society of America (16 yrs. proofreading its monthly "Bulletin" as a volunteer). One of 7 founders of Square & Circle Club, a Chinese women's service organization in 1924 and now in its 68th year.

I Forebears

##[1]

Forty-niner Grandfather

Teiser: I'll ask you the first question that we always ask, and then I'll go back a little bit. When and where were you born?

Chinn: I was born in Marshfield, Coos Bay County, Oregon, on July 28, 1909.

Teiser: Let's start, then, going back as far as we can, to your grandfather, your mother's father, who had come to the United States earlier. What was his name?

Chinn: Lee Man Bien.

Teiser: What year did he come?

Chinn: Eighteen forty-nine.

Teiser: To the mines?

Chinn: Well, he came to San Francisco to try and get work in the mines and see if he couldn't make a living out of it and be able to bring home some money—a small fortune. But I guess, even as early as that, he didn't have any idea how to mine, how to dig for gold, and so he was largely unsuccessful in the mines. But he persisted for quite a long time, joining in with a group

1. This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or portion of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes, see end of interview.

of other Chinese with whom he formed a friendship. They tried going around on their own prospecting, but without much luck.

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Teiser: What communities did he go to?

Chinn: I have no knowledge of that, because my mother was never able to understand; that was before she was born.

Teiser: Did he go back to China then?

Chinn: No, he came back to the cities, like Stockton, and sometimes Sacramento and San Francisco, looking for employment—anything to make money to send back to the family. Unfortunately, this was when he was a very young man; he was only around seventeen or eighteen or thereabouts. I have no idea of the exact period. He stayed as long as he could, working in different jobs, and finally he went back to China on one of these periodic visits many Chinese made over their sojourn in this country.

I don't know whether it was on his first visit or his second visit that he married. My mother wasn't able to tell us exactly when he married or the other factors, because she was not born until 1872.

Teiser: Did he then stay in China?

Chinn: No. The Chinese in those early days worked enough so they could send money or bring money back home, but it was only sufficient for a short period and then they'd run out; so they had to come back [to America]. They always had intended coming back, but they wanted to go back [to China] so they could get married and raise a family. Then they would come back and work again.

Finally, within a few months after my mother was born, my grandfather and grandmother had a big quarrel because she wanted him to stay home in spite of the fact that they didn't have much money. But he wanted to come back and hit it big. Anyway, they had a falling out and a quarrel, and he came back to America. He never did go back. He worked for a little while building the transcontinental railroad. From there he went to the San Joaquin Valley and worked in some of the reclamation projects that were prevalent and available to the Chinese, and also at farming, when he could, as a helper.

Shortly thereafter, probably in the late 1870s or early 1880s—we have never found out any trace of him, but we do know that he passed away in the San Joaquin Valley.

Teiser: So that's the last record you have of him?

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Chinn: That's the last record my mother had, because her mother gave as much information as she could, but she [my mother] was just a child then.

Teiser: Did your grandfather continue sending money throughout his life?

Chinn: All the way up to the end, yes. But they never were able to find out where he was buried, where his remains were, or anyone who could describe how he passed away, whether it was from sickness or disease or what. We have tried, over the years, to find out if we could find

any trace of him in these temporary Chinese temples, shops where records were kept, or other places such as tombstones, but we weren't able to find out anything.

Parents

Teiser: Did your mother, then, feel that she had some connection with the United States before she came here?

Chinn: Yes, but she was not alone; there was my aunt. My aunt was older, and my mother was the younger. They were finally orphans when my grandmother passed away, so they stayed in the village in China, raised by village members, distant relatives. In the meantime, my father, who was born in 1861, had come over here in the 1870s. Periodically he would go back, and he married and had two children, a boy and a girl.

Teiser: May I ask your mother's name?

Chinn: My mother's name is Chrysanthemum Lee; Lee is her clan, family, name.

Teiser: And your father's name?

Chinn: Chin Wing.

Teiser: I interrupted you. Your mother came—

Chinn: My mother and my aunt were raised by villagers, and these two orphans were considered to be sort of spinsters because they were in their twenties before they were able to find a husband. However, my father, with his first marriage when he went back subsequently, had a boy and a girl. In the early 1890s his first wife passed away. My father, who was back here in Oregon, went back to China looking for a wife. One of the sisters was recommended to him, so he went to this village and found out he

liked my mother and married her. Before he came back, he had a daughter by my mother in China.

He left them there because he had no way of going away to work and leaving her alone [in America]. So she stayed home [in China] until 1906, when my father went back there early that year. He had in the meantime decided that he wanted his family here in America because he saw the greater opportunities and the chance to make a decent living here, in spite of all the problems they had with the Caucasians. So he went back [to China] in 1906, intending to bring his wife and daughter back to California. But the big San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 turned everything upside down, and he was not able to bring them here that year. He stayed in China, and my mother became pregnant again for the second time in 1907, when my father finally said, "Well, we will now try and come over here [to America] again." So my father and mother arrived with their daughter in 1907.

Father's Early Experiences in America

Teiser: Let me go back, if I may, to your father's arrival. He first came in the late 1870s. Do you know exactly when?

Chinn: We have no idea when he came.

Teiser: That was before the Exclusion Act?

Chinn: Yes. The Exclusion Act wasn't until 1882.

Teiser: So he came freely?

Chinn: He came freely, yes.

Teiser: Do you know from speaking with him what it was like for him to come here? What did he find when he first came here?

Chinn: When he first came he was a boy. He decided he would go look around for gold, and found out that it was altogether strange for most Chinese men who came over here, because in China they didn't go digging in the ground for gold; there was no such thing. So any sort of an attempt to look for gold was just by chance, digging around or, by the late 1870s and '80s, just following the white miners and working their tailings over again, picking up a few specks of gold here and there. My father finally decided he was barely doing more than making a living, so he decided he would

go back to the cities and try and find a job or find a way of making money one way or another.

Luckily, he found a couple of neighbors in China that he knew who were working in San Francisco as cooks, so he gradually started working for them as a helper and learning how to cook. Gradually he became skillful enough to find cooking jobs for himself. I remember that much later, when I was older, I asked him how he was able to learn English. He replied, "Anyone can learn anything if they keep their eyes and ears open," and he was unafraid to ask questions with regard to words or phrases he couldn't understand. By being able to speak for himself without an interpreter, he was able to get a job in Coos Bay, Oregon, as a lumber camp cook. This was the break he was looking for, and cooking became his life's work.

Teiser: He must have done fairly well, then.

Chinn: Yes, in a minor way. Because when he became a cook, he made the magnificent sum of $15 a month. Finally, when he became proficient and went out into the forest with the cutters [loggers], away from the mills, traveling with the gangs, he had to cook morning, noon, and night for these gangs. He was the only cook, and then they gave him the magnificent sum of one $20 gold piece a month. That was the money Dad was able to save to build a house for my mother. He also invested in a small way in other real estate.

Teiser: Was he sending money back to China all this time, too?

Chinn: He was sending money right along. That money, even $5 or any sum of money, was something that was better than nothing in China, because back there there was no way for them to earn a living as a worker. There was no business area where people would hire outsiders to work; there were just small family businesses that utilized their family or relatives. There was no such thing as manufacturing, no such things as large corporations in our entire area in those days.

Teiser: What had your father's family done? What was their occupation?

Chinn: Mainly farmers. They just had a few miserable acres that they farmed. That was prevalent all the way through China, not only just in Canton or Kwangtung province, because there was no

such thing as corporations or big business, as I say, and anything that they manufactured would not have a market for sale. So all they did was farm, and if the crop was bad they suffered famine, a shortage of food. There were many families who died because of the famine because they didn't have enough food. Then bandits

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were prevalent, and fights between larger groups turned into wars which ruined many villages and small towns.

That was why so many Chinese people like my father were desperate enough, when they learned that gold was discovered in California, to come to California from south China.

— 7 —

II The Chinn[2] Family in Oregon, 1907-1919[3]

Chinese Family Associations

Teiser: When your father came here and settled down—if settling down it was, since he was away so much working—did he join any of the Chinese associations in North Bend?

Chinn: No, because in all of Coos Bay County, Oregon, there were only three Chinese families. Therefore, no associations. But in large towns where many Chinese lived, associations generally found roots. Then, too, Chinese only joined their own family associations, one in which you automatically belong. It's just like if you were a Smith, you belonged to the Smith family clan; if you were a Taylor or a Teiser, that became your family association.

Teiser: What was the name of your father's family association?

Chinn: Chin; that was the family name.

Teiser: Was it a large one?

Chinn: It's one of the largest in China and also numerous in America.

Teiser: Is it? And what benefit, if any, did it afford him here?

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Chinn: Many of the Chinese, when they couldn't find work, had to live somehow, so the family association that took in assessments from working members was able with this money to either build a little shack or a building to provide lodging and food for those unemployed. That was the beginning of the family associations in America.

Teiser: Was the money they took in dues from the members?

Chinn: Yes, for those who were working; anyone who could afford to pay, paid. You might say this was the system used prior to the Social Security program begun in the 1930s. Prior to that time the Chinese always took care of their own. That's why you never found any Chinese beggars

2. Chin was the English name written on father's first passport. Later, in San Francisco in the 1920s, we children changed our last name to Chinn. T.W.C.
3. These are the dates the family was in Oregon, but my father started as a cook as early as the late 1880s in Coos Bay. T.W.C.

in America, except in one or two cases where you found a contrary person who didn't want to associate with anybody and went out and did what he could to earn a living or to keep himself fed.

Teiser: Up in North Bend, how was your father in touch with the Chinn family association?

Chinn: By correspondence; or to a business friend in San Francisco, who acted for him. I must tell you how the Chinese in America, in the beginning, managed to maintain correspondence with their folks in China. When they first arrived here, unable to understand English or how to start making a living, it was through the handful of Chinese who were able to speak some English who guided the new arrivals and helped them get started. These "interpreters" were also the ones who helped those Chinese who were unable to write letters to their families back in China to do their letter writing for them. Of course, they charged for this service, but generally not much.

Then there was the matter of letters from China. How were they addressed, when their men were constantly moving around in their need to make a living as well as to send money home? That is where the Chinese stores come into play. The Chinese generally looked for business houses run by relatives or people from their own village in China. These business houses also acted as "bankers," receiving money from busy laborers who had "messengers" from small Chinese groups working too far away to come into town to run their errands. These messengers would deliver the money or letters to the business house designated to act for these laborers. The address written from China used the business house address and then kept these letters until the addressee was able to come to the store to pick up the mail. In return, aside from actual cost of stamps or money orders, etc., which was naturally

reimbursed to the store, it was expected of each laborer that he would patronize the store for all of his needs.

This practice became routine up to as late as the 1950s, and a handful of constant "travelers" continues to this day to utilize the "care of" provision in their correspondence to and from China.

Teiser: Why did your father leave San Francisco?

Chinn: He left San Francisco because he found the opportunity for more permanent employment as a cook. He had a trade, so he left San Francisco and moved his family.

Father's Early Property Investments

Chinn: By that time, of course, after working a number of years, he had a small amount of money. One thing my father did that probably a lot of other Chinese did not do was to have the foresight to realize that California, if not America, had a greater potential for the future of his family than going back to China, where no income possibilities exist.

So when he brought his family over here he decided he would put some of his money—he had some from his years of working—into building a small house where he could put his family. Then, as the years rolled by, he bought another piece of property, and a third. But even before that he was already buying lots in Oregon, for this reason: he foresaw the possibility that immigration was going to be curtailed, because there had to be a limit; so if the exclusion

law came into effect he could say, "I am a property owner here. I've been here before, before the Exclusion Act came, and here's my proof; here's my deed. I have people, Caucasians, in the town where I live who can vouch for me." So with such proof he was able to go back and forth to China freely without worrying so much about being held up. That was one advantage he had over the average Chinese who did not have the foresight or the earning power that he had to follow his idea of buying security.

Learning English

Teiser: Did he get along well with the Caucasians, with all of his neighbors?

Chinn: Very much so, because he also decided that as long as he was going to live and raise his family here and his future was going to be in this country, he would try to learn English. To a certain extent he succeeded, because out in the logging camp there were no other Chinese who were employed as loggers, so there were Caucasians that he was associated with. While he didn't learn the best language possible, he learned enough English to get by.

Teiser: Did your mother learn English?

Chinn: No, she was always busy. After my oldest sister was born in China, all the other six of her children were born in Oregon. She was busy raising one, then another, then a third, and so forth, and she never had a chance to associate with other inhabitants of the town, where she might be socially acceptable to a white family. Of course, this would be almost impossible, because an interpreter would be needed. So she pretty much kept to herself and raised her family in the only way she knew how, and that is in the Chinese fashion. That is, teaching them to take care of themselves, cleaning them up, and eventually, as required, sending them to school. The children were the ones who learned English and were able to communicate in going to the stores to buy food for my mother between sessions when my father came home.

Chinese Equal Rights League of America

Teiser: In your book [page 90] I think you show a certificate that your father had, belonging to what would be a political action group.[4] What was the name of it?

Chinn: He subscribed to it. It was Chinese Equal Rights League of America. He joined on March 24, 1897.

Teiser: Do you know anything about that organization?

Chinn: This was the Chicago organization. Of course, this organization went wherever the Chinese were, to try and get them to support this drive to accord equal rights to those Chinese who wanted to

become citizens and to live in America. So they had to fight for their rights as early as before the turn of the century.

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4. Thomas W. Chinn, *Bridging the Pacific: San Francisco Chinatown and Its People* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1989), 90.

Our family did not move to San Francisco until after World War I, in 1919.

Teiser: That meant that if he was in North Bend, in Oregon, he was away from the immediate pressures there were here in San Francisco.

Chinn: Definitely. He was away from it during all that turmoil and—

Teiser: "The Chinese Must Go."

Chinn: Yes, that's right. However, the Chinese weren't exactly taken into any of the functions of the larger community in even the small towns like North Bend or Marshfield, Oregon.

Growing Up in North Bend

Teiser: Did your father keep in touch with the Chinese community here when he was in Oregon? Were there newspapers?

Chinn: There were a few Chinese working—when I say a few Chinese, I mean Chinese men—but there were two Chinese families, one living in Marshfield, which is a larger town than North Bend, and the other in North Bend, too far to see them except occasionally. Marshfield was the original town that we lived in and where my second sister was born, but the next year my father built two new houses in North Bend, about five miles outside of Marshfield, and moved us there. So when we moved to North Bend, all the rest of the five children were born there. It was in North Bend that we were raised and where we went to school, at least until we were able to move to San Francisco.

Teiser: As youngsters, then, did you feel discrimination?

Chinn: Not to a great extent. We only knew that we were playing, as very young children, with Caucasian boys and girls, because when we were around five or six or seven there was no such thing as discrimination. They could see that we were different, but we were still children, and so we played together without any thought of color being a factor. Those were happy times until we moved to San Francisco, because we were the only Chinese children in the school, the four of us.

Teiser: Were you good students?

Chinn: I can't even recollect, because we were in such elementary grades, first, second, and third grades. I was ten, and I was the third oldest child in a family of seven. My oldest sister, who was born in China, was married by that time—1914 or '15.

Teiser: Whom did she marry?

Chinn: A member of the Dy Foon family, a hop farmer from a small farm in Aurora, near Oregon City, which is near Portland. That left six of us who were actually born in either Marshfield or North Bend as the nucleus of the family that my mother raised, until we moved to San Francisco.

Discrimination and Violence Against Chinese

Chinn: I think at this point I can tell you why my family moved to San Francisco.

Teiser: Yes, please do.

Chinn: For several years prior to moving to San Francisco, my father and mother were trying to get us to learn as much about our own culture as possible. Because while we were far away from San Francisco and other turbulent areas where the Chinese were discriminated against, they felt a certain uneasiness about what if the country decided they didn't want any Orientals here and deported all of us, regardless?

Teiser: And there was that possibility?

Chinn: In some Caucasian minds they thought that, because they were already turning everything upside down after 1907 when we moved to Oregon. There was still so much physical activity against the Chinese that our parents felt, "What if we were forced out of making a living for ourselves and we couldn't survive here? The only place we could go back to is China."

Teiser: What do you mean by so much physical activity?

Chinn: Well, all sorts. The Chinese, prior to 1911, had pigtails. Boys and girls, young men and women, when they came up to you they would hold you and tie your pigtails together so you couldn't separate. Then they would start marching you down or whipping you, or doing all sorts of tricks on young kids. That happened

too often, but not so much in the small towns as in San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento, and Fresno. Wherever the Chinese had a small, growing community, periodically they'd come in, and although it could never be proven, sometimes they'd set fire to the Chinatown and burn it up. Then the Chinese would move to another area and start again. When you tried to fight back, like trying to punch or beat up somebody who was attacking you, then the whole gang would come up and invade Chinatown, if the Chinatown was small, and they would wreck the place, or at least try to. The Chinese knew they couldn't fight back against the numbers they had.

Teiser: I remember a man I knew who had worked on the cable cars who told of taking rolled up newspapers—maybe he got them wet so they'd be hard—and as they'd go through Chinatown they'd throw them at the Chinese.

Chinn: That was a common occurrence; that happened whenever they could get several of their friends so they could have a show of force; they'd come in there and bully the Chinese. We felt, after we moved to San Francisco, that in a way they established the "Chinatown squad" in an attempt to control lawlessness within Chinatown, whether it was caused by the Chinese themselves or by American bullies. That meant that there were San Francisco policemen in plain clothes who patrolled the area of Chinatown, and they called them the "Chinatown squad."

Teiser: I thought generally they were spoken of as an attempt to control the tong wars.

Chinn: Partly the tong wars, and partly to make sure there was no violence by any white gangs that might come in and upset the community. By that time, as you know, around the turn of the century, the tongs were losing their power—after the fire and earthquake—but they were still a potent force. When you get a group like that together and they start fighting—the lawful elements of the Chinese, those who had families and those who had businesses, finally

determined that they had to unite to fight the tongs to prevent them from ruining their community. Finally, a Chinese group called the Chinese Peace Association got the tong groups to agree to a peace and to work for the betterment of the community. Since 1924 there have been no organized tong wars. After that it dwindled, and by 1925, '26, you could hardly hear the tongs being mentioned as a fighting force at all. They still existed, but then they turned their activities into trying to do some good for the community.

Myths about the Chinese

Teiser: The tradition, or the rumors, still continued, because not so many years ago I was walking in Chinatown, and some tourists were walking along. One of them said to another, "Is it safe to go in these stores?"

Chinn: Well, that has always been perpetuated by your writers—your newspaper people and your novelists, by your magazine articles. In those days, prior to the turn of the century, there were no Chinese writers who wrote in English who tried to portray the fact that the Chinese are by nature nonviolent people. All of that half century, from 1849 to after the fire and earthquake—that's close to sixty years—the writers were mainly Caucasians, and they wrote the most extravagant portrayals of the Chinese. A few were very fair minded, like your church ministers who had Chinese churches and so forth, but by and large the bulk of your history books, your school books, portrayed the Chinese in a very indelicate manner—in as sordid a manner as possible. Naturally the school children picked it up from their textbooks—like the tong wars. Even today you get some of these people who have never been out of the Midwest or the East, who have not been exposed to any large Chinese communities or individuals, and they still are suspicious of Orientals.

Tongs and Triads

Teiser: The tongs were not just fighting groups initially, were they?

Chinn: No, they were formed originally to protect the rights of family associations that wanted to protect themselves—when family squabbles pitted one family against another. So that gave rise to this practice of having some members of their clan become enforcers, and those enforcers, in turn, became members that eventually formed tongs.

Teiser: So then they evolved into mainly fighting organizations?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Did they have a relationship to the Triads?

Chinn: They're distantly related. But that's a different organization entirely. These tongs were mainly formed over here, but in China there were the Triads, or those secret organizations. One of them they called the Chinese Masons, but they have no relationship at all with the internationally known Masonic order, though they still use some of the signs.

Teiser: I noticed in recent years when there was some gang strife among young Chinese here, they brought out the name Triads again.

Chinn: Those are your new immigrants. You have these new immigrants coming over who turned bad in large metropolitan areas like Canton and Hong Kong. They had already joined those Triad organizations as youngsters in their teens—Triad organizations known throughout China, in Beijing, Shanghai, and so forth—and when their families moved over here they had already established themselves as people who want to earn their living in the easiest way possible. That's why [they chose] bribing or trying to force protection—"I'll protect you for so much a month"—and forcing the poor shopkeeper to pay them a fee for not breaking their windows and not robbing them and so forth.

Parents' Decision to Move to San Francisco

Teiser: To return to your family—

Chinn: My family hired some Chinese men to teach us how to write and speak Chinese, and how to read. But after spending all day in an American school, and then trying to revert back to a strange language that as children we never knew except for a few words from our parents, it was very hard. We were very poor Chinese scholars. That was one of the deciding factors for my parents—"Our children are getting too Americanized; they have no Chinese friends, they have no Chinese background. We think maybe we'd better move them back to San Francisco where they can live in Chinatown and learn more about their Chinese culture."

That was the final decision that my parents made, that they'd better move back out here in spite of the fact that my father's earnings would be greater in Oregon. He thought he could get work in some restaurant or with some private family as a cook. But by that time, 1919, there was very little call for private family cooks, and certainly there were no Chinese restaurants to any great extent in those days. We did live for a little while on the

rents that my parents got from the property they had rented out to others.

Unfortunately, two things happened. In 1924 my father passed away. When the real estate broker who handled the rentals for our family—he forwarded the rents to us, minus his commission, periodically—discovered that my father wasn't alive any more, he started sending less and less money, saying that they couldn't rent out the place. After a couple of years they finally said, "Well, we can't take care of it any more." We were so young, but we found out later that they had sold the place and were no longer in business; they had skipped town. So we lost everything.

III San Francisco in the 1920s: Childhood and Adolescence

Housing and Employment Opportunities

Teiser: You came to San Francisco knowing a little Chinese?

Chinn: Very little. We found out when we moved to San Francisco that the only place we could live in was Chinatown, because no one would rent to us or sell us a home outside of Chinatown.

Teiser: Was that just an agreed upon system, or was there force of law behind it?

Chinn: It was not a force of law; it was by word of mouth. At that time the stigma of being Oriental was still strong enough that people would look at us and know automatically that we couldn't be called Caucasians, and they would not rent to us because no one wanted neighbors whose culture they did not understand or who could not speak to them in their own language.

Teiser: Your father never worked as a cook in a private family?

Chinn: No. He might have worked for a day or two or a week or two when a cook got sick, or something like that. Finally my father, prior to his passing, did decide in desperation, "Well, since I have a trade and no other employment, I'll open a restaurant." So he opened a tiny little restaurant on the outskirts of Chinatown, just below Kearny Street on Clay Street, but he only cooked American food, and the only customers he got were the single men—the bachelors—who lived nearby, because no American family would come into a restaurant of that type.

After less than a year he decided he couldn't make any money. That was during his final year. That was the year he said, "Even bringing our children out here to San Francisco, they haven't

learned that much Chinese." We were outcasts in our own community because our English was so perfect, and the Chinese children could not learn English because they were all amongst their own. So we were outcasts among our own people. It was tough for the first two or three years until we got to learning their pidgin English and adapted ourselves accordingly. We could not learn Chinese because our minds had spent several years in learning English.

I was the oldest boy, so my father decided he'd send me back to China for a Chinese education. He wanted somebody in the family who would understand enough Chinese and Chinese culture to protect us in case our family was forced to go back to China. So he sent me back in the company of an older cousin.

Teiser: What year was that?

Chinn: Nineteen twenty-four.

Teiser: So you had been here five years.

Chinn: Close to five years.

Living Conditions in Chinatown

Teiser: Let me go back, if I may, to those years. You describe in the book your living arrangement, which certainly was not very comfortable.

Chinn: No, it was not. The only place where we could find living accommodations at all was for my father to rent a small store. It was one of those tiny little stores that was situated in an alley called Spofford Alley. It was just sort of a deep store, and the entrance was our living room. A hallway ran all the way to the rear; the rest of the space he divided into three little tiny rooms, one for themselves in the extreme rear, one in the middle for my sisters, and one right next to

the front for us boys.

Teiser: I think you mentioned—either you told me or it is in *Bridging the Pacific* —that there was a lot of crime; that you had to protect yourselves.

Chinn: Yes, petty crime, but also tong wars. That was not only for ourselves but was a custom among nearly all Chinatown stores. Bear in mind that the tongs were still a force until after 1924, so during those five years, or even way, way before we moved to San Francisco, people who had businesses, as well as those who had

families and lived on the ground floor, to protect their glass windows and showcases put up inch-thick boards to cover the window portions of their front entrances. I've described that in the book. It was that type of living conditions.

Teiser: You were protecting yourselves against intimidation, or having to pay—?

Chinn: Well, in case of tong wars that came around. If they thought you belonged to a rival group that they were fighting against, they would bring out their hammers or heavy clubs or knives or hatchets—that's why they called them hatchet men—and broke your windows and tried to force their way in to beat up one of the inhabitants.

Teiser: Do you think your family was ever suspected of being in a tong?

Chinn: No. My mother was a force with my father, and my father was keen enough to realize that my mother had a mind of her own. They were both modern. My father, having lived here for some years, had learned enough of American ways to know that the women were also a force. When she told him not to join any tongs or not to join any associations, he did not join.

Family Associations

Teiser: Did your father belong to anything else?

Chinn: No. The family associations were the only Chinese organizations he belonged to.

Teiser: He didn't belong to one of the regional groups?

Chinn: Well, the district associations were one step up, but that still was within the family associations. You had your families, your district—just like those who lived in an area; like San Francisco would have the North Beach area or the Forest Hills area, or whatever—and all those people in that group formed a larger group. Because you can't always stay with your family; you have to shop or walk around the streets of your community, so you become a member of your district association, a larger area, because your protection would be with a larger group and your socializing would be with a larger group. Finally, you would have your national group—those who were fighting the immigration law, fighting state or federal laws that San Francisco's laws that local laws could not handle. So a district group had to hire

lawyers and establish an association that would bring together all these groups. You can't go out singly and represent others.

Teiser: Was that the one your father belonged to, then? The Chinese Equal Rights League he had the receipt from?[5]

Chinn: Yes. That was probably his first tangible evidence that he wanted to support the League in its endeavor to seek equal rights for the Chinese in America. On his next trip to China a few years later in 1907, he brought his wife here, and this country became our home ever since.

Chinese Six Companies

Teiser: What relation had the family associations to what was now known as the Six Companies?

Chinn: The family association itself can never belong to the Six Companies. The Six Companies, in effect, from its very beginning, was the national, or American, if you will, representative composed of major family and district associations of all the Chinese. It speaks with one voice by the family association's membership in district association: if you were head of the district you became qualified to become a member of the Chinese Six Companies when your turn (by rotation) came to be endorsed, just like any congressman or any senator. After you are elected, you become a member of the senate or of congress, and in due time you become an officer of that group, then moving up to become president or secretary or treasurer of the Chinese Six Companies. Does that answer you?

Teiser: So you became a member of the Chinese Six Companies without joining; you just were?

Chinn: You had to qualify; you had to be a leader of your family association—the head of your family association—before you could become a leader or officer of the district association. Unless you became a district officer, you could not become an officer of the Chinese Six Companies.

Teiser: But by being a member of your family association you were represented in the Chinese Six Companies?

Chinn: Oh, yes.

Teiser: I see. There are so many—

Chinn: Well, if you will take your American system of government, you will find that step by step—sometimes you skip a step, naturally—you go from district groups like North Beach or something like that, into your city group; and then from city you get to your county, and from county you get to your state representative—into assemblyman or state senator; then from there you catapult into national politics, and it goes all the way up to the presidency of the country. It's about the same idea [in the Chinese Six Companies]; you go step by step.

Teiser: Was there a feeling in your family that the Chinese Six Companies was a helpful organization?

Chinn: Helpful? It had to be to survive. If it wasn't helpful, the Chinese would not support it. But bear this in mind: when the Chinese Six Companies first was organized—that was shortly after the Chinese arrived here; we're not sure of the exact date, but it was probably in the early 1850s—the Six Companies naturally became the first centralized organization for all the different family groups. All the Chinese who arrived were taken care of by the Six Companies,

5. See *Bridging the Pacific*, p. 90.

who, in turn, got their members located, situated, fed them, housed them, and helped them find employment.[6]

That is why many American writers thought that the Chinese Six Companies was a big contracting firm that was doing everything under the sun as a business group. But it was only until these new arrivals could establish their family associations that the Six Companies took over in the beginning. The Chinese Six Companies then became the national representative of the Chinese in America. So you can tell by the earlier writings that the influence of those first written conceptions of American writers continue to confuse students, because these books continue to remain in classrooms and libraries.

Education at the Oriental School in Chinatown

Teiser: In these five years, between the time you arrived in San Francisco and the time you went to China, what schools were you in?

Chinn: There again I have to tell you that there was only one public school that the Chinese could attend, and that was the Oriental

School, which was located in Chinatown for the Chinese children. I was there from 1919 until 1924, when Father sent me to China for a Chinese education.

Teiser: Were there Japanese in it, too?

Chinn: No, only Chinese. There was no large colony of Japanese in those early days in 1915 when the school was first established, and the Chinese children filled all classrooms.

Teiser: There were no large colonies of Japanese?

Chinn: No, not organized enough, and certainly the Chinese would have nothing to do with the Japanese anyway, because they have always been opponents; the two countries have never gotten along.

Teiser: Did that school have good teachers?

Chinn: As good as could be expected. There were some wonderful teachers. My wife[7] remembers a lot of them. In fact, strange as it may seem, in 1921 my wife was just thirteen years old, and she won for the Chinese community the best essay written about—they called it at the time the Community Chest. She won first prize for all of the grammar schools in the City. That was front page news, practically. I think the *San Francisco Call* newspaper had all the schools in the city listed, and her name was in front, and her picture was on the front page, which was something that had never been thought possible before that time. [see following page]

Teiser: Were they all Caucasian teachers?

Chinn: There were no Chinese teachers from 1915 to 1926, I think it was, when Alice Fong Yu became the first qualified Chinese teacher who was finally hired. But in the beginning she was not hired as a teacher; she was hired as a teacher, but she was never given a chance to teach. She was, you might say, the principal's secretary—in other words, she did office work.

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6. See also pp. 66-67.
7. Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn.

Teiser: But then she became a teacher?

Chinn: Yes, in some of the future years. When teachers got sick or something she filled in, and gradually, when they felt enough confidence in her—that she would not start talking Chinese to her Chinese students—why, they felt—

Teiser: There was no such thing as bilingual education?

Chinn: No, no, not at all. [laughs]

Teiser: Did you do well in that school?

Chinn: I was never a good student. I couldn't get along with my schoolmates, for one thing, because they still wouldn't play with me. I had a hard time trying to speak broken English and got all mixed up. Every sentence they would begin with Chinese and end with poor English, or start with poor English and end up with Chinese. So your mind just kept trying to understand them. As youngsters, it took years for us to get used to it.

Teiser: Can you say some sentence, how it would be?

Chinn: I'll say it right now: "Ruth Teiser, how about coming to Chinatown and *tung ngoy yum gah feh* ?" Now, would you understand what I'm saying?

Teiser: No.

Chinn: "Ruth Teiser, will you come into Chinatown with me and have a cup of coffee?" They would say, " *gah feh*." " *Gah feh* " is coffee, the phonetic sound of coffee. So there you are. How could we listen to the front part and not understand the Chinese part? These little things made it very, very difficult for us in the beginning.

Teiser: I suppose you didn't have any Caucasian friends whom you could go on speaking with as you were accustomed.

Chinn: No. Of course, if you went out across Pacific Street—Pacific Avenue they call it now—and Stockton, those Italian boys would be coming after you with their knives or billy clubs or whatever and chase you back to Chinatown. I've been chased several times, and we've had fights.

Teiser: I recently interviewed a Jewish man who had grown up in Brooklyn, and he said if they got out of their territory the Irish would chase them back in the same way.

Chinn: It's universal. Every little community, no matter what your racial extract, found it more comfortable within its own community until the second generation, at least, before they'd come out.

Teiser: That's an experience that's just as well not repeated.

Boyhood Interests

Teiser: What were you interested in as a boy, other than your school and trying to get along with other kids?

Chinn: When we got out of school we had another problem. Almost all of the Chinese boys and girls, when they got through with American school about three o'clock or thereabouts, came home or played around and got a quick bite. At five o'clock, generally it's compulsory among all the Chinese children to go to Chinese school to learn your Chinese culture, your Chinese language—reading, writing. From five o'clock to almost eight o'clock you go to Chinese school. So you can imagine what a difficult problem these Chinese children had. It threw me for a loop, because I could never assimilate both. So as a young boy I became quite a poor student, you might say, of Chinese

By 1921, '22, San Francisco had built the North Beach Library on Powell Street, and that became my second home. One of these Italian librarians, an elderly woman, took me under her wing and, since I spoke good English, gave me all of the books I would ever want to learn. Oh, she helped me tremendously by helping select good books for me to read. I'd check out four books and read them all within a week or so and repeat the process every week.

Teiser: You did not go to Chinese language school, then?

Chinn: Oh, yes. I went, but only halfheartedly, and generally playing truant.

Teiser: Recently the Book Club of California issued some keepsakes, and you had done the calligraphy for one that Adrian Wilson printed. How did you know to do that calligraphy?

Chinn: Some of it sticks to you, the very elementary part that I learned in the early 1920s. But my part of it, to a great extent, came after I was old enough to realize that I had better learn a little bit more Chinese on my own. So I forced myself just to learn the simplest ideograms, but I'm not a Chinese scholar per se. I knew I had to go in one direction or another, because I couldn't straddle the fence and try to learn adequately in both and not be proficient in any one. I also found Chinese books containing some illustrations, drawings, and ancient calligraphy, which I provided Wilson with.

Teiser: So you read a lot?

Chinn: Yes, I continued to read a lot of books after my father passed away. Oh, I'd better tell you this: after my father passed away in 1924, in 1926 I was very lucky. I found out through the Chinese YMCA that they needed a file clerk down in the financial district in one of the insurance bureaus, and I was hired. That was my way out of Chinatown. Now, with a little income I was able to send out for correspondence school material back in Chicago to pick up some advanced learning. Then later on, in 1927 and 1928, I went to UC [University of California] Extension; I remember it used to be on Powell Street between Bush and Sutter.

Teiser: Yes.

Chinn: I went there, and I also took evening Healds College courses whenever I was able to find money to enroll. This was right after Father passed away, in 1924 and 1925.

Chinese YMCA

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Teiser: You became active in the YMCA here, then?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: This was before you went to China?

Chinn: Yes. I was over at the Chinese YMCA very often, daily, for the reason that it was the atmosphere in which I was most familiar, because the Chinese YMCA people, organization, and so forth, was more fluent in English than any other Chinese activity within Chinatown. Then the fact that it had the facilities of a large library and play area made it ideal for a young boy like me.

Teiser: What kind of play area? For athletics?

Chinn: Just a pool table in the early 1920s, until the present building was opened in 1926. Then they had a gymnasium with a basketball court, and they had a swimming pool.

Teiser: Where was the old building?

Chinn: The old building was on Stockton Street, and all it had was just a large area for people to sit and converse, and a little billiard table—a pool table, to be exact; that's where I learned to play pool and converse in English with some of my contemporaries who spoke decent English.

Learning to Communicate in Pidgin English

Teiser: You were in a position, as you mentioned last time, between the Chinese community and the English-speaking community. Were there many other people like you? Were there many young men like you?

Chinn: Not that I became well acquainted with. First of all, between that period of 1919, when we first arrived in San Francisco's Chinatown, up until 1923, a period of almost four years, it took my family—that is, my sisters and brothers—almost a couple of years to get sort of acquainted with Chinatown. When you first come in there, even though you are Chinese yourself, you are still a stranger to them; they haven't seen you around there, and you're not part of their community until after they've seen you and become accustomed to your presence.

Teiser: It was that small a community, that they would recognize you or not recognize you?

Chinn: Oh, yes. The minute I or any of my brothers and sisters opened our mouths, we spoke more in English than we did in Chinese, and that's when I said we had a difficult time in adjusting to the fact that we were in a mainly Chinese-speaking community rather than an English one.

Teiser: You gave me an example of pidgin English. Could you give a couple more examples? For instance, how would you say in pidgin English, "My father was a cook on a railroad."

Chinn: If I'm talking to a Chinese, and they ask me what my father does, I would start saying (and I'm speaking in Chinese now), " *ngoy gor ba-ba do chooy hy goy het loo foa chea loo*."

Teiser: Interesting. I see that it is, as you say, a blend of Chinese and English, that kind of transliteration.

Chinn: Yes, that's what it is. Unless you spoke Chinese and English both, you couldn't understand. You'd understand one part of it, and suddenly they would break off and speak something you didn't understand. These people we spoke with, had we used the English words, they couldn't understand it that well, and vice versa; when they spoke in Chinese we couldn't understand it that well, because they came from a different district in China, which means they used a different type of enunciation than we did.

Teiser: What district did your father come from?

Chinn: Toishan.

Teiser: What part of China is that in?

Chinn: In Kwangtung Province, south China.

Teiser: That was quite different from the Cantonese?

Chinn: No. The province is equivalent to our state, and a district is equivalent to an area within the state, just like a county. Within the county there is another subdivision into many districts—that is, a little bit more than a community. Each section of that district is composed of people who have arrived, probably generations before, to formulate a Cantonese dialect that is slightly different from each other.

Teiser: So within Cantonese there are different dialects?

Chinn: Oh, many, many different ones.

Teiser: I was looking this morning for a copy of a book by Frank Norris called *Moran of the Lady Letty* [1898]. Do you remember that?

Chinn: No, I don't, but I do know the author.

Teiser: I was going to show it to you. I've never been able to read it because it's written largely in pidgin English.

Chinn: Probably I could understand some of it, because once you get the meaning of it you can probably guess at it. But to speak it and learn it thoroughly and be sure of the understanding that the pidgin English is intended to imply—sometimes you could be off a little bit.

Teiser: You told me you meet some friends most mornings in Chinatown for coffee. What do you speak when you meet with them?

Chinn: It's second nature with us now. My friends that I go to coffee or have lunch with several times a week, we're all thoroughly professional people. One of them has been an immigration lawyer for forty-six years, one is a dentist downtown on Geary near Powell, two are travel agents, one is a former colonel and another a general in the Chinese Nationalist army, and one is my good friend Thomas Fong, who is the contributor to this oral history project. We all speak English, but during the course of the evening we will spend about 25 to 35 percent of our conversation in Chinese. Interspersed with it is that half Chinese, half

English sentence, which is used quite often. We all understand each other, so we get along. We've been together for decades.

That's one thing that makes us feel comfortable with each other, because we can all understand thoroughly what the other means, and we come from an area that's close by, where we can communicate quite easily.

Teiser: The former army officers—when did they come here?

Chinn: Shortly after World War II. These two in particular—one's a colonel who is a bank consultant since he came over here, and the other, a general, is a retired immigration office translator and assistant. Neither one spoke that much English for many years, until they acquired a certain amount. They weren't able to go to school; they were mature men at the time they came over here, naturally, so it took them many, many years to develop passible English.

Teiser: It's amazing how well people like that fit into American society.

Chinn: Well, they wouldn't fit in outside for the reason that they couldn't communicate that decently, other than with their Chinese counterparts.

Teiser: They were Nationalist China people?

Chinn: Yes.

Chinese Boy Scout Troop

Teiser: Well, we got out of chronological order, but this is something I kept wondering about.

The YMCA activities you explained. Did you join other organizations before you went to China?

Chinn: Oh, yes. That's the period between 1921 and 1924. The earliest contact I had in the way of local organizations was the first Chinese Boy Scout troop in America, formed in 1914 and active ever since. However, since I did not arrive in San Francisco until 1919 and was underage—I was just ten at the time—I wasn't able to join until 1921. That's *the* organization to which I owe a great debt for helping me bridge the understanding of Chinatown and its customs, cultural and otherwise, up to the present time. We have an alumni association, organized in 1955, that is much

like The Friends of The Bancroft Library, and we support the troop with help physically but more financially. I was one of the founders in 1955.

Teiser: Interesting. When you first knew it, in 1921, who were the leaders of it? Were they people who had been born here?

Chinn: In 1914 it was a group of Chinese boys—eight of them—who were playing in the churchyard of the Chinese Methodist Church. One of them, a close friend and my future mentor, Chingwah Lee, found this old Boy Scout handbook. That is something that has just lately been discovered. A Boy Scout handbook found in Chinatown? It would seem to imply that a prior interest in Boy Scouting had been established, and it was so. A Chinese boy, way back shortly after

the Scouting movement was started (following England's founding of it) in 1910 in America, somebody in Chinatown—who I've since discovered was Hugh Liang—sent back to New York to see if he could get information on it, and asked for a copy of the book, and they sent it to him.

However, that earlier group never registered. They did not join because there was no representation locally; it was back in New York. There was no Boy Scout movement back then in 1910, '11, or '12, in the San Francisco area. So they practiced some of the customs and what the Boy Scout movement stood for, but they never joined. Finally, when the boys became disinterested, they just discarded the book, and that's how Chingwah Lee discovered that book. He and his group then wrote to the national headquarters in New York, who finally sent a representative to San Francisco and established the San Francisco Boy Scout Council. However, they did not establish that until 1916, and our boys started in 1914 by being registered with the Los Angeles council to become recognized, and they've carried that same system of Boy Scouting all these years since 1914. After San Francisco's Scout office was established, two other Scout troops joined first, and that's why we became Troop Three.

Teiser: This was a troop for Chinese boys only?

Chinn: Well, at that time, because no Caucasian would join a Chinese organization; only the Chinese boys would join a Chinese troop.

Teiser: Did you have contact with other troops?

Chinn: In the beginning, very seldom. Just occasionally during citywide events, but that wasn't until some years later, because other troops here in the City were not formed until after 1916, two years after we had started.

Teiser: What things, essentially, did you learn through scouting that you otherwise might not have known?

Chinn: You learn to practice camping, hiking, scoutcraft (learning how to tie knots), how to work together with other boys, to compete against each other in friendly competition, how to be efficient— just like in grade school you get better grades if you study hard and practice—to become good citizens, and, most of all, everything the Boy Scout oath and law stood for.

In the very beginning, when we first started, we didn't even have a leader. They were all young boys, so they had to get an American person to become their scoutmaster for the first year, until they could train somebody to take over.

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Teiser: The Boy Scouts was partly a matter of learning practical things like camping and so forth and partly a matter of learning ideals?

Chinn: Ideals, and the reason for the organization's being, which practiced citizenship, love of country and flag, and the higher being, God.

Teiser: Were there any conflicts between scouting ideals and traditional Chinese ideals?

Chinn: In a way. I'm glad you've brought that up, because it's never been truly understood why the Chinese community were so reluctant to allow their boys to become members of a Boy Scout

troop. That reason was because originally the Boy Scouts name was translated, erroneously, into Chinese—and it's still kept the same name all these years—as the Boy Scout Soldiers. In other words, scouting meant scouting armies; that's how they interpreted the name. They did not want their young boys of the community to become soldiers, so they were reluctant to let them join until it was clarified that this in no way meant military service or anything concerning armed forces fighting each other.

Teiser: That's interesting. You would have had to have your complete parental approval before you joined?

Chinn: Oh, absolutely, yes. Because, after all, when you joined you had certain obligations, which meant you had to buy a uniform or have a uniform of some type, whether it was handed down or otherwise, and that money had to come from the parents.

Teiser: Were the uniforms expensive, as economics went then?

Chinn: Well, anything that involved money was expensive, because at that time the Chinese in the community had very little income. Individuals, parents, worked hard for their money, and they didn't think it was right to spend that on uniforms and so forth. So it was a great sacrifice on their part to allow their boys to become Boy Scouts. As I may have mentioned before, because my father was away so much, it involved my mother taking care of us. She didn't have the money to buy a uniform, so some of us boys had to take hand-me-downs from other scouts who outgrew their uniforms.

After repeated washings it got to be almost white, a dirty white instead of the olive drab of the standard Boy Scout uniform. My mother was the one who thought up the idea that this old uniform that fitted me was so white that she finally decided, "Okay, I will put it in hot water and put ground coffee beans in a bag with it so it will help dye the uniform to a better color that was uniform with what Scouts use." I wore that for a good part of a year before I outgrew it and passed it on to someone else.

Teiser: She was very practical, wasn't she?

Chinn: She was.

Teiser: Did any Chinese families object to Boy Scouts because it was too western, too Caucasian?

Chinn: Well, it was a new activity that the parents had not encountered prior. Outside of the YMCA there were no other western organizations. I should say that before the YMCA there were the western churches; your Protestant churches came into being from the very beginning of the Chinese community. They came in and taught English and also taught their religion. Following the churches, the first organization that was non religious was the YMCA—that is, partly non religious, because it's still the Young Men's *Christian* Organization; it had to be a Christian organization which brought it into the religious field, but you didn't have to belong to any one church.

However, the reason why the Chinese YMCA found acceptance so well was the fact that prior to being established in San Francisco's Chinatown, the YMCA movement itself became a worldwide organization, as we know, and it was established in China a long time ago.

Teiser: I was about to say that China had been subject to (or whatever you want to call it) lots of missionary activities from the West.

Chinn: Yes, and that was one of them. As soon as the YMCA was established, I believe in the 1850s or '60s, in Kwangtung

province, where most of the Chinese in America came from in the very beginning, they got used to the idea of a YMCA movement. In fact, it was some of those Chinese young men who worked and became members of the YMCA in China who came over here and were the ones who planted the idea of a Chinese YMCA.

Religious Beliefs

Teiser: What was your mother's and father's own religion?

Chinn: They had no religion outside of their own beliefs of Confucianism and, indirectly—not deeply religious—they pointed toward the Buddhist beliefs.

Teiser: But they felt no conflict with your interest in Christian religions?

Chinn: No, they had none. My parents were both very, very tolerant. They knew, when my father decided to bring his family over here, that they were cutting their ties with China in their preference of where they wanted to live, but not necessarily giving up their Chinese cultural beliefs. Because they always felt that because the Chinese were so set aside from American activities, socially and culturally, that they may be forced to go back to China, not by choice but because they were kicked out (speaking coarsely). They felt that they had to assimilate American culture. As long as their children were going to learn and attend American schools, they had to learn American culture.

Teiser: You mentioned in the last interview this belief that the Chinese might be deported. I had never realized that. It must have been an overriding concern. [tape off briefly]

Athletic Activities

Teiser: When did you start to be interested in athletics, or were you always as a boy?

Chinn: I always was. I think I should bring out that team sports was one of the activities of the young people in Chinatown—that is, boys and girls, but especially the boys. There were very few young girls over here, but the boys, being boys, would play on the streets and so forth. As their numbers grew, they formed teams

and, as boys will, got into games. Their first activity, and it's remained to this day one of their largest activities, was in basketball. We formed teams to play basketball, oh, as early as, I'd say, World War I. There were teams, and the YMCA started sponsoring them in athletics as early as the 1920s.

Teiser: You were mostly short fellows, weren't you?

Chinn: Oh, yes. It didn't matter whether they were tall or short, because the Chinese were not able to integrate with any other race to play basketball or to engage in athletics in any shape or form until much later. For instance, basketball, track and field, even tennis, even indoor baseball, volleyball, soccer—all were played amongst our own Chinese teams until well into the 1920s. It was way after the Depression before Chinese that were recognized here and there were eligible to play in high school teams, to get outside of their own community and participate in sports.

Teiser: When they did participate with others, were they equal to them, for the most part, in most of those sports?

Chinn: If they formed themselves as teams and played against other racial groups, they were never up there in the standings. Because of their lack of practice and the fact that generally the Chinese boys were physically smaller than the other racial groups, they never were able to stand up under stiff competition in contact sports.

Chinese Tennis Team

Teiser: How about tennis?

Chinn: I believe I was among the small group of Chinese who first took up tennis in San Francisco. I had started playing tennis in 1924, playing in the North Beach section. As soon as the Chinese established the first tennis court in Chinatown, which was in 1926, we had competition in the Chinese playground, and I was always the boy who was number one among the young Chinese. In 1926 I joined the Yoke Choy Club, and later I was the captain of the tennis team, and we started playing against Chinese teams as far away as Portland, Los Angeles, and all surrounding areas wherever there were Chinese opponents. We were the tops; we won every one of them in the early years. In fact, in '28, '29, and 1930, we barnstormed between here and Los Angeles and also played against American high school tennis teams, and we beat most of them. So it was something to be proud of, that we were able to

come out and establish ourselves. Of course, these were not exactly the big metropolitan-area high schools; some of them, like San Luis Obispo, Sacramento, were just byways where the high school teams were not quite as strong as in the metropolitan areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In the 1930s—in fact, in 1936—I was the Chinese national champion. Every time there were visiting tennis pros like Ellsworth Vines, who was the U.S. national champion when he came to Chinatown, I was selected to play an exhibition against them. And every time the Chinese Davis Cup players came over, I was part of the practice squads that were used to hone up their game. I've had quite a little exciting activity in my tennis career. [chuckles]

Teiser: Yes, I should think so. You mentioned a North Beach facility of some sort. Was that before the Chinatown proper?

Chinn: The only tennis courts where we could play were all the way out to Golden Gate Park, which was prohibitive because you had to get on the streetcar and ride all the way out there and then back. So the closest tennis courts were in the North Beach area. By that time, 1924, as a group, boys and girls, we took the chance early in the morning of getting on before the white boys

and girls came out to play on those courts. We got on by climbing over the fence of the North Beach playground and were thus able to use the facilities there. We used to play there, oh, a group of a dozen or more on the one or two tennis courts that they had. They had two at the very beginning, and even now I think they only have three or at the most four; I don't know about the present situation.

In those days the tennis court was separated from the swimming pool by a little wire fence, and quite often—this is amusing—some of the girls and some of our beginning boys would hit the tennis balls high and knock them over the fence, and they would fall into the swimming pool, and quite often the pool was still partly filled with water. We would climb over the fence and retrieve the tennis balls, but we couldn't use them because they were wet and soggy. So what we did was bring them home and, in order to get them dry and usable in a hurry, we would put them in an oven or in a hot area where they could dry out fast. Then we could start using them all over again.

Teiser: Did they get their bounce back?

Chinn: Partly, you know. [laughter]

Teiser: Did you ever have any incidents with other kids? Would they try to chase you out?

Chinn: No, not as long as we gave up the courts when they came.

Teiser: My word, what a time you had as youngsters.

Chinn: We had an awful time. It was dangerous just walking over to the courts, but when they saw girls with some of us, why, then they backed off a little because that was not playing within the rules, so to speak.

Teiser: You've seen such changes, haven't you? Not that everything is equal yet, but still—

Chinn: When we near the end of our oral history I might tell you some of the things that happened that influenced me personally, but we'll let that go for now. I don't think this is the proper time to bring it up.

Jobs

Shrimp Industry

Teiser: Still on this period between 1921 and '24, you've spoken about your reading at the library. Did you have any jobs? Did you work at anything to bring money in?

Chinn: From 1921, when I was twelve, to 1924, when Father sent me to China—I was not yet fifteen years old—after public school and then 5 to 8 pm Chinese school, there wasn't much time to work. As a boy, even before my father passed away—I'd say sometime between 1923 up until 1926—there was no way of earning money in Chinatown, because there were no businesses that hired outside people. Generally, especially for young boys and girls, the only activity where we could earn some money was in the shrimp industry, where fresh shrimp was caught and cooked in the shrimp camps and then brought into Chinatown to be shelled. Because not all people wanted to go into the shrimp companies and work shelling the shrimp, the shrimp

company did deliver baskets of shrimp to your home, and you shelled shrimp at your home. They would weigh it up afterwards and pay you by the pound. It was just a nickel for five pounds, or whatever rate; it was very little. Even then, you were thankful to get anything at all. That was one activity.

I remember my mother, because she had us children to raise, couldn't go out and try to get a job, nor would a woman go out and be able to find a job outside the home. She would knit laundry bags out of twine, and she sold those by the dozen to the laundries that used them to bag the laundries of the different customers so they wouldn't get mixed up. Those were about the only activities we knew of where we could earn money.

File Clerk

Chinn: I was lucky. By the time I was sixteen or seventeen, in 1926, the Chinese YMCA got a request from an insurance bureau to find them a file clerk. It just happened that the message came in while I happened to be there, since I went there every day. They asked me if I wanted to be a file clerk down in the financial district, and I said, "Yes, I would love it."

Teiser: Did they ask for a Chinese-speaking or Chinese-writing person?

Chinn: They called the Chinese YMCA; that was their purpose, because they couldn't fill the order from outside. They needed help badly enough that they had to get a person who knew enough English and could function well as a file clerk. Knowledge of English was the only requirement.

Teiser: Was there Chinese language material you were working with?

Chinn: No, this was an American firm. The only insurance business conducted was in the financial district, outside of Chinatown. That was my chance to be outside and associate with American people.

Teiser: Did you start that before you went to China?

Chinn: No, after I got back from China. I went to China in 1924, and it was 1926 when I was first hired.

Father's Restaurant

Teiser: Let me go back a little bit. When your father had a restaurant, did you work in that?

Chinn: Oh, yes. In fact, I was pretty proud of myself because—of course, my father did not have a big restaurant; it was just a tiny little place, not more than a counter with about four or five tables—every time my father had to go away to buy provisions for his restaurant, I was left in charge. So a couple of times when customers came in, I was the one who had to cook the ham and eggs or whatever they needed. That, together with my earlier experience in Boy Scouts, where you went out camping and learned to cook, stood me in good stead. In scouting, not only

did I learn to cook—even though it was rough fare, I got to learn the general idea of what to do—I also learned how to sew, because when you have torn pockets or clothes, you learn how to sew buttons on.

Teiser: Did you learn how to make change?

Chinn: Oh, you had to. Money was one of the first things you learned what to do with. [chuckles] You did everything when you had customers in there; as long as you're the only one there, you're expected to do everything—wait on tables, wash the dishes afterwards, and so forth.

Teiser: You certainly got a well-rounded education.

Trip to China, 1924

Teiser: This brings us up to your going to China in 1924, before your father's death. I think you have explained in your book that your father wanted you to learn the Chinese language. Was that it?

Chinn: Well, from the very beginning, if I may go back (in case I didn't cover it prior), when we were in Oregon my parents decided we should try to maintain our Chinese culture. In order to do that, since my father was away most of the time, he engaged a Chinese man to teach us Chinese. But we were not very receptive to it, particularly when we were so young. When my father found out we were getting so Americanized, he was worried that we would forget all about our Chinese culture, so he decided for our sakes, and for our future in case we were deported—the fear of no longer being acceptable as American citizens; that fear was always in the Chinese people's minds in that period—to sacrifice living in Oregon and go back to a larger Chinese community so we could be sure and learn Chinese.

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Teiser: When you came to San Francisco you couldn't give up—

Chinn: —what we had learned, and couldn't give up our habits of communicating between ourselves, my sisters and brothers; we always spoke in English as the preferred language. Formerly, every time we left our home we no longer spoke in Chinese because all of our Oregon friends were American boys and girls. So when we came to San Francisco we still couldn't get rid of our preference to speak in English, and that was one of the reasons which alienated us against other Chinese boys and girls, because they felt, "Well, those kids are a little bit too fancy for us, a little too uppity," not knowing that we didn't know any better.

However, we couldn't learn that much Chinese, and, at least on my part, being the oldest boy, my father finally decided, "Well, I think, for our sakes, as the eldest son I'd better send him back to China to learn Chinese." That's what led him to ship me off to China.

Teiser: Did he send you to his own village?

Chinn: Yes, as the first basic step; I had to go there because I had to learn the rudiments of the Chinese language before I could go to a regular Chinese school. As a raw recruit who couldn't understand or speak Chinese decently, I would never be able to keep up with classmates.

Teiser: How did you start to learn there, then?

Chinn: Well, I didn't, actually. I was just getting accustomed to the ordinary village peasant talk when, just a few months after I had arrived, my father passed away. I never got to a regular Chinese school.

Teiser: How many months were you in China, then?

Chinn: About three months, I would say, I think from July to when I arrived back in San Francisco around December.

Teiser: You wrote that you met there Chinese people who had been to the United States.

Chinn: Some old men who had come to California prior to the turn of the century and had gone back to China since to retire. They were the only people who spoke even a few sentences, if you can call them that, in English. To me, that was like hearing the sound of Gabriel blowing his horn, because he was so welcome. He would say, "Hello, Charlie," or something like that. But then they

would start telling you in Chinese some of their experiences in America, or in California specifically. Some of them were such stories as working in the San Joaquin Valley reclaiming swamp land and so forth, which led me to believe, "Why weren't these stories ever recorded?" They said, "Well, we're telling you now." I thought about how I had never heard of these stories when I was at home in California, and they said, "Well, you ought to start writing some of these stories down," and that's what led me to think I would try and do that when I found the time, which in boyhood you never did.

By the time I had spent some years, then, as a file clerk, learning more about American history, I decided that as soon as I could I would try and record Chinese-American history. But in my learning years, in those beginning years, I never did find the time to do that.

Teiser: By that time, 1924, how old were you?

Chinn: Barely fifteen.

Teiser: You had really developed mature interests.

Chinn: Well, I am glad I had the perception to try and retain anything I ever learned, whether it was from books or from personal experience. I also had the good fortune to have a very, very good mother, who said, "Be sure and retain everything you learn that is worth saving, because it will help you in later life." As the eldest son, without a father around to help me out, it was Mother who really became my guiding light.

Teiser: She must have seen that you have a retentive memory by nature.

Chinn: Yes, by necessity, you might say, because then when my mother couldn't handle any situation that required English, she turned to me. So it was, in a way, up to me to write letters back to Oregon to our real estate man, who was supposed to look after our interests and forward the rent money, regarding any improvements that needed to be done; any correspondence at all was left up to me.

Safeguarding Mother's Legal Status

Teiser: Let me go back again to your mother and her status in the United States. When she came with your father in 1907, she could come in because she had married one who was a legal resident here?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Her status was stable?

Chinn: It was stable, and she was able to come in without too much fuss. I've never said this before, but the immigration people did not want to take a chance, as almost all of the Chinese females who came to this country came because they were bought in China and brought over here for prostitution. In order to safeguard against that, as long as my father had the necessary credentials to prove that he and my mother were married and that it was of her own free will that she was going to stay with my father, my father said, "Let me leave my wife with Donaldina Cameron[8] and let her stay there while I finish my business of getting supplies and contacts for my sojourn in Oregon." He would have to have somebody who would send him Chinese supplies or forward China letters and so forth, someone almost like an agent for them in San Francisco when he was in Oregon.

The immigration people evidently thought that was a good idea; that way they would know for sure that if she wanted to leave Donaldina Cameron after a couple of weeks, then they would feel safe in assuming she was a wife.

Teiser: That's interesting. Did she stay for long with Miss Cameron?

Chinn: A couple of weeks.

Donaldina Cameron's Home for Rescued Chinese Prostitutes

Teiser: What was the institution that Donaldina Cameron was with?

Chinn: At 920 Sacramento Street was the location of Donaldina Cameron's home for Chinese prostitutes who were rescued from their masters and brought to Cameron's home. These prostitutes were then trained in western culture—what they would need to survive—because eventually these young ladies were sought after, regardless of their past, as wives by these largely single Chinese men, young bachelors. Many of them became the wives of people who were able to afford to raise a family here.

Teiser: Do you remember how long Donaldina Cameron lived? Did you know her?

Chinn: I knew her. In fact, from the very early 1930s, after my wife and I were married in June, 1930, we had a group that was called the Chinese Bible Class. Every Friday at 7:30 in the morning, a small group of sometimes six or eight, sometimes as many as a dozen or almost a dozen and a half, would meet for coffee at Donaldina Carmeron's home and have a Bible student teach

8. She was superintendent of a home for rescued Chinese prostitutes.

us—a grown man, not a young man, generally from the financial district. During all the years that I was there, from 1931, I would say, until 1937, when finally a teacher was no longer available and we broke off, every Friday morning between 7:30 and 8:30 we held Bible classes. So we got to know Donaldina Cameron. I also knew Carol Green Wilson.

Teiser: I was going to ask you about Carol Green Wilson.

Chinn: I knew her, even as recently as just before she passed away. In fact, I'm not sure if she has passed away yet.

Teiser: Yes, she did.

Chinn: Just in recent years I've not seen her.

Teiser: Did you give her information for her book?

Chinn: No, I never did.

Teiser: Did you read her book?

Chinn: Oh, yes. I have a couple of them. For the field in which she is writing, she is accurate. I have no reason to doubt her. I was not privy to any interviews with Donaldina Cameron or Carol Wilson.

Teiser: As you remember Donaldina Cameron, what did she look like?

Chinn: She was a tall, stately, very, very beautiful woman who radiated confidence in herself and in her inner satisfaction that she was doing something she believed in deeply, and she was very religious. Just a beautiful woman, not only because she was physically attractive, but because she radiated from inside that everything she did was a pure person.

Teiser: Did you mention to me that you have some of her papers?

Chinn: I have. I still have them. They were given to me by the executor of her possessions after she passed away; she had no more

relatives, or the distant people who were eventually recipients of her possessions shifted back and forth and finally decided that this part of it—materials, documents, photographs—were no longer useful to them, and would I care for them? Would I want them? Otherwise they would be disposed of. I said of course I wanted them; and I still have them.

Teiser: What kind of papers are they?

Chinn: Mainly they are photographs of the Chinese women who lived with her, and correspondence with those who married and had children and still maintained correspondence with Donaldina. There are letters sent by suitors who wanted to get Miss Cameron's consent to their becoming suitors for some of the women she had. All in all it is very good. Some of them [the women] had little troubles here and there, and they wrote to tell Miss Cameron about their troubles. Some of them, after they were taken away, were not truly wives and eventually had to escape back to Miss Cameron. I have not gone through them thoroughly because I just haven't had the time. It's something I hope to do in the future.

Teiser: It would be interesting to edit them, wouldn't it? Or maybe they're too private.

Chinn: They are private—too private for me to really open up. I feel it should not be made public until I feel personally that they will not harm any descendants.

Teiser: Yes.

We started with your mother's status. She was always a legal resident, and you, as an American-born man, are an American; you have always been considered an American legally?

Chinn: We children? Oh, we were born here; naturally we would be considered citizens. As long as we were born in America we are American citizens.

IV Professional Interests and Family Life

Odd Jobs

Teiser: After your brief sojourn in China you came back in December 1924, didn't you say?

Chinn: That's right; about that time, if I can recollect correctly.

Teiser: What did you do immediately, then?

Chinn: Looked around for work, because with my father passing away and my mother not being able to find work, I had to fill in. I couldn't continue going to school, so I looked for any kind of work I could find. As one instance (this is also a little bit comical), there was one insurance company that insured Chinese, which was unusual for the twenties, and that was the American National Life Insurance Company back in Texas, I believe. They had a Latin salesman who came into Chinatown to sell, and he couldn't speak Chinese, naturally, so their local office felt they would like to get a Chinese salesperson in. This Latin approached me and asked if I wanted to be an insurance agent, and I said, "Anything to try and make some money," so I became an agent.

I filled out a form and started selling insurance. Two months later, I was fired. They had sent that application back to the head office in Texas, and probably nobody paid any attention to it for a while, but finally one day somebody back there woke up to the fact that I couldn't become an agent because I was only barely fifteen years old—not even sixteen years old [chuckles], and much too young to be an agent for them. So I was fired.

Teiser: Well, you got a little experience.

Chinn: I got a little experience then, and I got at least familiar with the fact of what files meant, which served me in good stead for the file clerk's job.

Starting a Sporting Goods Store, 1929

Teiser: The file clerk's job that came in was just by chance, wasn't it?

Chinn: Yes. I worked as a file clerk for over six years, from 1926 to 1933—almost seven years. I was very happy with it, but I was not happy enough because I wasn't earning enough money, and I

wanted to utilize the rest of my time aside from my daytime job to get hold of another source of income. I couldn't find anything that suited my needs; no one wanted a part-time person at night or in the late afternoon after my job, so I started my own business in 1929.

Teiser: What a year to start a business.

Chinn: That's the year I started business. I was just twenty years old. I converted our little home on Spofford Alley and made the front part of that store a sporting goods store. It was the first Chinese sporting goods store, as far as people tell me, that they could find in America. So that was unique in its way.

Teiser: How did you find capital to put in the stock of goods?

Chinn: By that time I had saved whatever I could. I wasn't able to stock and keep an inventory on it; what I had was just from hand to mouth. I wasn't able to go back and buy by the carload or the truckload; I just bought from the branch office here. What I couldn't get, I had samples which I'd sell subject to delivery in a few days. I'd go down to the wholesaler, buy it and bring it back, and make a few dollars. That was a few dollars I couldn't otherwise earn.

Just to further that particular aspect of it, I didn't make very much, but I made enough for me to be satisfied that maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all. I needed more room than that tiny little front part of the store, so I rented a place at 876 Sacramento Street and called it Tahmie's Sport Shop.

Teiser: I was just noticing that you did a phonetic spelling. Were you expecting only Chinese customers, or did you hope for others, too?

Chinn: Well, you never say you expect only Chinese customers; you just welcomed any customer who walked in. But who would want to buy their goods in Chinatown when they could buy them and get a larger selection downtown? Your price wouldn't be different. My customers were mainly my friends and a few friends of friends who were Chinese.

I maintained that until I sold it in 1933. The reason I sold it was because I was getting to be pretty friendly with my wholesaler, which was the Wilson Western Sporting Company, my main supplier. He and I talked especially about Chinese sports, and then he asked me if I ever thought of going back to China where I would have a lot of customers. I entertained that idea for a while, and finally, in 1933 I resigned from my file clerk's job to represent the Wilson Western Sporting Goods Company in China. They would give me all of the territory in China.

So with that rosy idea I quit my job as file clerk, I sold my sporting goods store, and went back to China in 1933.

Marriage to Daisy Lorraine Wong, 1930

Teiser: Let me ask you to go back a little bit. You were married in 1930. Had you met your wife through Chingwah Lee?

Chinn: There again, I think it's a coincidence, because you remember I mentioned that I became a Boy Scout in '21. Then our Boy Scout troop started getting so big that they had to divide up the troop and not have too many boys at any one place because it was too much to handle. We had

a troop that was composed of only so many boys, and when it got beyond that we had to divide into divisions and have some of them meet in different churches. Our church happened to be the Chinese Congregational Church, and it was there that we met every week. And it was there that I met my future wife.

Teiser: Her name was—?

Chinn: Daisy Lorraine Wong.

Teiser: You call her by a nickname, don't you?

Chinn: You notice that her first two initials are D and L. The reason she earned her nickname is that by coincidence another Chinese girl, and a very close friend of hers and mine, too, was named Daisy Kim Wong. To differentiate, instead of calling them both

Daisy and having them both respond, they called my wife DL and called the other girl DK. DL became Dillie, and DK became Dickie. That's how she earned that nickname, and she'd rather be called that than Daisy. [laughter]

Teiser: Did you go together long before you married?

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Chinn: When I came back from China I was then assistant Scoutmaster down at the church where we met, and started gradually to go to church. It was on Easter Sunday, 1925, that I was made a member of the church. What would you call that now? When we were made members of the church on that Easter Sunday, there was a group of young people who became converts to Christianity. My future wife was converted, too, on that day, at the same time. So we got to know each other since then. We had some young people, both at church and at clubs, and we often dated together, but only as groups, not as individuals.

It was four years later, 1929, before I even thought of going out on a private date with my future wife. It was in 1929, after our first date and subsequent dates, that we became engaged in the latter part of 1929, and married in June of 1930.

Teiser: Did you have certain things you had to do because of your two families? Did your two families—?

Chinn: We were still quite young; even when I was married in 1930, I was barely a month away from my twenty-first birthday. I felt certain obligations, and my wife at that time was hoping to graduate from the University of California in Berkeley in 1931; that was her graduating class. Somehow we decided not to wait, so we were married in 1930.

Another funny thing: as I was making the decision to resign from my file clerk job and sell my sporting goods store, on November 5, 1932, our son was born.

Second Trip to China, 1933

Chinn: It was just four months after my son was born that I left for China by myself, representing the Wilson Western Sporting Goods line of merchandise, hopefully to make our future in China by establishing either a manufacturing or distributing sports headquarters, in which case I would have sent for my family.

But—and this is another big disappointment in my China relationships; the first time was in 1924 when my father passed away—this time, shortly after I arrived in China in early April, America was in the throes of going off the gold standard in the height of the Depression. I couldn't get any commitments, get any contracts, make any sales or anything because of the gold situation.[9]

Teiser: What bad luck; or maybe it wasn't such bad luck.

Chinn: It was good luck, because within four years after I left China, Japan invaded China—as early as that. Since 1931, Japan had been encroaching, and it finally seized Manchuria and then invaded China proper in 1937. So it turned out for the best, personally.

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Teiser: Last time you had just gone to China for the second time in 1933, and I wanted to ask you some things about that—kind of "if" things. You went determined to stay there and send for your wife and son?

Chinn: Send for her later if I could find that we could establish ourselves and make a living back there.

Teiser: So you intended, if you could, to stay there?

Chinn: Yes, for business purposes, but our home would always be in San Francisco, of course—our permanent home.

Teiser: That's what I wanted to know. You would have had your son educated wherever you were, but mainly his home was America, too?

Chinn: Well, of course, yes, because he was born there, my wife was born in San Francisco, and I was born in Oregon. Our familiar surroundings would always be western, and that would be in San Francisco as we grew up. But for business purposes I had to go wherever I could make the maximum amount of income. Of course, when America went off the gold standard, why, that froze business, and I couldn't do any business or make any money or see any prospects of it, especially when there were rumblings at that time, as early as 1932, that I had not been aware of, that the Japanese were trying to, and eventually they did invade China.

Teiser: Your status in China would have been that of foreigner, then?

Chinn: For all intents and purposes, we were strangers in our own motherland.

Teiser: It would have been interesting, I think. I'm sure you would not have been the only ones.

Chinn: No, no. Even now there are literally hundreds who go back to China but were born here. Many were very uncomfortable there because if you go into the interior, away from the coastal cities or towns where you have modern plumbing, modern electricity, and so forth, they could never become accustomed to outhouses and going outside to bring up a pail of water from the streams. So it was difficult.

Teiser: Were you in China enough in 1933 to be able to observe any differences from the way it had been when you were there earlier?

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9. See also page 48.

Chinn: Frankly, I was not there long enough. The reason was that my first port of call, coming from San Francisco, was in Shanghai. That's in north China, and it was impossible in those early days for us Cantonese born in south China, with our parents and earlier generations from the same area, to travel to north China. But I had friends in north China, in Shanghai especially, and I thought I'd stop there and see them. Also, it was one of the main western-exposed Chinese towns, very progressive and had practically the first manufacturing plants in China.

So I called there and stayed there for a while—several weeks. That's when I learned that America might go off the gold standard. It kind of alarmed me, but I went ahead and stayed with these friends for a couple of weeks. Then I left for Canton, and it was there where I stayed for another couple of weeks, when my anxieties were confirmed that America was going off the gold standard. Of course, that froze all business. Even with the first rumors that this was likely to happen, no one would do business on any long-range basis where they might be caught in a contract where they couldn't perform and where they would lose a lot of money.

With that prospect, and nothing in view that would change that picture, why, I reluctantly had to come home after a couple of months. In fact, it was less than three months.

Teiser: Was your Chinese adequate to do business there?

Chinn: Only in the coastal cities, in the larger metropolitan areas where everyone had to be bilingual; English was the spoken word other than Chinese.

Teiser: Did you use the English language mostly?

Chinn: Mostly, yes, and most of my friends used English.

Teiser: You had such a dual life—

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Teiser: You were saying you had a split cultural background, then.

Chinn: Yes. You almost have to. I guess even today, especially, many western representatives have found out that they had to have some knowledge of the country in which they are intending to do business; that they should be able to converse or have an interpreter along to take care of their needs.

Choosing Chinese and American Names

Teiser: In this connection, I think you told me that your first name you had been given was Tom. I assume that's a Chinese first name also, isn't it?

Chinn: Phonetically, yes.

Teiser: Then you changed it to Thomas. When did you change it?

Chinn: After we moved to San Francisco and I found out that it was more formal. As I grew up and got around to having girlfriends, why, they didn't like Tom so much as Thomas. Over all the many decades since the turn of the century at least, that I know of, the Chinese were more apt to try and use American spelling and American pronunciation rather than Chinese. So my father's name being Chin Wing, and my father calling me Tom, I changed my name to Thomas Wayne,

Wayne being the closest I could think of to Wing.

Teiser: How interesting. It seems to me I've heard so often that many Chinese have, or did have, a Chinese name and also an English-language name. Is that right?

Chinn: Yes. When you're first born you have one, you might say, adolescent name. Then when you reach a certain maturity, much like the Jewish people have what they call a Bar Mitzvah, you become a man and you get another name, which sometimes I believe corresponds to when you get married.

Teiser: How about girls? Was your wife named Daisy? Was that her only name?

Chinn: Daisy Lorraine Wong was her full name. Her Chinese name was altogether different.

Teiser: She had a Chinese first name, too?

Chinn: Oh, yes. A Chinese first name was what she was born into. After she was born her parents gave her two names—a Chinese name according to the Chinese spelling, and an English name which was not phonetically translated. Her Chinese name was Wong Hung Yuk; her American name is Daisy Lorraine Wong.

Teiser: Did those dual names cause problems with immigration or any legal matters?

Chinn: No. In this case, the immigration people had to learn our culture insofar as it pertained to identity and so forth. That you cannot avoid. They know that the Chinese custom requires it. They couldn't change that and say, "Well, this must be your name; you can't have two names." They realized that, finally. That's one of the many little things that the immigration people had to understand before they could continue trying to process their new immigrants.

Relationship with Father and Mother

Teiser: Did your father ever speak to you about his experience as an immigrant? Was he detained, and did he have troubles when he came in initially?

Chinn: Our problem was that during all the years he was away in lumber camps, we never had a chance to grow close to our father. We looked to our mother for practically everything we needed and did.

Teiser: It's too bad you didn't have some legacy.

Chinn: When we moved to San Francisco and he was a little bit more visible at home, it was almost, you might say, too late for us to grow close to him, because he couldn't play around with us or anything. He had to take care of Mother's needs, whatever she wanted, so it was a struggle. Just when I thought we might be able to develop some rapport with him, as we grew to thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, why, it became impossible when I went to China—when he sent me to China—and then he was gone when I returned a few months later.

Teiser: Was the absence of fathers frequent among your acquaintances?

Chinn: I would say that in earlier days you had two problems. Before the turn of the century most of my friends—and I get my information from my close friends—had parents, which meant these people who were married and had children. Their fathers generally were the ones who were available to work; the women did not. The men had a tough time getting a job because there were few opportunities available to them, no big factories. So they had to travel to wherever they could find work, and frequently they would be gone for weeks when they were trying to find work, but they would daily go out looking for work or seeking friends who might help them better their knowledge for a trade.

So most children had to rely mainly on their mother, and the father was just incidental to it. He came home, but he was there mainly just to remain until he found a job; if the job brought him elsewhere, that's where he would go. After a period of time, if it looked like the job was fairly permanent, he would move his family there.

Teiser: For Chinese families that must have been an unusual situation.

Chinn: They became accustomed to it.

Teiser: It certainly wasn't similar to anything in China, was it?

Chinn: In China you had one home and you lived there all your life, and your descendants lived there. In China they had no other place to go. They either farmed a little plot of land, or they had a small store that the family ran, or they starved. Over here, both parents were speaking a strange language, so when the father went out for work, the mother and the children were left stranded wherever they were until the father could either come home or find work close by to come home every day.

Teiser: Would that have an long-range effect on the Chinese in America?

Chinn: It had some effect, naturally. It meant that as young children you grew much, much closer to your mother than your father. It came to be such an accepted fact for all those whose fathers had to work away from home and live away from home that he remained a secondary person as compared to the mother, who was always home. She took care of you, raised you, sent you off to school, looked after your every need. When my father came back, he only supplemented whatever my mother needed.

Family Decision Making

Teiser: Did he make the big decisions? Like sending you to China for education—was that his decision or your mother's?

Chinn: That was a split thing. It all depended on how much flexibility the father gave. If he wanted to be the master of the house and wanted things done his way, the mother had nothing to say about it. In our family, my father chose his own destiny insofar as his income possibilities were concerned, but at home it was my mother who shared his decisions. I can tell you this: shortly after we moved to San Francisco, the relatives and friends that my father made decided that since he was an educated man (he was educated in our village [in China]), he would make a nice, valuable member in their association—in one case in the tongs.

So my father, instead of saying, "Okay, I'll join," when he was asked, said, "Well, let me think it over." He came back and told my mother about it, that he was given this opportunity, because it would afford him greater exposure, more chances for employment, and a chance to maybe become an elder in an association or a tong. My mother said, right away, "I don't believe you should, for this reason: you are yet new to them. You weren't with them for many, many years, and you don't know. I hear all kinds of rumors, and there are tong wars. This association has aspirations to depose the monarchy in China." That was one of the aims of this society. "Agents of the monarchy might be over here trying to find people who are against the monarchy and dispose of them. So I don't believe, for our sakes, that you should do that." And my father heeded my mother's thoughts. She had a lot to do with influencing him all through our lives. We felt that it was so wonderful that he gave equal status to our mother; that is, she was really a true partner instead of just another person under him.

Teiser: I'm trying to think, as you say this, when Sun Yat-sen was here.

Chinn: In the late 1800s—from around the late 1890s until the overturn of the monarchy in 1911. But he did not stay in one place; he traveled from place to place, seeking funds, and he would periodically go back to China under an assumed name, through friends that helped him. If it got real hot for him in China, he would go to Japan. Then he would come back and go to New York, and from New York he'd drift through all of the Chinatowns raising money. That money he sent back to provide the finances that helped overthrow the monarchy and in 1912 established the Republic of China.

Teiser: Does that fit in any way with what you were just saying about the tongs—attempting to overthrow the government?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: I hope you don't mind these digressions.

Chinn: No, you can ask anything you want. If I don't tell you something, it's because a situation is still a little delicate and wouldn't be fair to people involved to say anything pro or con on that subject. But I myself am not a political person, so I do not even try and say anything that looks like it might develop into factions, taking sides and all that.

Teiser: It's interesting, though, because political things affected you and other Chinese-Americans, too, of course. Thank you for discussing these subjects with me.

Chinn: Of course, everything I say that doesn't pertain to me or my family as personal subjects, I'm willing to stand by what I say. All the others are more or less my viewpoints.

Teiser: That's what I want, and I'm glad to have you explain.

When in 1933 did you return to San Francisco after your failed trip to China?

Chinn: Around the end of the year.

Experience as a Cub Reporter, 1922-1924

Teiser: By then you had no instruction in printing?

Chinn: Not printing, but when I was a young boy in the Boy Scouts in the very early twenties, we had a wonderful opportunity. Our group, about three or four of us, were chosen by a downtown newspaper, the San Francisco *Call* (I believe it was called before it became the *Call Bulletin*) to help out some of the minority groups. One of the [people at the newspaper] was a columnist (at the moment I can't remember his name), and he took us on as cub reporters, sort of. He'd give us a few lines, saying, "This is such and such," and what happened, and told us to write it up so that he could critique it.

There were a couple of years where a couple of other boys and I were so-called cub reporters, and we were very proud of it. He

taught us a lot about the five—who, why, when, where, how—that we have always remembered. That was part of the reason why, as I grew older, I started using those same reasons—that is, who, why, how, when, where. So when I was in China and these retired oldtimers who had been in America told me their stories, I thought, "Oh, what wonderful history that would make," because no one had any written history prior to that time among us Chinese. Those were the little seeds planted by these western writers, non-Chinese, who were willing to give us some help in the newspaper reporting field.

Teiser: What years were you a cub reporter?

Chinn: I would say 1922 and '23, and 1924 until I went to China.

Friendships Developed through Scouting

Teiser: A good deal came out of your scouting experience, didn't it?

Chinn: Yes. That is why a lot of us are so close. That's over sixty years ago—almost seventy years ago—and we who developed friendships since those days have remained friends in an alumni association that we formed as a nonprofit group. Every year we donate money back to this alumni association, who see to the needs of the troop that we started from and pay their expenses. I am sure than one reason the children of Chinatown developed stronger ties of friendship was because of our situation: we had to spend most of our time in Chinatown, so we learned to cherish one another more.

Teiser: Isn't that interesting. I was telling a colleague that you and some friends of yours had formed this Boy Scout troop in 1914.

Chinn: I was not the founder or anywhere near it. In 1914 I was only five years old and lived in Oregon.

Teiser: I told her that some Chinese boys had done so, and she was amazed that they would be that enterprising, and that they would want to create an association in a western pattern.

Chinn: You've got to remember this, Ruth: Chinatown was a community which did not come out to socialize. You can't call it socializing; there were not even allowed to come out and mingle with other people outside of their community. They were too strange, and they were even discriminated against physically in the early periods. So here were this group of young people who

were born here, or who were brought over here as babies, with no outlet for their energies. They were "ghettoed" within the community, just those few square blocks. That's why they had to play amongst themselves, fight among themselves, or get along among themselves. When you get a group, and they find something new that could absorb some of their energies, something that might bring them closer together as a cohesive group that could grow up together, they went for it.

This little group of eight boys that founded the Chinese Boy Scout troop found a handbook of the Boy Scouts of America, they looked it over, and they decided they wanted to be Boy Scouts. That was two years before San Francisco as a city established a Boy Scout council here in the city. This Chinese Boy Scout troop that I belonged to sent a letter all the way back to New York to find out how they could become regular members of the Boy Scouts. The main New York headquarters office checked their records and found out that their closest Boy Scout organization that was registered with them was in Los Angeles. From Los Angeles they asked one of their people to come up to San Francisco to form an organization here. That was not done until two years later, in 1916. When that was formed, then the Troop #1 of the Chinese Boy Scouts was given to others, and our troop became Troop #3. But we don't care about that.

Teiser: It's ironical, though, isn't it?

Chinn: Yes, it is.

Learning the Printing Trade

Teiser: I was starting to ask you about your interest in printing. It developed when you were a cub reporter?

Chinn: Yes, as a cub reporter, just a young sprout learning the ropes. But when I came back from China in 1933, near year end, I had already resigned from my file clerk job in order to take on this China trip with great big prospects and hopes. Having cut loose from them, I could not very well go back and try and get my old job back, so I did odd jobs for a while. This was in 1934.

Teiser: Hard to get work.

Chinn: Yes. Late that spring and early summer, I determined I couldn't find a job at all. That was during those Depression years. Finally I decided that if I couldn't find something to do I would

start something that I had envisioned in boyhood—go back to school and learn a trade.

The only trade that I felt would best suit me and that I would be inclined to attempt would be in printing. The only print shop available where they would take in a handful of nonstudents like myself—I was beyond school age—was McClymond High School, which is were I went. They had a regular print shop that printed the high school paper, not only for their own McClymond High School, but for a couple of other high schools in the district. It was there that I learned typesetting and the rudiments of printing.

Teiser: Had you been in the printing plant at the *Call* ? Had you seen it when you worked there?

Chinn: When I was a cub reporter? He took us through. There were just three of us.

Teiser: So you had seen what goes on there.

Chinn: And knew the rudiments of what was entailed in running a newspaper.

Teiser: There were print shops in Chinatown that printed Chinese material, were there not?

Chinn: That was altogether different. In English everything is developed from your alphabet, twenty-six letters. In Chinese there's no alphabet; each symbol denotes a separate meaning entirely from anything else; it's a complete word. The formation of several of those would give the idea of what they wanted to say. So unless you had read and studied Chinese, it's impossible to formulate a written speech or be able to read a paper otherwise; there is no alphabet.

Teiser: I've been in Chinese print shops, and it's astounding the racks of characters they have.

Chinn: The minimum requirements for a Chinese newspaper would be between 12,000 and 14,000 characters.

Teiser: So McClymond High School admitted you to their classes?

Chinn: Yes, they admitted me, and they started me out in typesetting—setting type by hand—and then, after a period of time, putting me on a linotype machine. It was there that I developed my determination to take up typesetting as my profession, if and when I was able to undertake some serious type of work.

Teiser: When I first met you, which must have been in the early 1950s, I was told that you were an absolutely top typesetter.

Chinn: Well, I started from that humble beginning at McClymond High School. Then, when I developed it, I found out that even if I had gotten very proficient in my linotype work and my hand typesetting, there would be no possibility for any great degree of English typesetting in the Chinese community, because they printed most of their newspapers only in Chinese. The only requirement for English was an English menu in the restaurants and a laundry list for the laundries that proliferated at the time, and very little else. There was just the small beginning among the young people to formulate programs for their different functions and so forth, where they were slowly beginning to use English as their mode of communication.

So I was disappointed there, but I felt that in typesetting, at least, if I made up my mind to really become proficient in typesetting by linotype in English, then I could ask the American printers if they needed any typesetting. Of course, this wasn't until later, but I'm taking it step by step now, from the time I learned typesetting and the rudiments of printing.

Starting and Producing the *Chinese Digest*, 1935-1937

Chinn: Then I got this bright idea. I looked around and found out it wouldn't be very helpful if I were to establish an American print shop in Chinatown, because no American printer would come into Chinatown seeking a printer, so I decided I would go back to my first love; I would start an English language newspaper for the Chinese-Americans. That's why I approached my mentor, Chingwah Lee, who guided me and helped me and led me as a Boy Scout into becoming a good citizen. He was just about to become one of the principals in a major movie, Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth." He felt that since he was going down south to take this actor's position, he would have a steady income because he would be under contract. I asked him if he would help me

finance the beginning of a Chinese-American newspaper. He and I had the same idea of starting something like that many years prior.

Teiser: In what connection? Had you just decided—

Chinn: Just in talking, jokingly, only half seriously, we thought, "Well, one of these days we might get together and put out a paper." It just so happens, now that you mention it—these are things that I

sometimes forget because it's not anything I've been associated with personally—I recall that when Chingwah Lee was in high school in San Francisco, my future (and present) wife, Daisy, was also in high school. You've got to remember that there weren't that many Chinese boys and girls in high school way back in the early twenties. So what happened? Outside of classrooms the American boys and girls never socialized with the Chinese boys and girls. So, since there were only a dozen or so Chinese students in any one of the high schools, Chingwah Lee was the leader in forming a Chinese high school students association, and "any Chinese high school student can join, and we will put out a little typewritten newsletter." He was the instigator of that, which was quite successful in those early days, and my future wife joined him in that job.

He himself, therefore, had aspirations of starting something like that, and hoping that in the future, down the line, we could start something. So when I approached him on financing a Chinese-American newspaper, the first one, he said, "Fine; let's do it." To tell you how generous he is: when he went down south to Hollywood to work on that film, he was there for over a year. He would come up periodically, every other month or so, to San Francisco, but in the meantime he had a small antique studio with a collection of valuable Oriental art and porcelain pieces. He gave me the key to the place and said, "Why don't we not have any overhead by starting the newspaper here? Just use my studio as the newspaper address." So for all the years of the *Chinese Digest*, which is the name of the paper, that became the address.

Teiser: When did you start the *Chinese Digest* ?

Chinn: The first issue of the *Chinese Digest* came out on November 15, 1935.

Teiser: How long did it last?

Chinn: I served as editor and co-publisher of the newspaper, which started out as a weekly, from 1935 until the first issue of 1937. Then it became a monthly and finally a quarterly in its final year of 1940. And in all that time I worked without pay. Finally it got to the point where my wife was the only one with a steady income; she worked for Western Union. In 1932 our son was born, so you can understand that after three years of trying to raise a family with one income, it became too much of a struggle. My full time was spent in putting out that weekly newspaper.

Teiser: You wrote it?

Chinn: I, and my friends joined me, and they became a network of correspondents from other Chinatowns up and down the Bay Area and later as far as Portland and Seattle, all through the California towns where there were larger Chinese communities. They would send in their news items about their particular community, but in every case, not being trained writers, we had to rewrite it for them. Now, the only way we could put out the paper economically was for us to produce the type ourselves. So I went out and rented a small typesetting plant—a very small

one; it only had one linotype and one Ludlow that sets larger type. I rented the shop from this owner for $25 a month, and he let me use everything in it after he had finished his daytime job. His work was finished then, and this was an additional income for him.

By daytime we were out soliciting ads, getting stories, or writing editorials. At nighttime we would do our rewriting, and then when my wife got out of work from Western Union at 5:30 or six o'clock, she and I would go out and get a quick bite. My mother, the grandmother of our son, took care of him during the time we were away. Once a week, at deadline time my wife would come down and join me in this typesetting part.

Teiser: So then you both worked one night a week?

Chinn: I'd go down there a couple of nights a week, but when the deadline came and the type was supposed to be made up into forms, my wife came down to help me. Other nights when I finished typesetting I'd pull a proof and bring it home, and my wife would do the proofreading before the deadline day. When the deadline day came, my wife was all day at Western Union, and after we had dinner she went down to the shop with me. As I set the type she would make the corrections, make the changes, even though it might be two or three o'clock in the morning. In between the times I did not need my wife to proofread, she would curl up in the little shop window with a blanket over her and catch a little sleep. Then at four o'clock I would assemble all of my work and make up the type forms and have it ready for the printer, because we had to get out of there by the time the owner came around.

For over a year we did that, sacrificed everything for that. She didn't get anything; I didn't get anything. Satisfaction was all you got out of it. It got to be so much of a strain on her, as well as on myself, that I decided there was no hope of an increase in income because very few people were willing to advertise or put in an ad, which, with our small subscription list, was our only source of income. The newspaper itself only sold for five cents, so you can imagine how much income that brought in. [laughs]

But the paper was kept up because after Chingwah Lee completed his first year and the film was finished, he came back. That's when I told him I couldn't continue, and he understood. He said, "Well, let me take care of it from now on, and you go out and see if you can find a job." So I looked around for a little while, and I couldn't find a job. Then I decided, "nothing ventured, nothing gained." I borrowed to buy an old beat-up linotype machine for ten dollars down and (I've forgotten exactly) fifteen dollars a month. I had to rent a small store, and I went out and solicited business.

From 1937 I maintained a small income that was minimal at the most, but we got by. It helped supplement what my wife was making. All those years, all I typeset was laundry lists, menus, very few programs; and I'd go back and help Chingwah if he needed any help—until Pearl Harbor.

Teiser: Oh, that long! Let me ask you a couple of things that just occurred to me. Is there a file of the *Chinese Digest* anywhere?

Chinn: I have one personally.

Teiser: Did you tell me that The Bancroft Library filmed it?

Chinn: Oh, yes, they did film it. They do have it. I have my bound copy that a friend bound for me. If they don't have it, let me know, and for my portion of the involvement in the *Chinese Digest*, I'm willing to lend it to them. But I'm fairly sure they have that.[10]

Teiser: What part did you have other than what you just explained—editing and rewriting other people's material? Did you write editorials?

Chinn: Editorials, interviews, went out and interviewed Chinese VIPs who came into the community from China, attended meetings where I was able to get a story. I would go out and solicit ads to help my volunteer people who went out also. I do want to say this, that two American advertisers did come in, and they supported us for a while. It wasn't much; it was only a few dollars per issue. That was Roos Brothers, a clothier, and another clothier, Moore's.

Teiser: I remember that Wells Fargo Bank often gave ads or statements to minority newspapers so-called. Did they ever give anything to you?

Chinn: No, not in those days. It was only much later, after World War II, but not during our time.

Teiser: I have another question that is a detail. When you wrote articles, did you compose directly on the linotype machine, or did you write them out first?

Chinn: More often than not—

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Chinn: —I composed it on the linotype machine. But I should qualify that by saying that any story or article involving the other sex, a female story, I would give to my wife and she would write it up, giving it the women's angle. So she had a lot to do with it. She was our conscience; she helped us rephrase things that were too masculine when it involved the feminine side of the story. She was a big help, of course. Even now, after sixty-one years of marriage, I can always say I have fond memories of the time she and I were closer together than we were just as man and wife—that we worked together, even.

Linotype Business, 1937-1980

Teiser: Let's go forward with your linotype business. Did you work with press people—trade shops?

Chinn: Well, not actually, because my end of it was always the typesetting, and when I finished my part of it, what they required of me, then I turned it over to them. In other words, I was the wholesaler, and I did my end of the work, and a printing firm would finish the job in their own printing shop.

Teiser: I'm sure you were glad not to have all that to do.

Chinn: Yes. First of all, let me tell you that I believe I am the first Chinese trade typesetter—that is, someone who set type as an owner of his own business. And I didn't have only one shop, but I owned three shops—not together at one time, but one following the other: from 1937 to Pearl Harbor, when I had to give it up to get into defense work; in 1949 I reopened, started another shop, and ran that until 1956. The only reason I started it the second time around was because

10. The Bancroft Library has some bound copies from volumes 1 through 6.

some of my American printer friends said they would give me a lot of business, which never materialized to the extent that they gave me that much work. So it fizzled out in 1956.

Teiser: What did you call yourself?

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Chinn: The first one, from '37 to '42, was the Chinn Linotype Company. From 1949 to 1956, it was called the California Typesetting Company. I had been working for other typesetters in the interim, when I didn't own my own place, and in 1971, the boss of the shop I was working in—which is one of the largest shops in San Francisco, called the Gollan & Sons Typography Company—wanted to sell the shop.

Teiser: It was the son, Gordon, whom you were working with, wasn't it?

Chinn: Yes, Gordon was my boss and good friend. He decided he wanted to retire. The foreman of the plant was also a very good friend of mine. His name is Robert C. Stevenson. He approached me and said, "I'd like to buy this, because I think we could make a living out of it, but I haven't got the money. Do you think you could swing anything?" [laughs] I had just gotten out of the business some years previously, and I had already had two ventures. At that time, 1971, I was over sixty. It was a wonderful opportunity, and Gordon was willing to sell it to us at a good price—$75,000, which was a lot of money in those days. He said, "I don't want to just sell it and have it broken up," because he and Bob and I were very, very good friends; we mixed around together. By the way, Gordon Gollan also gave me the run of the shop for all the typesetting I needed to turn out printing matter for the Chinese Historical Society of America, from 1963 to 1971, gratis. Then when I bought the shop, I continued to provide typesetting, also for nothing, for fourteen years.

I said, "Let me see if I can't do something." To make a long story short, my son had just returned from service in the U.S. army in the Korean war, and he had been my apprentice when my shop was open. When he came back from the war I didn't have a shop anymore, and he had to finish up his apprenticeship with a downtown typesetting company. So I asked him, "How about joining us as a silent partner and making it a three-way partnership?" He said, "Okay." So I borrowed some money. I had the majority share. With my son and Bob Stevenson (I lent Bob the money to get him started), we bought it in 1971. In the early 1980s the computer age took over, gradually rendering the final blow to linotype hot type operations

Teiser: Cold type.

Chinn: Cold type. We continued as long as we felt we could, and finally in 1980 I said, "Our business has dropped to the point where it is no longer feasible, and it might be to our advantage to sell the plant instead of continuing to struggle." Both my son and Bob agreed, and we sold the plant to, you might say, a junk dealer,

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because he bought it for the physical lead involved in typesetting, which is a valuable commodity. There was some very, very expensive hand type, because Gordon's father started the plant in 1915, so he had all the type from that time up to the present time. There were a lot of choice types that many, many people were always borrowing because they couldn't buy any more type of that kind. If they needed it for special jobs, Gordon would lend it to them, and sometimes he would get it back and sometimes he wouldn't.

Anyway, we sold it, and we didn't lose money, but we didn't make very much. It was enough, and it was the best I could do.

Teiser: Where do you think the equipment went?

Chinn: It went somewhere in Spain or one of the Latin countries where they could use it, because in those days we had a lot of accents that were used in linotype. They didn't need very many accented letters to supplement what we had, so they bought piecemeal here and there. At one time there were around nine linotype machines. That's why I say that as a trade typesetting plant, we had one of the largest in the city.

Teiser: And you had one of the best reputations, too.

I want to ask you about the people you knew and worked with in the printing industry, outside of your own shop. Do you want to talk about that now, or would you like to think about them later?

Chinn: Why don't you let me bring that in later because I don't want to leave any names out.

Teiser: We're always interested in San Francisco printers.

Chinn: Probably you know already that Dick [Richard] Dillon is a good friend of mine, and I've helped him out. When he and Adrian Wilson put out one of their several keepsakes for the Book Club of California, he and Dick asked me for help when it came to the Chinese material. So I gave him some help.

Teiser: I have it here. The keepsake is called *Chinese Book Arts and California*. It was the book club's keepsake for 1989.

Chinn: Albert Sperison sent me a copy. Next time I'm going to remind myself to bring you some of the keepsakes that I was involved in for the book club.

Teiser: Good. We'll get them all on the record. You did the calligraphy for this [the previously mentioned keepsake], didn't you?

Chinn: I helped with the art work; that is, I provided some of the art work.

Teiser: And some of the data?

Chinn: That was a different one where Adrian used a lot of Chinese characters, scrolls, drawings, and art work, not in these single sheets [points to some sheets]; it was more extensive than those. The keepsake was number 153, copyright 1976 by the book club and titled *Images of Chinatown*, written by Richard Dillon. Dillon dedicated the book thus: "Dedicated to Tom Chinn and to the memory of Louis J. Stellman."

Teiser: Oh, it was a book.

V World War II and Changing Attitudes Toward China

Labor Shortages and Employment Opportunities

Teiser: We're now up to wartime. Would you like to talk about whatever China relief organizations or efforts in Chinatown you were involved in?

Chinn: When Pearl Harbor happened, many of our young men and I believe some women were in uniform, because there was that threat, and the draft took most of them. Suddenly, after Pearl Harbor, the need for defense workers was tremendous. Kaiser [Industries] was hiring people for their shipyards, other defense industries were located up and down the peninsula and all over the Bay Area— Hunter's Point, Vallejo's naval shipyard. They were hiring people, and not only were they hiring men but they were hiring women. Many, many of these shipyard workers were women. They reached the saturation point where they couldn't find any more, and finally the Chinese started getting offers of employment, too.

Suddenly we were all fighting on the same side. America, England, France, and China were joined in battle against the Axis nations. For all intents and purposes we were *the* allies; we were fighting against the same people in different fighting areas. Japan was with Germany, and they were fighting in China, and China was with the allies. That gave us that much exposure, which helped many of Chinatown's people to get out of their ghetto community.

China Relief Organizations

Chinn: The young people started forming groups. Before the big exodus out of Chinatown, the Chinese young people, such as myself in those days, could not give up our friendships with each other just because we were brought together because we were confined. Before the job market opened up with all these employment opportunities, we were helping China raise money. The elders were doing all they could, and we, as the younger group, called ourselves the Federation of Chinese Clubs. We set up a lot of events for fundraising. There was one period when I was English public relations director for the Chinese Six Companies, briefly. Then I became the treasurer of this Federation of Chinese Clubs for a period; you know how you have a one-year term, and I served in one of those periods. We all helped out in any fashion we could.

Our work was done among our English-speaking groups. Now here was an opportunity to work in conjunction with our elders, but then we found ourselves in trouble. The young people conducted their affairs in English; the older people conducted their affairs in Chinese. Records were kept in Chinese, or in English among our young people. So we couldn't work that closely together, because our viewpoints were the young perspective, and theirs were from the old. It had to be two different, distinct operations. That has existed to this day because of those differences. The older associations continue writing their minutes and maintaining their records in Chinese, while the young people who were born and raised here spoke English, mainly, and conducted all their affairs in English.

Now, of course, a greater extent of the operations and business within Chinatown, not involving Chinese businesses that were more closely kept by the elders, are conducted by the younger ones in English. Some of those who were born and raised here and spoke English mainly have

converted their Chinese bookkeeping to English, especially now that the computer has given rise to a much faster and much more reliable record than any Chinese handwritten record that could be kept. So gradually the English method of bookkeeping and minutes and so forth is overcoming the Chinese. Of course, the old Chinese associations that are mainly conducted in Chinese and mainly by the elders may still be maintained in Chinese, because continuing influx of Chinese immigrants made it difficult to use English only.

Teiser: Is this true also for the Six Companies?

Chinn: Let me put it this way: there have been Chinese-Americans who were elected president and tried to make a change there, to have it in both languages, I believe, but it never passed. Their records are still kept in Chinese.

Impact of the Draft on Chinatown

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Teiser: I wanted to ask you a little more about the World War II period, because it was such an important period in Chinatown.

Chinn: The World War II period, from shortly after Pearl Harbor, was a very, very, important period for Chinatown because with the draft and so many young men and women taken into the armed services, it created a shortage in all of the regular businesses throughout the country. In San Francisco and the Bay Area, it provided new opportunities for the Chinese, who were clustered together and kept in Chinatown—not by ordinance, but because no one would rent or sell them homes outside of Chinatown, so they weren't able even to find jobs outside of Chinatown. But after Pearl Harbor the need for more labor in the defense industry, such as Kaiser shipbuilding, in particular, in Hunter's Point, and business in general when their help was taken away, opened up an avenue for the Chinese to get jobs. Help was wanted left and right, and the Chinese applied. A large number of Chinese men and women went into shipbuilding and other defense industries.

Teiser: Has anyone ever written on the Chinese in shipbuilding?

Chinn: Not extensively, to my knowledge. I haven't seen anything more than an occasional interview with a woman who worked in the shipbuilding industry—you know, just a common laborer doing work not of a technical nature. But over a period of time, from that point on the Chinese were able to leave the Chinese community and work. Their work was deemed satisfactory, exceptionally satisfactory, after the outside community got used to the idea of seeing a different skin in their midst. So in a way I credit World War II with that major open door that enabled them to work outside of Chinatown.

Repeal of Exclusionary Acts

Chinn: Secondly, also, was the fact that with the beginning of World War II insofar as America was concerned, after Pearl Harbor, China became one of the Big Four: the U.S., Great Britain, France, and China were the allies against the Axis group and Japan. In order to create a sense of harmony, there was one particular exclusion act in 1879 that prohibited Chinese from working in any California corporation or any state, municipal, or county government. And that law was not rescinded until sometime in 1943, sixty-four years later.

Teiser: Had it been observed carefully before that?

Chinn: Not at all. Since the day it was enacted, way back in the 1879, I do not believe there was any enforcement of the legislation, whether they were corporations or other employers. The Chinese who were capable of working found their labor was needed. The Chinese were into most of the technical work way before then, but only in isolated situations, like when they needed school teachers where there were shortages. The first Chinese school teacher to become employed by the San Francisco public school system was not hired until 1926 or '27, and from there on it opened the door for others. But that was way before 1943, when this law was rescinded, so you can see that the demand nullified any enforcement of these laws.

Popular Images of Chinese Laborers

Teiser: I remember that in an earlier period, and I think it continued, when there were so many Chinese bachelors in this country, employers—like in agriculture, mainly—liked them because they would come and stay. They would settle down in whatever living circumstances that were provided for them and just stay and work for a long time. They were not peripatetic; they wouldn't move on to other jobs.

Chinn: You've got to remember that the Chinese are not generally transients. They don't like to move around if they have something where they feel comfortable in working for a good employer or one who will offer them steady work without too much harassment. They'll stay for a particular reason; they've got to have a steady income to provide for their families, which were still in China. In the 19th century, these were mainly single men, or married men who had to leave their families behind. So what they were after was a steady source of income to provide for their loved ones and

family back in China. They were not anxious to move around at all.

Of course, like all human beings, there are always the exceptions, the small percentage points, of those who like to gamble and carouse and so forth, and who figured this life was better than China. If they were unmarried, particularly, they wouldn't feel that much of an urge to go back to China, so they would just go wherever they felt they had a good drinking companion or friends. Those would be the exceptions, but they were very small percentagewise.

Teiser: The other category of Chinese men that I found in the popular mind was houseboys or housemen—what were known as "the Chinamen in the basement." They had a room down near a furnace, and they lived miserably, I guess, but they cooked—

Chinn: They did everything, including babysitting. All the Chinese generally love children, no matter what race. It reminded them so much of families they had back in China; it was an extension of their own family, so to speak. Their employers would feel perfectly safe in going out and letting the Chinese servant take care of their children. That was proven so many, many times in various stories—not written by Chinese, but by American writers.

Teiser: Yes, they were apparently loyal to the families they worked for, and the families were loyal to them.

Chinn: That's right.

Teiser: It seems to me I know a number of people who grew up in households with a Chinese servant.

Chinese Servicemen

Teiser: We were discussing the Chinese in World War II and the greater employment opportunities they had. Did the fact that the young men were drafted into the army imply a new equality for them?

Chinn: Well, I won't say equality so much as an effort to tolerate. That is the word I would use in the beginning. They tolerated them more where they didn't before, in that they were needed; their labor was needed, so they were tolerated, but I won't say they attained equality right away. It took many, many decades before gradually becoming more acceptable. If you were to compare today, or even this past generation, with the World War II period, you

would find so many changes. I can't begin to enumerate all of them, but for instance, before World War II you would very, very seldom find intermarriage between races. That was accentuated during World War II when a lot of the Chinese draftees or Chinese in the armed forces who volunteered were sent back to Asia, and particularly to China with [General Joseph W.] Stillwell and so forth. When America accepted war brides as acceptable immigrants, that meant that a lot of these Chinese married back in China and brought their brides back after the war, or as soon as the war was straightened out so that they were able to bring their wives over. That was a big thing, because prior to that time Chinese women were in a very, very small minority in proportion to the number of men there were.

For instance, in the 19th century there were about twenty-five or twenty-six Chinese men for every Chinese female, and that included prostitutes. So you can see that the ratio was so unequal that men never had a chance to find a wife in this country who was of Chinese extraction.

Teiser: Were many Chinese servicemen sent to China?

Chinn: Oh, yes. In my own family, many of my relatives were sent back. Even my kid brother was sent over and was driving a transport over the Burma road into China. Airmen, pilots—many of my friends were in Burma, India, and China as parts of units of the U.S. Army.

Teiser: Were they segregated units?

Chinn: Not in any way. As they were drafted they were assigned to different units in which there might be only a handful of Chinese at the most in any one company of a hundred or two hundred men. So you can see that they were allies who had to fight together. These people were drafted from the U.S., so they were basically either U.S.-raised, even though they were babies when they

were brought over here, or they were born here and understood and spoke good English. There was no confusion there.

In fact, if you go back far enough, even during the First World War there was a handful of Chinese who were drafted there. My older half brother was in the U.S. Army in the First World War, and during the last few days of the fighting before the armistice he was killed in France. He was buried there, and after the war, much later, his remains were exhumed and brought back and shipped to China. When they got there, they provided a U.S. guard of honor to accompany the remains back to the village where he was given a military burial. A flag and a medal was given to his widow. That was in 1921.

Teiser: In World War I, was there any perceptible breaking down of barriers, as there was in World War II?

Chinn: That we don't know, but we presume there was a lot more aversion to having Chinese mixed in with the troops. I understand from reading that there was even an aversion to having blacks mixed in with the white troops; they were more or less put in companies. But that I don't know, because it's secondhand information. Certainly my half brother never attained anything other than just being a pfc [private first class], and I don't know what kind of duty they assigned him. All of these things are so remote, because he was not a literate person who wrote home.

Teiser: Back to World War II, did the Chinese in the army form friendships with the non-Chinese that lasted?

Chinn: Like I say, from World War II on there was a gradual thawing of any resentment of the Chinese. After the war there were many, many instances of friendships formed that were maintained for a lifetime.

Teiser: And still are?

Chinn: Still are, as far as I know.

Veterans Organizations

Teiser: I see there are Chinese Veterans of Foreign Wars groups.

Chinn: We have American Legion groups, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and even more exclusively, those little specialized groups that were airplane pilots groups and tankers groups. Where they had a large enough group and a sort of a tie-in with each other, they have formed little friendship groups, but not legitimately, like incorporating or something like that.

Teiser: Are Chinese-Americans members of general veterans' groups?

Chinn: Definitely. In fact, one of them, the brother of Chingwah Lee, my mentor when I was a youngster, whose name was Changwah Lee, became the district commander for the American Legion in a certain district of San Francisco which was mainly Caucasian. So he was acceptable and became a very popular leader. There are other instances, too. Of course, we know that today, in this present generation, there have been many, many more Chinese who have been

elected into predominantly American organizations as their president or whatever.

Service as an Air Raid Warden

Teiser: You stayed in Chinatown during World War II. What were the changes you saw immediately around you, other than the employment situation which you mentioned?

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Chinn: I was in a unique position in World War II. If I may digress a bit, to give a bit of my personal history in that regard—shortly after Pearl Harbor I was appointed to become air raid warden company leader for the Chinese community by the San Francisco air raid headquarters.

Teiser: How did that happen?

Chinn: I don't know, outside of the fact that people knew me way back then, and I had already been the editor and co-publisher of the *Chinese Digest*, which was the first English language newspaper for Chinese who were American-born, so I was at least, I believe, exposed to the media and to certain people who knew about me and believed in me.

Teiser: You must also have been thought valuable as a bilingual person.

Chinn: I imagine so, because they would naturally have a Chinese person to become the leader of that particular function in Chinatown. You would have to be, because so many Chinese were not able to speak English; they were still the first generation. So I was able to be very active in organizing and directing the air raid warden service. I did that for about a year following Pearl Harbor.

Teiser: What does an air raid warden do?

Chinn: You appoint those qualified into block wardens. They took care of their block—so many people. I was just like a sector leader with three or four wardens under him who is responsible for seeing that air raid edicts are laid down. For instance, if it came to San Francisco being threatened by enemy war planes, if it was in the nighttime, I was to be sure all the lights were turned off, because any lights would become a beacon for any planes,

indicating that there was a city or people below. That occurred in every block in Chinatown that I was responsible for.

Let me give you a humorous instance. You can't only choose an area where certain blocks were entirely occupied by Chinese. Always in the fringe areas there are mixed groups of other races. For instance, if you took Chinatown by the square block, it would include the Fairmont Hotel because it was within that boundary. Well, our air raid wardens were responsible for that block, because the lower part of that entire block was mainly Chinese, but the upper part was the Fairmont Hotel at the top of Nob Hill. Many times during the early days of the enactment of the air raid warden system, our wardens had occasion to rush in the Fairmont Hotel and tell them there were some lights on in various rooms in the hotel. Then the hotel would have to hurry and rush around and find out what room number it was that was lit up. [laughter]

After a period of turmoil and—we can't say non-cooperation, because it was a job trying to find out which unit in their hotel was violating the law.

Teiser: Yes, you can't tell from looking at the outside what the room number is.

Chinn: That's right. Finally, we passed that information to the headquarters air raid warden office of San Francisco. In a meeting with these various large buildings—such as even the financial center, where the janitor would keep the lights on to clean up—the city warden service agreed that the hotels or the buildings would have to set up their own air raid warden service to govern their own building; either that, or let us do it, but that would be a much tougher job. The hotel was very happy to do that, because then they wouldn't be subject to any outside harassment. It worked out very nicely after that, but in the meantime we had an awful time with the hotels, particularly the Fairmont.

Among the Chinese, they were very, very obedient. They helped out a lot and made sure that if they saw a light they would inform the block warden right away; any infraction of the air raid warden service law was reported immediately.

Impact of the Japanese Internment

Chinn: After Pearl Harbor, so many of the outside communities, whites and people of other racial extractions, never could identify the difference between a Chinese and a Japanese, or a Chinese from a Korean: "They're all the same, with black hair and yellow skin." So someone devised the idea of having a button that says, "I am a Chinese," and those were worn by many who felt they couldn't speak very good English. But very few of us American-born wore it, because we spoke English so well that we could easily say that we were Chinese. It got to the point where the Chinese were so afraid that they would be taken for Japanese and be reported, because shortly after Pearl Harbor, the following few months, all the Japanese were taken into these internment camps. There were a few Japanese who hid, and they had to round them up, so every once in a while there'd be a sweep into Chinatown or into other areas where they saw some Orientals living.

Anyway, these were some of the activities of Chinatown. The fact that so many in Chinatown by the following year after Pearl Harbor in 1942 were able to work outside Chinatown created a sense of, "Well, we are so proud; we can walk the streets anywhere," some of them wearing their buttons or carrying their lunch pails, going to work at the shipyards or places where there was a night shift.

Teiser: Of course the Chinese carried their characteristic lunch pails, did they not? They looked like no other lunch pails.

Chinn: No, they carried regular lunch pails. They bought them outside. They didn't want to be distinctive any more; they wanted to feel just as good as anybody else: "We're carrying the regular lunch pail." And a regular thermos, and so forth.

My observation ended, practically, in the latter part of 1942 for the reason that when the Japanese were forced into internment camps, a handful of us had some Japanese friends since before Pearl Harbor, and one of them called me up after Pearl Harbor. They had a deadline to report to these internment camps, and he said, "We're forced into these internment camps, and we have to leave our home, and we own it. Would you care to buy it?" This friend of mine lived in San Mateo, so I said, "Well, if it will help you, but you name a price and we'll see if we can't meet it." Well, to make a long story short, we bought his home. When they were

then taken to San Bruno to Tanforan racetrack—they were incarcerated there with all the other Japanese—we would visit them just to ask them if there was anything we could do to help them out, because we knew they were true blue American citizens.

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We bought them different things, whatever they wanted. They liked Chinese food, and we'd bring it to them; they wanted me to run little errands for them to straighten out their loose ends, and I did, because they had a dry cleaning business, too.

Finally when they were taken away and we were able to move, we moved to San Mateo and lived there from late 1942 to 1953. What I wanted to say in that regard is that that is one reason why in 1942 I was forced to resign from my air raid warden service, because not being a resident of Chinatown, I had no business to be a leader, because I lived in San Mateo. During a blackout, I'd never be able to get to the city, so I had to resign.

Chinatown Company Division of the California State Militia

Chinn: But just about the same time I was ready to resign, a friend of mine, Johnny Kan of Kan's Restaurant—he's better known as a restaurateur—contacted me and said, "I've got a friend who would like us to form a company of the California State Militia that would be responsible for taking care of law and order in Chinatown during any attack." He said, "I'd like to have you go down with me for this interview, because I think I'd rather have somebody go with me and join me in the effort than do it all myself." I agreed, and we went down and were accepted, both of us. After a period of time I was made the company commander of the Chinatown community.

Teiser: Was this an all Chinese group?

Chinn: No, I can't say that, because we didn't consider it an all Chinese group. Mainly it was the Chinese community, but in one or two instances Americans who lived on the outskirts of Chinatown volunteered to join us, and we were happy to have them because in a way it meant that we weren't so isolated and identified as just a Chinese group. We had reason to believe, too, that there was a reason for it, because here we were forming a Chinese group, mainly to take care of law and order in Chinatown, but suspicious outsiders might feel, "Well, there could be a subversive element within that company, and they could do a lot of harm unless it was carefully monitored." So we believed that at least one of them who joined was either FBI or something like that, but it didn't matter, because we were all good friends, and he never said otherwise. He was a loyal militiaman, and that's all we cared about. After the war was long past, he was still a good friend to most of us.

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Teiser: What were your duties in the militia?

Chinn: When we first were organized and bought our own uniforms, we marched into Chinatown as a company, just to let the community know we were there and that we were assigned there to supplement the city law officers. We couldn't supplant the police force, for instance, or the FBI or any of the other higher law and order persons that were sent down there, but we were to maintain law and order among the citizenry of the community. I served there for another year, until I decided I couldn't spend that much time between my home in San Mateo and coming out and commanding a company that had so much to do with San Francisco's Chinatown, and

I was not there during working hours. So I had to resign from that, too.

Teiser: You mentioned subversive elements. Were there in the Chinese population, either in China or here in the United States, groups that were against the prevalent attitude of China as an ally at that time?

Chinn: At that time, no. No one would dare openly come out and say they were against this, because this was an allied effort. You can imagine what any of the people would say if you were to say, "I don't believe that; I'm a Communist," or something, or even secretively try to subvert the law and order. No one would dare do that, because they would be reported immediately. I'm sure of that, because I knew every one of these people in the company whom we recruited.

Teiser: Was there any threat from Japanese people, either in Japan or here?

Chinn: In Japan, no, and those who were here were already rounded up, so there was no visible presence of anti-allied forces. You were either a good person or you were a bad person; if you were a bad person, you were behind bars or in the internment camps. My observation was that I didn't think that Chinatown as a whole could be compared to any but the better districts of the city in law and order and obedience.

Teiser: I was here, and I remember it all well, but not the way you do. People continued to go from outside Chinatown into Chinatown for whatever reasons they had done so before—to buy things or to dine. Was there any difference there?

Chinn: No, no. In fact, merchants welcomed any business that came into Chinatown. Naturally all the bazaars, for instance, which compose most of the businesses that could be considered as a unit to be the larger part of Chinatown, welcomed visitors and customers.

However, their supplies of Chinese goods were cut off. There couldn't be any shipping because of the submarines and warships of Japan; any allied ships that came to America would have to go by Japan, and that would be suicidal. Whatever goods the Chinese stores had in San Francisco were dwindling, so they had to find substitutes for what they could sell and what they could buy in wholesale lots, or manufacture themselves for sale. It was a situation that was pretty desperate, and a lot of the businesses closed for that reason.

Teiser: Did non-Chinese, I wonder, feel more sympathy or unity with Chinese at that period, such as the people who came into the restaurants?

Chinn: There had to be, but it's a gradual process; you can't get a reaction immediately from dislike to like. There had to be a period of adjustment from one viewpoint to a tolerance viewpoint, and then from tolerance to acceptance.

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Teiser: You were tracing how cordial relationships between Chinese-Americans and others had developed, and you said they finally developed into ordinary friendships, is that right?

Chinn: Yes. They went gradually from lukewarm friendships to firm friendships.

Chinatown, 1937-1941: Organizing for the Defense of China

Chinn: Since you are asking me about Chinatown, if I may I'd like to go back a bit to the period slightly before Pearl Harbor. I'd like to tell you about the period from, let's say, 1937 to 1941. That period was a very, very anxious period for Chinatown for this reason: ever since 1932, Japan had always had their eye towards trying to acquire a foothold in the Chinese mainland. They started a series of incidents in 1932 with the burning of the Lukouchiao Bridge, and from there on sending their troops into China. It started with a trickle, and then it grew to major invasions of coastside cities and wherever they could get a toehold.

Well, I guess that was very, very widely publicized by the American newspapers, so I'll skip over the atrocities done by the Japanese troops and say that Chinatown was very anxious because a lot of them at that period had relatives as well as close friends

still back in China. Of course, China was fighting for her life, trying to get supplies and armaments and so forth. So Chinatown organized and had a series of fund-raising efforts during all those years to raise money for the defense of China. Chinatown's leaders, led by the Chinese Six Companies, which is our acknowledged leadership organization, coordinated the effort. There were money-raising efforts in every way possible—donations—and there was even an effort that succeeded in raising a small company to build aircraft for China to use. They didn't succeed very definitely, because it was beyond their means, since building an aircraft company would involve hundreds of millions of dollars. But they did succeed in raising large amounts of money for China, and every so often they would send money back.

The Chinese, American-born, were not immune to it. After all, it was their mother country, and their parents were doing something. They couldn't sit idle; so the young people, myself included, organized. We were also a loose group of Chinese-American younger people who spoke and recorded their activities in English rather than Chinese. We considered ourselves the new generation of American-born and spoke English as our common language as against Chinese, which we spoke only in the presence of our elders. We got together and formed what was called the Federation of Chinese Clubs. We held dances and events to raise money and to collect food and clothing to be shipped back to China.

I remember that even my mother, who couldn't speak English, was one of those many, many Chinese who gathered, when a foreign ship docked in San Francisco to take on a big load of scrap iron destined for Japan—this was about in that period of 1936-'37—and she and other Chinese went down to form a protest line, moving back and forth along the deck, shouting, "Don't ship scrap iron to Japan; it'll come back in the form of bullets to the U.S." She was a staunch supporter of that movement. So that's something that they did. Every effort was utilized.

The young Chinese-American girls then swore off wearing silk stockings. That was their way of contributing to the war effort. That was a luxury item that had to be imported, so they wore cotton or lisle stockings, showing it off in pictures and even in daily newspapers. That was their effort. During one year, 1937 I believe it was, I was elected treasurer of this Federation of Chinese Clubs (it was held until after Pearl Harbor), and one of my good friends, Mrs. Henry Woo—Bessie Woo—was the president of it. We raised some large sums of money for China war relief.

Teiser: Where did you send the money?

Chinn: We sent it back to China, wherever the government was. They were constantly moving it to keep away from the encroaching Japanese. It started out that we sent it to Canton or Peking, or later on to Nanking, or later on still to ChungKing. So it moved around, wherever China's headquarters was.

Teiser: The nominal head of the Chinese government then was—?

Chinn: Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

Teiser: And everyone was loyal to him?

Chinn: Well, he was the leader, and he was the one who sat together with [Winston] Churchill and the other allied leaders.

Teiser: Was it his wife—?

Chinn: His wife [May-ling Soong] was one of the three Soong sisters who belonged to the leading leadership group.

Teiser: Had they not been educated in the United States?

Chinn: All three sisters were educated in the United States. One of them [May-ling Soong] became the wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek; one [[Ai-ling Soong] became the wife of H. H. Kung, the finance minister; and one [Ching-ling Soong] was the wife of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic.

Teiser: He had died by then?

Chinn: Yes. The other two sisters have died, but Madame Chiang Kai-shek is still alive and in Taiwan, way up in her nineties now.

Here's another funny thing about that which I should mention. Where I came from in Oregon as a boy, there were only three Chinese families in our immediate area, including the next town. The Chinese family in the next town of Marshfield (whereas we lived five miles away in North Bend) had a boy who eventually graduated from Stanford in the 1930s and went back to China. He married a Chinese-American woman who went back to China with him, and his wife became the private secretary of Madame Chiang Kai-shek. She and one of her sisters, who lives even now in San Luis Obispo, are good friends of ours. We still exchange Christmas cards with each other and write little notes, and when the one sister comes over to visit her sister in San Luis Obispo, we have dinner together. Pearl Chen is her name, and George Chen is my boyhood friend from Oregon. Their son lives in San Francisco, so I've been more or less delegated, so to speak, as "uncle," and to help him out occasionally. He did work for quite a while for

Taiwan's Chinese consulate in San Francisco before 1972, after which Communist China's regime was recognized by [President Richard M.] Nixon, and Taiwan was out.

Chinatown's Divided Loyalties to Taiwan and China

Teiser: I imagine there were many such indirect associations between Chinatown people and mainland China people

Chinn: Oh, yes, there are many, many. Some of them don't want to be recognized, because they belong to the Taiwanese group as against the mainland, mainly Communist, group.

Teiser: That's something that I know is a big subject, because it certainly split Chinatown in two at one time, didn't it?

Chinn: Yes, and not only at one time. It still exists, but not openly so much. You can always tell when you go down near Chinatown that those who are more open about their loyalty will have a Chinese nationalist flag flying over their buildings, and the others will be flying the American flag or a flag similar to the Chinese mainland flag.

Teiser: I must take more notice of that.

Chinn: It's something that's not known unless somebody tells you, and most people don't even pay any attention to it. But there are a lot of Chinese who still follow the old nationalist Taiwanese group. They have headquarters here that even have legal delegates-at-large appointed by the ruling group of Taiwan who go back there during their periodic conferences. And they flaunt it; they represent the Chinese nationalist group, and so forth. And there's a certain amount of money in it for them because they get travel expenses and things like that, and they of course try and recruit members for their nationalist cause in Taiwan.

Teiser: There's a great deal of commerce between the two groups, is there not?

Chinn: Oh, yes. There's a certain amount of financial advantage in cooperating with them, but that's been played down now that nationalist Taiwanese groups are in the process of trying to lift the laws of exclusion with the mainland Chinese. They're trying to formulate a sort of a recognition as a province. Taiwan, if it ever worked out, would be province of mainland China, but that's

in the distant future; that's still in the preliminary stages of discussion.

Teiser: Are there groups in Chinatown here now who are active supporters of mainland China?

Chinn: Oh, definitely. After all, mainland China is the recognized Chinese consulate in the U.S.—not the Taiwanese. Taiwan has been relegated to a subordinate, separate group, just using the name Coordination Council of China for tourist, trade, and other business purposes.

Chinatown's Reactions to Events in Tiananmen Square, 1989

Teiser: Are the supporters here of mainland China buffeted (if that's the word) by changes in policy on the mainland, wavering from Communism and so forth?

Chinn: Definitely. There is definite proof in the June 4, 1989, uprising in Tiananmen Square, with the students' popular uprising against some of the policies of the Communist government.

Teiser: Is that reflected here in Chinatown?

Chinn: Oh, definitely. That was something that was so well supported that it relegated some of the loyal mainland Chinese to be less vociferous in their statements. Also, the Chinese consulate didn't do too much in the way of activities during that period when this came up, because they didn't want to arouse any more resentment or expose themselves to any more harassment, which was the case right after it happened, when there were demonstrations in front of the

Chinese consulate. So there was definitely antagonism against the Communist mainland China.

Teiser: Are the sympathies of people in Chinatown now who are sympathetic with mainland China split between different factions there?

Chinn: I believe there are, but the young people and some of the older ones are for democracy. The hard-core Chinese who had not formed any great alliance with democratic groups here among the Chinese are the only ones who are still loyal to the mainland government, following U.S. policy of recognition of Beijing's regime.

Loyalty to the Mother Country

Teiser: It must be difficult to be part of a population in one country that is so much tied to the political ties of another.

Chinn: I thought that for a long time. After you've had enough years to mellow a bit, you look around—this is my own unofficial observation, of course, nothing to base it firmly on excepting in newspaper articles that occasionally mention different things—and you see that almost all racial extractions have their own loyalties to their motherland. I don't care whether you're Italian, French, German, or of any other nationality. You have a certain sentimental feeling for your mother country. Your parents were born there, your forefathers came from that country; your culture, your language, and your background are handed down. So what's the difference? It depends on the amount of sentiment you want to weigh in what you give to your motherland and has nothing to do with your true loyalty to the U.S. None of us who live in the U.S., outside of that very small liberal group that feels otherwise, would give up our American citizenship to try and go back and live in the old country, for instance.

My sentiment in that regard—and, again, it is personal—is the fact that I think our U.S. government is not helping in any way by refusing or being unable to formulate a policy or even extend the bureaucracy to study the situation of our new immigrants from all over the world. They are letting them stay in their little self-imposed ghetto. As an example—and this again is just a loose example—the Latinos who come here now are so vociferous in their demands to be given a voice in the government, but they still vote mainly as a block in their viewpoints, and the government is paying attention to them. But that's not the thing. That means that whoever has a louder voice and a greater representation will overshadow a smaller immigrant group from smaller countries. It's just like you have different kinds of gears trying to shift, with different big gears against small gears, and that is not bringing any harmony within our country. Sooner or later we are going to tear our nation apart.

Chinatown and McCarthyism

Teiser: My mind is going back again to something during the McCarthy era. It was assumed that if you were a Communist or a Communist sympathizer, you would put something else ahead of the United States, that you were by that very fact likely to be a traitor to

the United States because your higher loyalty was to Communism. Did that affect Chinatown? Did that affect Chinese people?

Chinn: Only covertly, underground, and I would guess only a small group. They would never openly come out and say they believed in the Communist cause. But those that are dyed-in-the-wool Communists—a handful of them might come out, but they would never say they were Communists. They would say, "Just because I'm possibly a little bit more liberal than you are, you take me for a Communist?" They would take that attitude. I deplore that situation that is still amongst us today.

You can't tell the difference, let's say, how many among these various affirmative action groups are dyed-in-the-wool Communists and how many are true liberals with true U.S. concerns being their first priority. But when you mix the two it becomes personal, and friendship overtakes it because the true dyed-in-the-wool Communists are not trying to entice their friends that might be liberal to join their cause. There might be a few, but I can't see that. Those that I've known, intuitively and amongst friends that have similar feelings, are a small number of people in different clubs or organizations. They are dyed-in-the-wool Communists, but they won't come out and say so, so what can you do?

Wartime Literature about China

Teiser: I want to go back again to World War II. Just before World War II there were writings in English in which heroes were made of the Chinese people. I think of Pearl Buck and writers like that who wrote novels mostly. I think there were some radio plays, too, that I remember, that brought out the excellence and loyalty of the Chinese people on the mainland.

Chinn: Now you're touching on a subject that, since I am not a professional historian—

Teiser: But you're pretty good at it.

Chinn: Just from my own observations, and backed only by the fact that I read the newspapers and magazines where I see and read about different observations that might be at variance with my own feelings. You mentioned Pearl Buck, and that's a good example that I will use now, because this I know to be true. Pearl Buck was a very, very beloved person during her long period of time in China, and when she came back here and wrote all those novels she

still had a very strong following—dedicated Chinese people that would welcome her with open arms if she went back to China.

But then comes your new China, since 1949 when the Communists took over mainland China. All of the beliefs and the training and the observations of Pearl Buck from the era prior to 1949 were considered taboo to Communist China. So where Pearl Buck was beloved up to the Communist takeover of China, she's now looked upon with less favor—her writings and so forth. That's something that I feel is prevalent. Not only Pearl Buck, but with most of our written material, whether the historians or novelists or other people that write about the different periods, if they go back far enough they are not in sync with what we believe exists today in China.

Liberalization Trends in Contemporary China

Chinn: In China today, many of us like the democracy or freedom we feel.

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Chinn: In 1980, when I was back in China, I was able to observe firsthand, because I traveled with my friends from Beijing, following the Great Wall, all the way to Duanhuang, which is the silk road town where the first Europeans came into China centuries ago. That was a distance of four to five thousand miles, and following that we were able to sense the feeling of a lot of the people. In it, we feel that Western writers, including a few Chinese-Americans of the more liberal type, do not grasp the trials and tribulations of a big—I don't mean great—country like China, the largest in the world populationwise.

It has been secluded so long by the Communists, since they took over in 1949 up to the time Nixon came in in the 1970s, that the Chinese should be forgiven to a certain extent for their attitudes towards other people. For that reason, and the fact that the country is so big and the bureaucracy is so loose in areas not located close to the central capital, it's in for a period of many, many years before [it achieves] true democracy or wherever the country is headed for—whether you call it Socialist or Communist or a democracy like the U.S. We can't condemn the country for going through this period, because it would be true with any smaller country but probably in a less pronounced way.

What I'm trying to get at is that China's in the midst of such a turmoil that anything could happen, and that might be one

reason why Taiwan is willing to come back in and sort of get back into touch where they might be able to use their influence to better balance their efforts. As indicated by their past history, from the time they became Taiwanese instead of mainland people, the Taiwanese have been very successful as a "democracy," as compared to life on mainland China. Economywise they have made great strides in accepting the Western technology as against China lumbering along without a great amount of money or willingness to accept the concept of Western technology and trade. For that you can say that China's aged leadership is to blame, because the leadership are still thoroughly entrenched in China. Many of them have never gone abroad to learn what Western democracy is.

So that period is still in the works, and it's going to take a long time before it can settle down to a trend one way or the other, whether it will retreat back into a closed society or embrace democracy, or something in between, for all we know.

I'm going too far abroad in my thinking and theorizing. I feel that many of my friends with almost my outlook and my background feel the same way, that China is now going through a trying period. That is something over which we have no control, and certainly our sympathy is all that can be expected from us, but as far as loyalty is concerned, this is our country. We can look at it objectively with any other American.

Teiser: I'm very glad to have this point of view. I have a friend who taught in China two years ago in a provincial college. He was one of only three Westerners in the town—a big town. He still keeps up with a lot of people there; he made many friends among the Chinese students. One of the things that astounded me from his account was that although everyone studies English, almost no one has a good command of it. Another is that most of the students, I gather, have so little

control over their own lives.

Chinn: What you say, in effect, is the same thing in reverse of the Chinese here. When you say most of them are learning English but are not proficient in the usage of it, that's natural because they do not come from a country where they can associate with enough people who would speak English with them more in order for them to become more proficient. The minute your teacher has gone out of the classroom, you go back to your home, and if you have elders there you go back to speaking your native language. So it's hard, when you're living in a country and you're trying to learn a foreign language, to do it efficiently in a short period of time.

Just like the Chinese who came to America—we had difficulty in exactly the same way. Our parents spoke Chinese at home. They never had the time to learn English, because they had to start

work right away to earn a living to send back to their families, and for that a large majority of the first generation were condemned because they did not have time to assimilate. Well, in the beginning it was hard for them to realize that they had any intention of wanting to live here the rest of their lives and to have their descendants live here. So there was that early constant struggle, and that's why the first generation spoke such poor English.

Army Quartermaster Market Center, 1942-1949

Teiser: I'd like to go back a bit. You said you worked in the shipyards?

Chinn: Only for a couple of weeks; that's all. It wasn't my cup of tea, so to speak.

Teiser: Then you worked for a number of years in the Army Quartermaster—

Chinn: That's right, the Army Quartermaster Market Center.

Teiser: What did you do there?

Chinn: I started out just being a clerk. However, this unit of the quartermaster corps was an entirely new section of the quartermaster functions than was utilized in an earlier time. This time the Quartermaster Market Center was set up to provide something that previous armed services had no advantage of, and that is to be served fresh food instead of the dried or nonperishable type of food. This was formed so that there were specialists in the meat department, in the dairy products department, in the fruit and vegetable departments. Anything that was perishable or seasonal which you had to put into refrigeration was the responsibility of the Quartermaster *Market* Center. The emphasis is on the word market.

Since it was a fairly new operation, I think I was lucky enough to get into the earlier period before it was really jelled into a set bureaucracy, if you want to put it that way. Consequently, my advancement was a little bit more rapid than would be the case if we had an old, permanent organization where I had to climb over a lot of other established people. I was able to suggest little improvements in the way we did a lot of the things that I observed in the ordinary operations of the market center.

We had specialists, as I say, in the meats, dairy, and fruit and vegetable departments, and these were the people who were actually in those fields in private life. They were never put into uniform, these marketing specialists, but they were older people, more mature people, who had a territory. Each one of the market centers across the country had a territory, and they bought, according to the requirements of the army, the necessary supplies that were needed for x number of armed service personnel. In other words, if we had an armed services of, let's say, half a million people in the West, in the army especially, we would then look over our area where our market center was and determine how many carloads of fruit and vegetables we needed, which kind we wanted, and we bought that many carloads. The same thing would be true of dairy products and meats and so forth. They would then contract with these suppliers—fruit and vegetable growers or meat packers—to furnish the number of carloads that we required.

But that wasn't all. Normally that would be plenty, and all you would have to do was to send nonperishable goods to a warehouse and that was the end of that; you would draw from that. We had to contract to rent and also to build cold storage warehouses, just like a refrigerator. We had to send people, like the veterinarians, to certify the freshness of everything that was received and that it was properly refrigerated and so forth. So it was a much more delicate operation than your nonperishable goods, particularly here. On the West Coast there were only three large areas, and that is San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the Northwest—Seattle. Ours was one of the larger ones because our territory had fruits and vegetables that took in the entire San Joaquin Valley and up to the area close to Fresno. Our requirements, for instance, during the fruit and vegetable season—summer—would be from three to four hundred refrigerated rail carloads of perishable food to be sent to our cold storage warehouses, and we had to have the space to put it in. And the same procedure with of all the other items.

I spent three years, from late 1942 to 1945, gradually being promoted in the departments. Then in 1947 I was promoted to become the head of the storage and distribution department. Our department determined and coordinated with field headquarters in Chicago the amount of food we were to buy, and our department was also responsible for the shipments in and out for all of that merchandise. And I was in charge. That was exceptional, because before I took over it was an army officer who was head of that department. So I had quite a responsibility in that I took care of everything from Fresno north to almost the borderline of Oregon. The Seattle office had territory from Oregon to Seattle.

Teiser: As a civilian?

Chinn: Yes. That was what was exceptional about it. But I had their trust, and I continued in that position until 1949, when I resigned to go back into my typesetting business.

Teiser: You gave up a big portion of your life to that war effort.

Chinn: I did, and I probably might have stayed in for another year or two, but I can't say that I left voluntarily. Especially during that period following World War II when the army personnel was growing smaller, the requirements for a big army were reduced, and all of these officers, from colonels on down, and even a smattering of generals, were scrambling for civilian work. It was gently hinted at that my job was in jeopardy because a certain colonel wanted my job. So I held on for a few months longer, but when the pressure got too heavy—you can't fight the army. They wanted their own back in there, so I finally decided I'd better resign, so I resigned.

[laughs]

Teiser: Perhaps it was just as well in the long run, since you returned to a very fine career.

Chinn: Well, in a way it was good, because it enabled me to return to typesetting and start my own plant, which I did. I think that would be a chapter in my next recitation, because I think what I will tell you about next time will almost become my life's work. I think this chapter is important enough for me to give to you and let you determine how my life finally evolved into what it is now, for better or for worse. I've never looked at it from a long-term viewpoint until more recent years, and now that I look back at it I sometimes wonder whether I should have had my head examined. [laughs]

VI More on San Francisco's Chinatown

Influence of American Religious Organizations

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Teiser: Willa Baum asked me to ask you if there was any discernible effect here in California on the Chinese-American community of the Protestant colleges in China, and maybe the Catholic installations there, too.

Chinn: Personally, I have not done much research about connections of the American religious organizations in China, but I have a friend who was the first Chinese woman graduate of Mills College.

Teiser: Who was that?

Chinn: That's Mrs. Florence Chinn Kwan. She is still alive. She's in either a convalescent home or her daughter's home; I believe it's in Berkeley. I have her phone number; I talk to her because her family and I have been quite close. I don't know how her mind is now, because she's in her nineties, whether she's still capable of transmitting any of her memoirs to you. She is the wife of Dr. S. T. Kwan, and he was one of the first two neurosurgeons of China, from sometime in the 1920s to the past decade or two, when her family and his family moved to San Francisco after the Communists took over in China in 1949. Finally, he was in brief practice here in San Francisco's Chinatown. Her brother was a well-known doctor here, an M.D. in practice since he graduated in the early 1920s. He was one of the youngest M.D.s to graduate from UC Berkeley.

Teiser: What was his name?

Chinn: His name was Alexander Balfour Chinn. His wife was also an M.D. and also received her degrees at UC Berkeley. Her name was Helen Tong Chinn. She was very well known because she delivered a good part of the community's babies in the early days [chuckles].

Teiser: I'm going back to the religious institutions—at least they kept people circulating between China and California, didn't they?

Chinn: Yes. I do know slightly some well-known names from passages in various research that I've conducted. One that comes to mind is Dr. Ng Poon Chew. He's a doctor of theology, I believe, a journalist, and the editor of the first Chinese newspaper in California. As a boy he was raised as a Buddhist in China by his family, but when he came over here under some American church auspices, he converted to Christianity in 1882. In 1889 he entered the San Francisco Theological Seminary and became pastor of the Chinese Presbyterian Church in Chinatown. After four years, he left and had a congregation in Los Angeles and started a little Chinese newspaper there in 1898 before returning to San Francisco to start the Chung Sai Yat Bo that became so well known. Eventually he became one of the most famous Chinese-Americans to take up the cause of Chinese-Americans. He lectured during the Chautauqua circuit. Just a recently I gave his name and photo to some magazine back in Boston that wanted his picture and a little bit of his background for publication.

Chinese Immigration After 1949

Teiser: You mentioned Dr. Kwan, who came here after '49. That change in the Chinese government gave us a lot of well educated and valuable Chinese immigrants, didn't it?

Chinn: Yes. At that time they allowed certain ones in, but I don't know the specifics about the law that allowed any of them to come in, whether they came in under quotas or under state department sponsorship, or otherwise. But there were quite a few who managed to come in under Congressmen-sponsored application.

Teiser: It seems to me there were political people and generals in the Chinese army who were admitted. I have some vague recollection that people who had been important in China but who were out of favor politically were allowed to come in.

Chinn: I do know there were quite a number of Chinese military people who passed away over here or who I know. In fact, my luncheon group that meets every Tuesday includes two of the ten people who served

in Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek's army. One was a colonel and one was a general.

Teiser: That's the sort of person it seems to me I've heard about.

Chinn: It could be, but I've never inquired.

Teiser: Was the influence of Henry Luce felt here?

Chinn: Henry Luce and Clare Booth Luce, yes. Of course, that was during the days when Henry Luce was in China. Was he under a religious sponsorship? He was Dr. Henry Luce at the time.

Teiser: He was the son of missionaries, I know. I thought that when he returned here and was head of *Time* magazine that he was influential in the cause of nationalist China, or Taiwan.

Chinn: That was his contact. That is, in those days all the people that the Westerners who went to China had contact with were "old" China, the China that was in place before the Communists came. Like Pearl Buck and Henry Luce and Clare Booth Luce were all from that old family connection with the T. V. Soongs and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. You couldn't operate without being friends or connected with that particular regime of China in those days, so it would be natural for them to have that relationship with them, and probably that carried

over when the Luces became a power here in the publishing world. Then the old warriors of China were displaced from mainland China to Taiwan, and from Taiwan they probably used connections to come to America. That I have no firsthand knowledge of.

Teiser: It's interesting how different forces kind of rallied then.

Chinatown Police Squad

Tong Wars

Teiser: Some things have come to mind after listening to the last interview. I was reading your book, *Bridging the Pacific*, and it mentioned John Manion and the Chinatown police squad. That's a whole other thing, isn't it, that Chinatown police squad?

Chinn: That was a special unit established by the San Francisco police department to more or less serve as the San Francisco police contact in Chinatown. They wanted people who would know Chinatown and know Chinese personalities intimately enough to make sure that

the community was observant of western law and order. They established that, because all of these policemen who were regularly in that squad over many years would know the leading people of the community and therefore could work more closely with them.

Teiser: Was there more crime in Chinatown than in other parts of the city?

Chinn: Well, it was a special type of crime, you might say, in the old days. The tongs, or the more unruly elements, over a period of years started getting more ornery. I have researched and determined that originally the tongs grew from families or clan groups that felt they were being shunted aside by more powerful clans from any work or business opportunities, or were being forcibly crowded out. They established a group of young men who looked out for their interests, who came from their particular clan groups. These were effective at first in trying to maintain law and order and prevent their own clans from being shunted aside. In the course of time, if the other side happened to bribe you or offer you something, then sooner or later some weaker members of the clan group would succumb to this enticement and join the other side or become an undercover person for the other side.

So in time these tong members would start fighting each other, and gradually it developed into a battle for turf for gambling and prostitution territory, just like we see today in other groups like the drug groups and the black groups struggling for turf. That developed those tong wars that started even way back in the late 1880s and 1890s, and continued from there on up until after 1906—the earthquake and fire in San Francisco. At that point the business community felt that they had to clean up their own community, and they determined that they had better do something about it. Early on they were unable to organize enough support in the community to force the tongs to back down from their active fighting tongs into something more peaceful.

This took from 1906 until 1918 or 1919, when the Chinese Peace Association first was organized. It mediated differences over a conference table, and finally managed to prevent any active flare-up of tong wars. Since 1924, when tong wars were officially banned, there has never been another tong war. There were threats of it, of course, in the early years following 1924, but eventually even those were dropped, and now the tongs as such are just another benevolent group that works for the betterment of the various Chinese clans.

Teiser: There have been little upsurges of gang activity.

Chinn: There will probably always be, because you get unruly elements, not only among the very, very small groups of real Chinese-Americans who were born here, but mainly those new, immigrant, young people who came over here and were so confused because they couldn't learn the language, couldn't communicate. They felt left out; they couldn't work outside of their own community because they couldn't understand English. So they worked inside Chinatown, where their pay was so poor that they felt they had to form a group, which started out as friends, and then they started trying to threaten the business community with bribery and payoffs for protection and so forth, until there were actual gang wars which have supplanted the fighting tongs of the old days. Now you have this gang warfare, the same as any of the others—like the blacks and Latinos forming groups—and you have a situation that is just born out of that.

Teiser: Is there still a Chinatown police squad?

Chinn: No, there hasn't been for many, many years now—I'd say at least three decades or better.

Recollections of John Manion

Teiser: What was Manion like? Did you know him?

Chinn: Oh, he and I were good friends. We were both committeemen for our Chinese Boy Scout troop. We had about five committeemen who met once in a while to look over the progress of the troop and what more they could do and so forth. In fact, when I became the air raid warden commander of Chinatown, Manion and I even had to work closely together, because the police were the organized and recognized enforcer of the city's laws. We were the ones who worked closely with the police squad in case of air raids.

Teiser: Did he know a little Chinese language?

Chinn: Very little. In fact, John Manion bamboozled the Chinese for quite a while when he first was assigned here. He would stand before a bulletin board that was all in Chinese and look at it and look at it. He'd come away, and later on he would talk to some of the Chinese community elders and say, "You have a bulletin that says such and such," that declared that the association wanted to do this or that. The Chinese elder would say, "How did you know that?" He'd say, "Well, it's on the bulletin board." From that they deduced that John Manion knew Chinese, but actually it was nothing but a Chinese person who was friendly or under the pay of

John Manion who told him some of this. He carried through and pretended that he knew Chinese and never gave that away for a long time. [laughter]

Teiser: There were not many Caucasians who knew Chinese, were there?

Chinn: Very, very few, and they were more the graduate students of universities who picked up Chinese. In fact, if you go back far enough, Billy Graham's wife was born in China and spent the first seventeen years of her life in China. Then she returned here, and I don't know if she met Henry Luce in China or over here, but that is how it developed. She probably knew Chinese, but that again was during the old China before the Communists came into power.

Chinese Dialects

Teiser: I have a friend who started to study at Harvard, then went to the Ginling University on a fellowship for Chinese Studies, and then came here and graduated from Berkeley. She loved to go to Chinatown, and she said she could read everything, but she could not understand any of it. She'd get mad because she couldn't understand it.

Chinn: There's no reason to be mad, because, as you know, the pioneer Chinese who came over here following the Gold Rush for the next several decades were mainly Cantonese-speaking Chinese. It was 1924 when Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek actually came into power, and it was about 1927 when he finally declared that the spoken language of the new Chinese regime that he set up would be Mandarin-speaking. The Cantonese were told to learn Mandarin. They even had Mandarin-speaking courses over here at UC Berkeley. But to this day, the older Chinese and the new Chinese immigrants from South China are still at odds with speaking Mandarin. The two are not that far apart but not close enough to understand each other. In other words, just because you're Cantonese doesn't mean you can always speak Mandarin, and vice versa. That comes from the fact that it depends on who you associate with. If your group is predominantly Cantonese-speaking, you're stuck with that tongue, and the same with Mandarin, although more Cantonese today are able to speak both.

Teiser: Are there other dialects spoken by large groups here?

Chinn: Yes, there are many, many. The main ones would be about a dozen or so dialects that can very faintly be understood by the other dialects, but only if they were close districts that had joined

this other dialect-speaking district. By and large, that still plays a part in developing rapport and working relationships and trust with other Chinese from a different area.

VII Printing and Chinese-American History: A Marriage of Professional Interests

Teiser: Let us go back to your career as a linotype operator.

Chinn: I think I mentioned that at this particular time I was going to ask if I could give you an overview so that this oral history can be interpreted in the light of what I finally have determined—

Interest in Preserving Chinese-American History

Chinn: What I'm going to say now is something that I have suddenly realized was taking shape in a more serious way than I had thought possible when I was younger. I think I've mentioned in various parts of my talks that my interest in Chinese-American history started when I was a boy sent back to China in 1924 to get a Chinese education. It was a couple of old-timers, retired men in their seventies and eighties who had come over here in the late 1800s to work either in the railroads or in the San Joaquin Valley farmlands, who told me stories about their early life

in California that sparked my interest in Chinese history in America. But as a boy, why, you get interested but it doesn't last very long, and all your resolutions to try and remember them start fading away.

But when I went back to China again in 1933, this time on business, I realized this was something that really should be preserved, because I really had not seen any of our history that had been written by Chinese themselves. All the Chinese stories and material that I had read or was told had been written by Westerners—Caucasians—and their concepts of what we think and what we do are sometimes misinterpreted or never understood thoroughly for various reasons; they were not written up

correctly. So I determined that I would start trying to write up stories and history about the Chinese-Americans—those who were born in this country, who intend making this country their homeland.

I came back in 1933 from a brief visit to China trying to establish business but, as I mentioned in various places, because of the big Depression, China was not ready to start any new projects while the world was still in turmoil. So I came back after a very brief period that same year. I had quit my job and gone back to China with rosy ambitions, and now came back without a job and no job in sight. That's when I decided that I had to learn about journalism and the printing trades, which eventually worked out to where I co-published the first English language newspaper for Chinese-Americans with my good friend and mentor, Chingwah Lee. That was in 1935.

Paper Sons and Daughters

Chinn: When I started that, I had every hope of being able to include a lot of stories about Chinese-Americans and their experiences and frustrations and aspirations, but I found out that I couldn't. I was just a little bit too young to understand that many people who came over here shortly after the earthquake and fire of 1906 had come over here illegally as so-called "paper sons," who claimed that they were born here but "all of their records were destroyed in the earthquake and fire." Under that "paper sons and daughters" situation, many of the people who came over here came illegally. But they didn't want to talk about it; they didn't want to give me any of their history because they belonged to, for instance, either the Lee clan or the Wong clan or the Chinn clan, when actually they belonged to another clan. Naturally, in those days of the 1930s, if the immigration people found out about it they would have deported these people. So that was always a hush-hush, no-no story that could never be told. That was frustration number one, when I realized there were many more obstacles than just the simple writing of somebody's story.

An Early Chinese-American History Organization, 1936

Chinn: However, after that I still felt that sooner or later somebody else would take up the challenge to write and develop an organization that would devote itself to Chinese-American history.

But out of that 1935 venture—the name of the paper was the *Chinese Digest* —came the first attempt to have a Chinese-American history organization, which was just a close group of friends, about a half a dozen or so, who started assembling some history that they tried to tell without mentioning names—just about places and activities of the community that didn't involve actual names. That was something that only lasted a brief time, a couple of years at the most, and then it disappeared.

Teiser: Was that about 1935?

Chinn: In 1936 or '37. That was an outgrowth of my *Chinese Digest*. My associate editor, William Hoy, was one of the instigators of that particular group.

Teiser: Did the group have a formal name?

Chinn: No. Well, it had a name, but it was so brief that I'm not sure what it was called, because I have nothing that was ever kept of it.

Chinese Digest

Chinn: My experience with the *Chinese Digest* lasted from 1935 until 1940, although during my tenure as editor from 1935 to early 1937 it was a weekly. I finally had to resign in 1937 because I had served over a year without pay, and I couldn't afford it any longer because I had a family now. I stayed on only as co-publisher. It wasn't just my wife; I had a boy. My boy was only three years old at that time, and I still didn't have a job after I took this *Chinese Digest* project on. So I had to resign, turn the paper over to Chingwah Lee, and he was the one who financed the balance of that period from sometime in 1937 to 1940, when it became a monthly. Then in 1939 or 1940, it became a quarterly, because he couldn't afford to support the paper any longer, either.

During all those years I was editor—1935 to 1937—I was spending my entire time producing the *Chinese Digest*. I had to rewrite all the stories that came in, go out and solicit advertising, as well as doing my own reporting. Then I would have to go and sit before my rented linotype shop and set all the type for it during the night, and my wife would spend half the night proofreading it.[11]

Teiser: That's the story of the small-town newspaper.

Chinn: Right, that's true. That was what finally wore me down to where I couldn't handle it any more. There were some signs of interest growing, but there was no money in sight in the way of advertising revenue, so finally I had to resign. However, I maintained my interest in it, and that was where I focused my ambition and my resolution to try and devote as much time as I could into preserving Chinese-American history. My files reflected all those years of research, from 1937, when I resigned from the *Chinese Digest*. At least I had a trade now, because I was able to become a linotype operator. I then borrowed some money, bought a linotype machine, and started my own typesetting plant in Chinatown.

Teiser: How much did a linotype machine cost?

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11. See also p. 140.

Chinn: In those days? Of course, I'm not talking about new machines, but old, used machines that were still very good. Mine cost between $400 and $500. But of course with all the material in conjunction with a typesetting machine, it came to $1,000. It was very tough to raise $1,000, which would have meant the equivalent of raising $25,000 or $40,000 in today's money.

Anyway, I started, and I was barely able to eke out a living—barely. But at the same time I had freedom, because when I had spare time I would be doing research.

Lectures on Chinese-American History

Chinn: By that time some of the people outside of the community had heard of me and asked me to speak at various small gatherings, so I was also doing a certain amount of speaking before small groups.

Teiser: Did they pay you to speak?

Chinn: No, I never got paid; it was all gratis. [laughs] For years I did that, though not quite as often as I would have liked. But at the same time, if it had increased I wouldn't have been able to spend the time on it. At least a couple of times a month, or maybe less than that; sometimes in an entire year I'd only speak about six or eight times.

Teiser: What did they want you to speak about? What did they want to know from you?

Chinn: Chinese-American history, but just in general terms. Like when the first Chinese came over here, nobody knew about that. Nobody

knew anything about the early struggles of the Chinese in the gold fields and in the farmlands, or what they did and some of their frustrations. You had to speak in general terms only.

Teiser: Were these Chinese or Caucasian groups?

Chinn: They were both, but mainly Chinese until after World War II.

Efforts to Preserve Chinese-American History

Chinn: That led up to my determination, after the *Chinese Digest* finally closed in 1940 and I had this little bit of extra time, to start another semimonthly called the *Chinese News*. I started that in 1940 and had to do it all, and it lasted until shortly after Pearl Harbor. Then, when I determined that I had to get into defense work or be called into the armed service—because after Pearl Harbor the draft was calling all young men—I had to give up my business and work in the defense industry. I sold my linotype shop and went into defense work. I spent two weeks at my very first job which, because of the pay, I thought I would try, and that was working in the shipyards. That only lasted two weeks, because I couldn't see myself as practically a common laborer without any trade skills.

I resigned from the shipyards and went to work for the U.S. Army Quartermaster Market Center, which is a story in itself. That gave me more of a steady income, which led to my being able to do other things. I was talking and lecturing more, but I was still dissatisfied because I was not doing anything, and nobody else was doing anything, to preserve Chinese-American history, and, as far as I can see, it was gradually disappearing. Every day that these old people

were passing away, that the changes in the community were taking place, our history was disappearing as far as its appearance in the English language from our viewpoint—the Chinese themselves. The only ones interested in that particular phase of history were the Chinese-Americans who were born here, and English was their principal language.

So I was doing a lot more talking before American groups now, as well as occasionally doing some writing. In fact, in the latter days of my linotype job, I tried to influence the Chinese newspapers—of which there were three or four at that time, two of them dailies and the others weekly—into putting in an English language column for these growing Chinese-Americans who couldn't read Chinese fluently. These Chinese newspapers patronized me when they needed American type. I typeset for them the names of

American firms that advertised and so forth. When the newspapers had stories that had American names, they had to come to me, and generally I had to rewrite or interpret the captions for them. Anyway, I finally got one newspaper to allow me to set an entire newspaper page in English. I would do it at no cost to them, but if there was any advertising I could bring in, I would be able to have part of that. Of course, there again I was doing everything—going out and soliciting stories and news, setting the type and making it up, carrying all that great big, heavy, full page of metal type to the Chinese newspaper to have them print it, and then getting the type back and starting all over again. It was a one-page-a-week job.

Teiser: You could carry a whole page?

Chinn: Oh, I had to put it in an automobile, because it weighed about a hundred and some odd pounds. That's why it was a tough thing to do. I couldn't continue it, and they didn't see any great advantage—

Teiser: You set it and locked it up and everything, and they just put it right on the press?

Chinn: Oh, yes. You had to do it. They didn't have the expertise to do it. I was worried in case they put the wrong thing in the wrong place.

Teiser: What was the name of the newspaper that you had the page in?

Chinn: The *Chinese Nationalist Daily*. At that time it was at 809 Sacramento Street, which is still a printing place and today publishes the *Asian Week*, which I became a consultant for since 1980.

Founding the Chinese Historical Society of America, 1963

Chinn: Time passed on, and I could see that nothing was happening at all in the field of Chinese-American history. Finally I got tired of waiting and thought that if nobody was going to start something, I would get some friends and start our own organization for this purpose. Well, nobody did anything about it; there was nothing in sight. So in early 1962 I got four friends of mine to join me in starting the Chinese Historical Society of America. First and foremost was my very good friend, my mentor and co-publisher of the *Chinese Digest*, Chingwah Lee; H. K. Wong—

Teiser: I remember him as a most energetic man.

Chinn: Dr. Thomas Wu, D.D.S.; and C. H. Kwock, who was at that time an editor. In the late 1950s his Chinese newspaper had purchased a linotype machine and was then turning out an English language section, one page, something that I had started so much earlier, but they finally did it with much better success.

We met many times that year, organizing and setting up our constitution and bylaws, and on January 15, 1963, we sent out an invitation to our friends regarding the organization of the Chinese Historical Society of America. From that meeting, in which thirty-one people met at my home, we organized and started the Chinese Historical Society. By acclamation I was chosen to be the first president. Because they felt I knew more about Chinese-American history than any of the others, I was also entrusted with the idea of setting out the way we would conduct our meetings, how our format would be for conducting meetings and doing research.

Gathering Documentation

Teiser: You said you had done research. Was your main research source people's accounts given verbally, or were there any records?

Chinn: Any way we could get hold of information that touched on Chinese-American history—any activity, any aspect of the Chinese in America—we did. But one of the first projects we did was that in our very first year, 1963, we had our first field trip. We were very, very dedicated in those days, but it was only a core group, a very small group of about a dozen or so, that went to Armona, a ghost Chinatown which is about five miles south of Fresno. It had one old Chinese still living in it, and just a few years after that he passed away, and then the authorities leveled this very old Chinese Chinatown.

Teiser: Did you record his recollections?

Chinn: We have some relics from it, and some early stories about it, and we took pictures.

Chinese Historical Society Bulletin

Chinn: From that early experience I determined again that we had to have something in writing. While it's recorded in our minutes, I felt

that if we were to grow, our membership had to have an organ where the members that might come from afar or were non-resident members could be informed of what we were doing. So I started a bulletin in 1966. Again, let me inform you that I was working as a linotype operator for one of the largest linotype plants in San Francisco, Gollan Typography.

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Chinn: The owner's name was Gordon Gollan, and the foreman's name was Robert Stevenson. They were both very good friends of mine, and anything I wanted done, they would bend over backwards to help me with. In fact, Gordon allowed me the use of his entire plant to set any of the type that I wanted for the society without charge. I also developed a close friendship with a number of printers who patronized our firm, the Gollan Typography Company. One printer, together with his son, were my very, very good friends. Their names were Lawton Kennedy and his son, Alfred Kennedy, both well known in the City's printing circles.

As I was able to get the type set free, it meant that I had to find a source to have the type printed. In order to get it printed I asked Lawton if he would not print the first issue for me, and he said, "I don't see why not." And from that first effort, Lawton decided that he wanted to be a member of the society; he and Alfred and his wife, Sally, all joined. Not only did they join, but they also donated all of the printing from 1966 to 1980. For a total of almost fourteen years, they did the printing, beginning with a four-page little bulletin to where it became an eight-page bulletin every month, and at our January anniversary issues, it became a sixteen-page bulletin. Lawton and Alfred did that all as their donation to the society, without pay. For that same period of time I donated all of my typesetting, as I had from the very beginning, as my contribution.

Gollan Typography, 1971-1980

Chinn: To further expand on that, in 1971 Gordon Gollan decided that he wanted to retire because he was commuting from way up north near Guerneville. However, he didn't want to just sell the company outright and have it disappear; he wanted somebody to keep it up. Both the foreman and I said, "Well, we would like to see it continue," because we were anxious to keep our jobs. [laughs] The foreman had no means of raising any capital whatsoever, and I had limited numbers of people whom I could borrow from. Finally it developed that Gordon gave us very, very lenient terms, and I was able to buy it by lending some money to the foreman as his

share. I took in him and my son, who had been my apprentice and who had gone to war during the Korean war and came back and finished up his apprenticeship with a printer. He had a certain amount of money to invest, so he and Stevenson became my junior partners, while I had the majority ownership.

In 1971 we bought the plant and carried it through until the computer age came into being, which meant that our share of typesetting business was fast disappearing. I determined in 1980 that if we were to get anything at all for our business, we would have to sell it before it disappeared in value entirely. The others agreed with me, and we dissolved the partnership and sold the plant in March 1980.

Teiser: What happened to it?

Chinn: The best offer was made by an individual broker who then sold all of the machines piecemeal in the open market. It was at that time one of the largest typesetting plants in San Francisco.

Teiser: How many machines had you?

Chinn: We had seven linotype machines and two Ludlow machines, reproduction proof presses, as well as one of the largest collections of old, handset-type in San Francisco, as Gordon's father had started his business in 1915. There were nearly forty double-type cabinets, each cabinet containing forty-eight drawers of type.

Teiser: Where did that go?

Chinn: That all went to some Latin countries, where they thought that the linotype machine was the last word, and it was something better than their hand-setting type.

Teiser: Where did the hand-setting type machine go?

Chinn: I never followed up on that, because my interest was just in selling it.

That meant that my typesetting contribution ended in 1980, when I myself finally retired. By that time I felt I was old enough to retire, and that was when I was turning seventy-two, coming on seventy-three. However, my tenure as president of the Chinese Historical Society lasted for four terms, each year in which I wanted to quit and they wouldn't let me quit. I said, "I'll still be helping you out; I'm not going to quit and just walk away from you," but they wouldn't let me retire until after the fourth year, when I said, "I absolutely refuse to take it for

any fifth year." I did refuse, and they elected H. K. Wong, who consented only because I promised to help him.

Teiser: What year did you stop?

Chinn: I started from '63, then '64, '65, and '66. I retired after '66. Something else happened after that. After I retired from Gollan in 1980, things started dropping off a little, because nobody else could afford to turn out the type of bulletin that I had. For fourteen years it had been a professional job.

Teiser: Between you and Lawton and Alfred, it was beautifully done.

Chinn: That's right, as you can imagine, Lawton never turned out anything but perfect work. So they had to resort to a typewritten bulletin for a couple of years, and then finally when we were a little bit more stabilized financially, they had it turned into a more professional job. Lately, in the last few years, they have dressed it up some more, but now it is only four pages.

What I wanted to tell you is that in 1974, America was in the midst of preparations for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the United States—1776 to 1976. I had good friends in a number of organizations that I had joined. In 1974 I was appointed a member of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, which was also the time when San Francisco was getting ready to celebrate its bicentennial of the birth of California. The San Francisco chairman of that commission was Dr. Albert Shumate, who became one of my very good friends to this day and who has supported all my work in Chinese-American history. In fact, after we became friends in 1975, he joined the Chinese Historical Society, too, and he has been helpful in many ways. For the past twenty years he has been attending our annual anniversary celebration and sat at my table. The one whom he brought as his guest, Miss Joan Quigley. Do you know her? She was President Reagan's astrologist. This coming Saturday both of them are coming to our anniversary again, and they will still be at our table.

National Conference of Chinese-American Studies, 1975

Chinn: Anyway, because of the coming of the 200th anniversary of the United States, I wanted to try and establish the first national conference of Chinese-American studies, so I became the president of the society again in 1975 so I could organize that national conference. There was a small, vociferous group in the society that felt I was influencing the organization too much, trying to

organize a national conference. I said, "If we don't start now, we never will get anything started. We started as a Chinese historical society, and what happened over the next several years? We were instrumental in helping other Chinese-American groups establish their Chinese-American

historical groups in Hawaii, Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, and I think there is one back in New York. So if we are to maintain relationships with them we should have occasional meetings, and this national conference would be the way to bring that about."

In spite of the refusal of several of the people to cooperate, I went ahead with it. It became the first national conference, in 1975 at the University of San Francisco. We had a three-day conference which was quite successful. People came from back East and up North, as well as Hawaii, and it truly was a national conference, small as it might have been; there were about four hundred people who attended. They carried with them something that encouraged the start of a second conference, but the second conference was not until several years later. That I had nothing to do with, but I started the trend.

Membership in Other Historical Organizations

Chinn: I wanted to go back a few years to tell you about the beginnings, almost, of when I started the Chinese Historical Society. I felt that, unbeknownst to me but subconsciously, probably, it had always been my resolution to maintain my interest in Chinese-American history. In order to do that, I had to try and continue my work in any way I could to further the interests of Chinese-American history. I felt that we Chinese alone cannot hope to overcome the century-old public perception of the Chinese as not being acceptable members of the American people. We have to mesh our knowledge of ourselves by bringing to the attention of the public a truer picture of the Chinese in America. We have to, in effect, sell ourselves as fully qualified members of American citizenry.

To that end I, not forcibly but by invitation, became a member of various American organizations. This list on my biographical sketch will show all of the various organizations that I became a member of, either as the first Chinese-American, or the first Chinese to become a member of such organizations as the Society of California Pioneers, where I am still the only Chinese. I was a charter member of the San Francisco Corral of Westerners.

Teiser: You were an active member of the California Historical Society, too, were you not?

Chinn: Yes. From 1981-1984 I was a member of the Board of Trustees. By the way, I think I started the first publication of the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1969: *A History of the Chinese in California*. I was editor. In 1969 I presented a paper at the World Conference on Records in Salt Lake City. It was a worldwide conference, and my paper, "Genealogical Sources of Chinese Immigrants to the United States" was received by the delegation of eight thousand conferees who came from forty-eight countries around the world, including Russia and most of the European countries. I conceived the idea and worked with the San Francisco library to take, on long-term loan, the Chinese Historical Society's research material on Chinese-American studies. It was transferred in 1983 to the Asian-American studies library at the UC Berkeley campus.

Incidentally, the first invitation extended to Chinese to lecture on Chinese-American histories was to two of our members of the Chinese Historical Society.

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Chinn: They invited three of us to lecture at San Francisco State University, but at that time I was still heavily involved in trying to pay off my third venture into typesetting plants, when I bought the Gollan Typography. I could not accept the invitation because I was too busy with my own plant. These two other gentlemen—

Teiser: Who were they?

Chinn: They were Him Mark Lai and Philip Choy.

Teiser: Is Phil Choy still alive?

Chinn: Yes, they're both still alive and still active. They lectured there, and they were the first Chinese to lecture on Chinese-American history on any campus that we know of in the United States. That now, as you know, has become more universal. Probably as an outcome of all of this, I received a presidential appointment to the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Native American Participation. Over the years I've received quite a few awards of merit, and as I've mentioned, I've been the first Chinese to become a member of such groups as E Clampus Vitus, the Society of California Pioneers, and the San Francisco Corral of Westerners. In the California Historical Society I believe I was the first

Chinese member to become a trustee in that organization; and of course I'm a member of the Masonic groups. I also became a Governing Member of the San Francisco YMCA.

Teiser: You've gone over a lot of material which has raised a lot of question marks in my mind.

Chinn: I felt I had to bring this out to show that I wanted to dedicate my life to Chinese-American history as much as I could, and to opening the way for a feeling that the Chinese-American is just as deserving of consideration for any job, any opportunity, as any other human being. I feel happy that at least I have contributed something, in a small way.

Teiser: That point of view is more and more prevalent now, of course.

Chinn: Yes, of course.

The Constitution, Minority Rights, and Legal Change

Teiser: One of the things that you said early on in this discussion was that a motivation was for you to record Chinese-American history as Chinese, not as Caucasians, understood it. It brought to my mind the fact that the Chinese, like every other minority group when they first came to this country and before they were understood, were considered kind of picturesque, almost cute, and not taken seriously. The same thing happened to Hispanics, to Russian Jews.

Chinn: Yes, any racial group. I'd like to expand on that, but it's just a personal statement. It's something that should be observed. We know that we're not alone in our problems of adjusting to the cultural and physical life of newcomers to America.

Teiser: Caucasians were condescending to immigrants always.

Chinn: That's right. As you bring out, this is prevalent among other immigrant groups aside from the Chinese. I couldn't agree more heartily. These are my own personal feelings, and I'm not the

most qualified person to speak on it, but I have strong feelings on that. I've never expressed them except to a very few close friends. That is, the more I see of what is happening in this country of ours, the more I feel that the constitution and bylaws of our country are being sabotaged in more ways than one. It reminds me of the Roman empire and all these other countries that were gradually destroyed by people, well meaning or not. When you

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have people who are destroying your government or weakening your government or interfering with your government in any way, there seems to me a gradual diffusion, if you will, of the power of the government to govern. Not that I'm against it, because there is a certain latitude that should be allowed for the expression of your common citizen; there has to be, but there also has to be a limit as to where it can go. We know that the limit is established by the Supreme Court and so forth.

However, everything goes back to the constitutional rights of people. The constitution was written 210 years ago, and it has never been changed; we consider that sacred. And yet, considering that it's sacred, we do not necessarily have to refer everything back to that particular source, but the Supreme Court or some governmental body that is empowered to do so should bring the constitution and the bylaws up to today's world, to limits where the common citizen can appeal. But we must consider a final new set of constitutionally interpreted laws that must govern our country.

I think of new groups that come in here, the Chinese among them, asserting themselves. But the Chinese, in turn, are not a unified group that will unite to the point where they will use their united power to push for legislation or certain actions. I have in mind right now—and I'm not against it; I'm just saying that this is something that is happening—the Latinos that are coming in here and are now becoming a force to be reckoned with because of the quota system that allowed certain of them to come in here. Various groups, whether they are new or old, are also being confused by the workings of groups like the Democrats and the Republicans, both vying for power to set themselves up as governing bodies, and yet one group will try and fight for new territory because they have more Democrats in certain areas and they want to bring that within their sphere of influence, and vice versa.

So you have all of these things working against you, and yet everything we have, pros or cons, are brought before our courts; our courts are flooded with appeals work. You go on further up the line, and you have the state supreme courts, and then you have The Supreme Court. All of them are so befuddled by the volume of cases to be heard. The Supreme Court right now is influenced by a certain number of the old, conservative men, and down the road a decade later it might be the liberals, and whichever type of court decides, that governs. We are constantly working back and forth, which is good, but we are still working and tracing everything back to the original constitution and bylaws of two hundred plus years ago. And it all comes down to the viewpoint of the nine

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Justices on the Supreme Court, whether these persons are conservative or liberal.

It seems like we are just destroying ourselves by going to such lengths to settle things one way or another. But you can't have an automobile invented and say, "That is it. There will be no change." That is the way we are operating today. Those are just my own personal thoughts, but you had a good point when you said other groups are working, too.

Teiser: One of the ways that this comes down to a point, of course, is in affirmative action.

Chinn: That is right. Affirmative action is becoming a power because minorities are given that latitude because our laws make it possible for them to take certain avenues of action. There's no limit to where they can go; they can go all the way to the top, to the U. S. Supreme Court. The U. S. Supreme Court takes out the old constitution and looks it up; just because nothing has been changed, we must use the old constitution and bylaws as our basic foundation. But that foundation must be reinforced with new interpretations that must take place if we are to survive.

Teiser: This was not initially a pluralist nation, was it? It was just western European.

Chinn: That's right. However, how can you keep it that way unless you change your laws all over again? Yet again, the inscription under the Statue of Liberty tells us you can bring all of your poor, your discriminated-against people.

Teiser: The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, I suppose, formed a precedent for action by Chinese-Americans.

Chinn: Well, that could be. Today everything is so muddled up that you need to have a lot of capital to finance research. You don't know which is the correct course of action to follow. It will always be that way until something is established somewhere along the line that will become the end, and you don't keep having to go through all of these various courts. Everyone goes back to the constitution of a couple of hundred years ago.

VIII Chinese Historical Society of America and Chinese-Americans

Formation and Goals

Teiser: I want to ask you a little more about the history of the Chinese Historical Society of America. When I was first aware of it (it was through Lawton Kennedy), you had established a very interesting museum on Adler Place. How did that get started? Who put money into the Chinese Historical Society?

Chinn: Bear in mind that you are the one asking me how this happened, and you want it in an oral form at the present time. I'm going to give it to you candidly and honestly, but in so doing I've got to warn you that it's going to be very, very egotistical. I don't seek it, but if you want me to be honest, I'm going to have to tell you that when I started this way back in the 1930s, and from that standpoint it's something that I have mulled over for all of these decades, refining and checking and putting little notations as to what I considered worthwhile. In so doing, I'm going to have to put the word "I" in so many places that I'm going to be embarrassed when I read it.

Teiser: Each oral history is from the point of view of the narrator, and so that's what we look for. You need not be concerned.

Chinn: I invited four friends to join me in forming the Chinese Historical Society of America. Out of this group, only one besides myself had any experience in forming such an organization: Chingwah Lee. In addition to Chingwah Lee and myself, the others were C. H. Kwock, H. K. Wong, and Thomas W. S. Wu, D.D.S. I think I've outlined briefly the formation of the society.

The reason they would not let me quit as president for the first several years was because they always had looked to me for answers for most things. Generally they always reached the same conclusion that I indicated.

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Teiser: What was the format of the monthly meetings? How did it go?

Chinn: I established, first of all, that our field is basically research in Chinese-American history, and not Chinese history or the history of China. Many of the new members who join feel that we should have included Chinese culture in it, which in a way is deserving because it provides some knowledge of why we are Chinese, why we have these beliefs. However, when you open that up, you also open up a whole new can of worms, because where does it end? So basically I felt that we have to be aware of where our limitations are. If we opened it up to include China, then we would be opening it up to a field where your records must also include a lot of Chinese words and Chinese culture that has no place in Chinese-American history, because our field has to be our contacts and our activities and our history in America, regardless of the fact that we came from China.

For example, we can say that Confucius decided that education was the road to advancement. Even today most of us still believe that, and we will probably always believe it because it's been instilled in us for these thousands of years, and we can't change that. However, I think that basically we must determine that Chinese-American history is best left as Chinese-American history, without bringing too much of the culture of our former China background. So that was number one. Number two was the fact that all of our records should be in English.

Installation Ceremony

Chinn: Another thing that I did—and this is another rejection of American custom—was establish the manner of installing our officers. As you know, a lot of organizations install their officers in a humorous, comical, or joking way. I felt that our purpose was a little bit more serious and should command some respect. So I set up an installation ceremony, outlining the way our installation should be maintained. It probably still is in place, for all I know, with a few minor changes, because after the twenty-fifth anniversary, or even a little bit before that (that was some years ago), I've been very active in maintaining my presence at meetings and so forth, and allowing myself to be elected to the board of directors.

But very recently, since I've undertaken my book, *Bridging the Pacific*, I have more or less not been able to attend. Especially at my age when I don't want to drive at night to meetings and then drive home, I've not attended that many meetings. So I don't know about what is happening now, and by the same token they feel that they do not have to rely on me so much, which is all to the good, because I do not intend to insist that they maintain my perceptions of how the society should be run.

But I feel that basically the Bulletin that I established is still being maintained, the installation ceremony is still being maintained. However, the field trips that we still have annually seem to

have been watered down to where they are sometimes more a social event, which to me might be all right if it's done partly social but mainly for the direction of our history.

Monthly Meetings

Teiser: Are there papers read at your meetings, or are there serious discussions?

Chinn: We have a speaker at our monthly meetings, and this is an improvement started some ten years ago by one of our presidents, the one who said, "Let's have it every month"; her name is Alice Fong. She was San Francisco's first Chinese teacher to be appointed by the board of education in San Francisco. That has been followed right along, and we generally try to have a speaker at all of our monthly meetings, immediately following a very short business session.

Teiser: Are the talks printed anywhere?

Chinn: In the Bulletin. They were not for a while, mainly because we didn't have anyone who was qualified to insist on the maintenance of such activities. That was something to be regretful for. There was a period of at least two years when I had cautioned the then president, who was retained the following year for a two-year term, to be sure that the minutes of our meetings were maintained. I realized that the secretary, who was elected then for the same term as the president, in my judgment might be forgetful about maintaining minutes. And lo and behold, for those two years no minutes were received, and no minutes were available for those two years.

Teiser: Where do you hold your meetings?

Chinn: At the same meeting place where our museum is, in the last decade or so. Then, because our audience is always open to visitors and the general public, it has been impossible to hold it at our small headquarters. So we've been holding it at the Chinese Culture Center at the Holiday Inn on Kearny Street.

Museum and Headquarters

Teiser: Did a foundation contribute the premises of the original headquarters?

Chinn: Yes. This was in 1966, three years after we were organized. I think I should mention that Mr. H. K. Wong was the contact man who initially was able to persuade an assistant to the Shoong Foundation to become interested in our society. I joined him later in getting a grant from this Shoong Foundation. The foundation donated a lease at no charge for fifteen years for 17 Adler Place. It also donated $25,000 for us to refurbish and remodel the premises suitable for our needs. That became the backbone—

Teiser: It's very attractive. Who did the actual installation of the exhibits?

Chinn: All of our core group—that dozen or so people that I mentioned earlier—met practically every evening, after working hours at their regular jobs. They would come up and spend two or three or four hours in the evening working to keep our expenses down. The money that was given to us to remodel the place was spent mainly on the exterior and on the lighting and physical

structure, walls, of 17 Adler Place. All the rest of the labor and the setting up of the exhibits, and the structures where those exhibits rested, was done by our members.

Teiser: It's beautifully done. How did you collect the various artifacts?

Chinn: By the same method of soliciting members and friends of our society. There again I can't stress too heavily the role that this bulletin played, because they were able to have in black and white before every member that the society needed such and such. Not only our members brought them in, but the members' friends brought them in. It was not limited to our Chinese friends but to many of our American friends and other friends of all nationalities who donated small things or pictures or souvenirs that they had acquired over the years.

Teiser: How long did it stay in that location?

Chinn: It stayed until 1989—last year, in June, when we were forced to move out of 17 Adler.

Teiser: Why did you have to move?

Chinn: Because after the lease was up we had to pay rent, and the rent took up nearly all of our income. So we had to look for other quarters, because where we were at 17 Adler there was no certainty that in succeeding years there would not be an increase in the amount of rent we'd have to pay. We were finally able to acquire a lease at 650 Commercial Street, a location where our landlord was another nonprofit organization, the Chinese Neighborhood Resource Center, and they gave us a five-year lease at our present very, very nominal rental.

Teiser: Did you take everything you had gathered—?

Chinn: Oh, yes, we gathered everything we could. It opened in June 1989, but the previous six months we had spent all of our time, our members again working together with friends who came in to donate their time, to establish our new headquarters.

Teiser: And is it now open to the public?

Chinn: Oh, yes. Ever since it has been open for our use, it was also open to the public. Never a cent was required for admission, but of course donations were welcome.

Teiser: Are you getting many people there on Commercial Street?

Chinn: A certain number, but it's just not generally known. Outside of the fact that the Bulletin is still published, announcing that it is free to any visitor or group of visitors, there's no other way to publicize it.

Oral Histories

Teiser: When I first talked to you a number of years about your oral history, you were conducting tape-recorded interviews at that time.

Chinn: Let me say this: that is among the things that I do not know, because a committee was set up, and that committee never reported anything that happened, mainly because it was self-supporting,

voluntary, and there was not that much money that ever came in to the point where they were able to take the tapes and transcribe them into manuscripts where they could be edited and published. It never reached that stage for many, many years. In a way it was utilized, but I'm now on very murky ground; I'm not sure whether the material was used in a publication where the entire proceeds of the book were donated to the society. But it was done on a basis of it being a personal author's donation to the society.

Teiser: So, in effect, if someone were looking for tapes of oral history reminiscences, they wouldn't be available?

Chinn: I can't even say that, because I've never asked that question. Certainly not in their present form; I have no knowledge of that. I felt that if I made any official inquiry I would also be stepping on someone's prerogative whose thoughts might have been honest or otherwise; I have no way of knowing.

Historical Misinterpretations of Chinese-Americans

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Teiser: You mentioned that the historical society was interested in collecting material about Chinese-Americans that hadn't been written by Caucasians, that Caucasians apparently didn't understand as well as Chinese people. Were there definite kinds of things that had been written about Chinese-Americans, other than caricatures, that you were responding to? Were there interpretations of Chinese-Americans that you found unpalatable or unfair?

Chinn: I have not tried to bring that out so much, because I think that most Chinese of that early period did not want to come out and be as open and frank about it as, for instance, affirmative action groups that come out and speak plainly today. In those days, even if we opened our mouth to say that anything was unfair in our estimation, we'd get either retorts or sharp answers that bordered on physical threats from the Caucasian people here. So in those days you did not come out and try and confront so much as try and keep quiet and swallow a lot of the things that you thought were unfair. It's happened so often that we kind of shy away from it even today in a great many instances.

As you know, the Chinese are not all quite as frank, if you want to call it that, in trying to set right something that they think is untrue about them as are the affirmative action groups

that speak today. I do not say that affirmative action in itself is to be condemned for what those groups say; they are also trying to bring a certain amount of fairness into our people's stance and in their everyday lives. I think what I'm trying to say is that all we want to do is bring the Chinese as a whole—not just Chinese-Americans, but even those who do not speak perfect English—to a comparable level with any other citizen of this country.

Desire for Acceptance

Teiser: In a different way, much of your work has been toward that.

Chinn: Definitely. I do know that when I was a youngster I felt so strongly about that point that I've always said that if I ever got a chance, I would first of all try and work and develop myself into

a situation where I would be able to work, socialize, and communicate with the outside people, regardless of race or religion or anything else. I just wanted to be on a par with them. I'd say, "I'm just going to say that I am an American, an American citizen born and raised here, and I'm just going to strive for equality." Unconsciously, all of my life I've done that, and I didn't realize it until very late in life. I'm not proud of that stance; I just felt that if I can't stand on my own two feet and justify what I do, why—

Teiser: That's a very American attitude.

Chinn: [laughs] I think that should be the attitude of all Americans.

Teiser: Did you have friends your own age who had that same attitude?

Chinn: American friends? Definitely. I remember way back in 1926 I was offered this job with the American firm, the California Inspection Rating Bureau, which is still in existence today. I was hired as a file clerk, and this was my first break, in 1926 when I was only seventeen years old, to come to work for an American firm. I was the only Chinese in the whole company, and I was so proud of myself, that I was able to break through like that. I say this is what I've been striving for, anyway, even as a youngster in my teens. I worked for them for almost seven years, '26 to '33, until I left for China on my own business venture.

Teiser: Were there other Chinese boys in any other firms?

Chinn: All I know is from personal experience, and I do not claim this to be something that I tried to find out, but I imagine there were one or two insurance agents that worked, but only among their own people, among the Chinese. They did not come out and socialize.

I remember how well I was received as a boy by all of my co-workers. One man I have always admired, and I remember his name today. His name was Burt Stewart. He worked not for our company but for an adjoining company in the same big building at 216 Pine Street. He worked for a firm that was called Whitaker and (I've forgotten the other name), public relations people. Burt Stewart had a girlfriend, Merrill, and they became friends of mine. I mean, we didn't go out together, but we were friendly; we chatted together, and whenever we passed we stopped and talked.

I remember distinctly, when I opened up my sporting goods store in 1929, that Burt brought his girlfriend up to the shop. I had told him, "Anytime you're by, why, drop in." So they did. They came in, and we chatted and had a nice talk. Eventually, many, many decades later—we lost track of each other ever since I left the firm. But a few years ago I read that Burt Stewart became president of the California Automobile Association. I was so gratified.

Then again, about twelve or fifteen years ago, I was leading a group of the California Historical Society into Chinatown in Locke, a little Sacramento town that's entirely Chinese. Of course, the California Historical Society is the state society. I think I was the only Chinese when I was lecturing on Locke. Lo and behold, as we were coming up in our Greyhound bus on that trip, two of the women sat alongside of me, and we got to talking. One of them said that her name was formerly Mrs. Stewart, and she was no longer with her husband; she was separated. She did not tell me whether he passed away or whether she divorced him. I said, "Does your name happen to be Merrill? She said, "Yes. How do you know?" I said, "You probably do not remember me, but Burt Stewart and you came to my sporting goods shop many, many years ago in the late 1920s." She said, "How do you remember that? It was nearly fifty years ago." Well,

people like that, the first time you've had any American friends who took the time to come up and visit you, you kind of remember those names if you have any friendship with them. Things like that make you feel good, that you're accepted as someone with whom they can chat and become friendly.

Teiser: Did the others—say the men you were close to who worked with you in the Chinese Historical Society—have many friends outside the Chinese community also?

Chinn: Over the years, later on, they did, especially after World War II, but not until that late date. By that time, why, the Chinese, because of World War II, broke out of their cocoon of Chinatown and were able to get work in the shipyards and the defense industries because civilian labor was in short supply because most of the other young men were in the armed forces.

Teiser: Yes, that was a great thing, because World War II changed all kinds of things.

Speaking Engagements

Teiser: I remember those California Historical Society junkets. You said you led a trip to Locke, and that must have been an interesting one. Did you lead any others?

Chinn: No. However, ever since I became editor of the *Chinese Digest* in 1935, I was asked to speak to various groups. Generally always they were non-honorarium talks that I just gave voluntarily when invited. During all those years from the late 1930s up to the end of the 1950s, I generally made three, four, or five talks a year or more.

Teiser: If you'd had honoraria, you'd have a big piggy bank now.

Chinn: Oh, not in those days. [laughter] That was among the outside groups, but among the Chinese I kept on trying to get them interested in our history, because up to that time there was no serious effort to start a Chinese historical society as such.

Chinese Scholars of Chinese-American History

Teiser: Were there scholars interested in the history of Chinese-Americans?

Chinn: Now, there again you hit a tender nerve with me, because I sometimes wonder at the wisdom of American colleges and universities that hire Chinese for their Chinese-American studies. That was all right in those early days when Chinese culture and language was the reason why these educational institutions hired these Chinese. But after Chinese-American studies came into being, I was so surprised—maybe I shouldn't be, but I was—that Chinese were still being hired once in a while who were not

Chinese-American. They came from China and had very limited information about the Chinese-American early days. Many of them came to our meetings, and I imagine they went to other members of our society, to ask for information about Chinese-Americans and the early Chinese who lived here.

Difficulties Researching Chinese-American History

Chinn: It seemed to me unfair, until later on I've suddenly realized that our Chinese-Americans themselves did not realize or do any research on their own history. The main cause of that was because so many of the Chinese came here illegally. That's after the 1906 earthquake and fire that destroyed all of San Francisco's records. Because of that, the Chinese suddenly found themselves able to swear that they were born in San Francisco and then sent back to China for a Chinese education, and then wanted to come back here. When they came back here and were quizzed by immigration officials, they said they were born here. "Where are your records?" "All burned up in the 1906 San Francisco fire and earthquake." Many, many of them were admitted because the Immigration Service wasn't able to verify that no such records existed. It was because of this that a lot of them later on sold those papers that they had, saying that they were admitted here, to other new immigrants who wanted to come to this country but who came under false papers. Because of that, the Chinese did not want to talk about their history.[12]

Teiser: Does that include so-called paper sons?

Chinn: That's what I mean by paper sons and paper daughters. When I wrote my book just a few years ago, I was so disappointed that so many of my friends and people who said they would give me their history when the time came refused me when I asked them if I could record their history or interview them. They said, "Our parents do not want to talk about it." In a way, that forced me to try and say that this book that I was writing would be the story about my family—my parents, my wife, and myself. I told that story so that I could try and encourage others to follow and say that this was in the dim past and no longer a legitimate reason for avoiding talking about your history.

Now, after the book came out and they saw that it was not a fabrication, everyone is coming out and trying to tell me their story. Well, it's too late.

Teiser: Unless you write another.

Chinn: [laughs] At my age I don't think I'll be writing another very soon.

Teiser: It was tradition, not legality, that prevented most of those people? They aren't afraid of the law, are they?

Chinn: Well, the thing about it is that the immigration people finally had a period—it was publicized in the papers—when they said that they would grant immunity to all those Chinese who have entered this country illegally and have shown that over a period of time since they have arrived here they have lived lawful and fruitful lives as good citizens. If they came forth and confessed that this happened they would be given permanent status to stay in this country. There were thousands who did that, but there were also many, many who were afraid. They just did not have any confidence that the immigration people would forgive them, so they did not come forth. That is the reason why the lives of the small minority that still exists and did not come forth to confess are still under a blanket, so to speak. Of course, after a certain period of time, the immigration people no longer publicized that; they closed that chapter out. There was only a certain number of years in which you could come forth and confess.

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12. See also page 97.

Teiser: This ties in with the fact that when you were interviewing and tape recording the recollections of some of the older people in Chinatown, you found them reluctant. This was before you started your book, of course, which was many years ago.

Chinn: Definitely. But those who didn't have older parents—that is, my contemporaries—were a little bit freer to talk about their history. But, by the same token, by that time, their parents having passed away, they had never asked their parents for their early history. That is why most of that chapter is more or less lost to us. Just like myself—I did not learn my mother's maiden name until much, much later, after the society was organized.

Teiser: When you were gathering material for the society in various ways, were you given access to government records?

Chinn: Frankly, no. It must be told, and I'm frank with you, that even today we do not have any paid staff in the Chinese Historical Society—not one—to seek such information; we're all volunteers. Most of us do it part time and don't have the money to go into

deep research, into government records or anything, or even to send away and ask for material. Even if the material is available, sometimes it's restricted to study in the library or wherever that information is housed. That would entail expenses and traveling to and from, and recording orally or otherwise—

Teiser: I just wonder whether the federal record center has—

Chinn: Now, yes, it has, but even that entails a certain amount of expense if you want to go into it deeply. That is one of the handicaps we've been working under. Now that we're a little bit more settled, having passed our quarter century as an organization, I think sooner or later certain grants will allow some of our retired elders to go into research.

Teiser: One of the things that must have happened over the years—and this must have affected the employment situation, too, for Chinese—was that early on there were very few Chinese who were well educated, or educated in American schools and colleges, were there not?

Chinn: Well, there were many—quite a few. But, again, this is an illustration. My wife, who is the same age as I am (eighty-two this year) went to the University of California in Berkeley. She started there in 1928, and up to the time when she enrolled at Cal Berkeley, there were only six Chinese girls in the entire campus. Of course, for the males there were a large number of Chinese students, but they were mainly from China. They were students under the foreign program that was established for them. There were very few Chinese-American boys—I don't know how many there were; she was never interested enough to find out—because of the cost and the fact that the Chinese boys had to go out and work the minute they were old enough.

Teiser: That must have affected both employment and the social structure.

Chinn: That's right. That's why I say that in the 19th century there were hardly any who were able to do any research, particularly in a field where the older Chinese did not look favorably into your trying to delve into their history, which may or may not be a true history.

Donation of Research Materials to Libraries

Teiser: You said that the material that you did gather for the Chinese Historical Society of America went to the University of California's Asian American Studies Library?

Chinn: Yes, but I don't know what's happened to it now, since I have not been actively attending all the meetings. I should mention, too, that up until the late 1960s and almost into the '70s our research materials were stored haphazardly in our files. Finally I was able to get our society to turn all those materials over to the San Francisco Public Library in the Special Collections Department, which at that time was under the supervision of Gladys Hansen, who eventually became the archivist—and a good friend of mine. I might mention that it was she who encouraged me to start organizing the Chinese Historical Society.

I gave the San Francisco library all of our papers on longterm loan if they would establish the material and make it available to research people if they wanted to study it in the library. It was established on that basis, a long-term loan; it was still our property. Some time later, when I was not present—many years later—a motion was made and approved that this collection would be transferred to the UC Berkeley Chinese-American Studies Library, also on long-term loan. And it was done. I would have to look up the year it was done.

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Chinn: Finally, some time later, I understood that UC Berkeley had a rule that anything loaned to them after five years had to be either donated to the University, or else it had to be returned to the loaner. Then it was moved by the society that we would present it to them. I was the only one who voiced opposition to that, because we have striven so long to preserve our history.

The reason I brought it originally to the San Francisco Public Library was because most of the activities about the Chinese in America started in San Francisco, and the Chinese were most numerous in San Francisco. I wanted that material available where the San Franciscans and other researchers outside of that town could come to get the information they needed. I said that if that was the purpose, then if the University wanted to take ownership of it, it should be returned to the San Francisco Public Library or to the society. The society resisted that for a while and said it should be there at the University. I said, "If that is the case, then why do we have a Chinese Historical Society? Let the University do their own research. All we're doing is being a conduit, spending all our time and energy getting that information and then giving it to the University. Then there's no reason for our Chinese Historical Society." On that basis the committee that I protested against in the Chinese Historical Society said, "We'll see if we can't get that rescinded; the University might rescind that law." I have not heard anything

about it since. I was too busy with my book to continue my fight, but I still believe in that principle. Why should we do all the work and pay for it all, and then just hand it over to the University?

Teiser: Ideally, of course, you'd have a permanent place to keep it all and maintain it and make it available.

Chinn: As long as it's available, the prestige of Cal is great, but it does not supersede the living organization of the society. If that should happen because the society donates everything that

they collect to the University, then the society does not have a purpose to continue.

Teiser: When you see the problems historical societies have these days—

Chinn: All I can say [chuckles] is that some of my friends in the society are not too happy with me for taking that stance, but I can't help it; that's the reason we started the society.

Birth of Chinese-American Studies

Teiser: Who else in your historical society has made major contributions?

Chinn: There again, let me say this. Until our Chinese Historical Society was organized in January 1963, up until the time we held our first seminar, we had had a flood of inquiries from all over the country asking for Chinese-American materials, and we decided we'd better do something about it. We were for several years answering all inquiries by volunteer individuals who may or may not have known what we had; or, if knowing, were not able to furnish each individual with that information. So we decided to have a seminar, which we did. At that seminar, which was held in the spring of 1969 at the Chinese-American Citizens' Alliance auditorium, we had several hundred in attendance; we had invited various scholars and the public. In conjunction with that seminar I proposed that we print up a pamphlet or a book on the subject, called *A History of the Chinese in California*.

Teiser: Yes, I have a copy here. It's wonderful.

Chinn: That book was gathered, assembled, and then I solicited the firm that I worked for to donate all their services to the organization. I also solicited Lawton Kennedy to print the book at cost. Finally, when he did print it, instead of charging us at cost he donated all of this. I did all of the work of teaching my

two associate editors, Him Mark Lai and Phil Choy, about the complexities of publishing anything at all, whether it's a pamphlet or a book. Prior to that time, I'm sure, neither one of them had any previous experience.

You asked if there were any others doing this type of publicity work and helping research Chinese-American history. Following the publication and the seminar that we held in 1969, San Francisco State University invited the three editors of this book to lecture at the university. Well, I didn't have the time to do that, but my two associate editors did, and they did some lectures there. That became the birthplace of Chinese-American studies in the United States. Thereafter other colleges and universities have established either Chinese-American studies or Asian studies, of which Chinese were a part.

So this Chinese Historical Society was able to advance Chinese-American studies into a broader field from the study of Chinese-American history.

Teiser: Have those studies continued at San Francisco State?

Chinn: Oh, yes. Not only that, but San Francisco State has a chairman of Chinese-American history. They have a staff there; I don't know how many, but they have quite a little staff.

Teiser: Are they all Chinese-Americans?

Chinn: Let's say they are Chinese, mainly, and Chinese-Americans within that. I have not inquired how large their staff is and how many of their staff are Chinese-Americans. Evidently they have been influenced by the earlier Chinese Historical Society members who recommended certain members on the university staff.

Chinese-American Citizens' Alliance

Teiser: You mentioned the Chinese-American Citizens' Alliance; what is that?

Chinn: That was an organization organized in the very, very late 1800s—I think 1890 or 1895—to fight for Chinese-American rights. They hired lawyers to appear before local, state, and federal courts, appealing laws that were discriminatory against the Chinese. They were able to erase many of those laws and statutes over the years.

Teiser: It still exists?

Chinn: Very strongly.

Teiser: I keep remembering that there is a certain division of sentiment in the Chinese community. Is it more or less in accord with Taiwan?

Chinn: Nothing to do with Taiwan, nothing to do with mainland China. This is a Chinese-American citizens' alliance, and it does not prevent those who came over here from China, mainland or Taiwan, from joining; if they want to join, anyone can join. There are even, I believe, a handful of Caucasians who have joined. I don't know whether that is so today, right this minute. But to show you just how broad it is, previous to the last couple of decades, all of the staff was mainly male. Now they have Chinese women who are not only members, not only directors, but I think they have just elected their first woman president. Her name is Virginia.

Teiser: It's an organization for the political protection of Chinese-Americans mainly, or every kind of protection?

Chinn: For Chinese rights to be put on the same level with the American citizen's. If there is anything discriminatory against the Chinese, they fight against it; whether it's political, business, or social, they will fight for their rights, which, in a way, you might say, is almost duplicated in a smaller way by this organization called Chinese for Affirmative Action.

Teiser: That is more tenacious, isn't it?

Chinn: More direct.

Chinese for Affirmative Action

Teiser: Has Chinese for Affirmative Action been effective?

Chinn: I believe it has been quite successful, especially in cases where it requires immediate action. A case in point was where a Chinese man was murdered, either in the Midwest or in the East, by a father and son who used baseball bats to kill him. Normally, something like that, not affecting the Chinese people as a whole but an individual act is handled by the Chinese for

Affirmative Action. They got one of their leaders to jump in there and ask for sterner measures, after the courts practically absolved the two murderers in the case. When the Chinese fought that sentence, they were able to put through a little stiffer sentence, but then

it was mostly on probation. From there, if my recollection is true, they got a stiffer sentence and a monetary sentence also. I don't go into these kinds of things, so this is just what I believe to be the facts. If you wanted more information on that particular instance, I can look it up.

Financing the Chinese Historical Society

Teiser: Going back to the Chinese Historical Society of America, is there any possibility that it could find space as other groups have in Fort Mason or at the Moscone Center area?

Chinn: They've been trying to find a place, but up to the present time they thought they would rather have such an organization headquartered within the confines of Chinatown. But it's been so prohibitive. They have a five-year lease at 650 Commercial Street, and at the end of January 1990 they have an opportunity to buy a lot on the fringes of Chinatown. It's a very small lot, but it would mean that we would own the building. We have tried so many years to raise a large building fund, and I don't believe I would be wrong in saying that two of us started that building fund some years ago—Mrs. Violet Chu and myself. With that as the beginning, we have been able to solicit additional contributions into that building fund which has been continuously growing. So some months prior to this period we were able to put a $20,000 deposit on that lot, and now there is a larger sum that we have contracted to pay. It's in escrow now. I'm not privy to how it's actually being formed, but we will be able to take title, if everything goes through escrow, with a bank loan of course, to start building a small headquarters and a very small museum.

Teiser: The fact that the financial center has crept up, really, on Chinatown, must make it less easy.

Chinn: That is true. I don't think that is going to hurt if we get the present building built. At least it will be permanent, and we will have ownership. I don't know what the situation is going to be in the future, but now we have been able to attract a certain amount of donors. Foundations, and Chinese foundations especially, have offered help, and that has been a tremendous factor in our being able to get a firmer financial base. I am very, very gratified that these Chinese organizations are now taking an interest in our society enough to warrant their being financially involved in it.

Teiser: Maybe I'm speaking out of turn, but if you are going to have a museum that is open to the public, maybe the Convention and Tourist Bureau would give you a little help, maybe in running it.

Chinn: They don't do anything, but they have occasionally had us in their list of museums.

Teiser: Your present landlord is a foundation, didn't you say?

Chinn: Our present landlord is the Chinese Resource Center, which is a nonprofit group that is trying to get better housing for the Chinese. Since they were not out after profit but to help us, they've given us very lenient terms for the five-year period that we have.

Chinese-American Social Service Organizations

Teiser: The Chinese population of San Francisco is very large today, but when you see the number of organizations that serve it, it's quite impressive.

Chinn: It is, but by the same token there are so many organizations that need help, so these organizations have to dilute the amount they can give to any one applicant seeking help.

Teiser: I'm thinking of the social service organizations, too, which is a different category, such as On Lok.

Chinn: On Lok [Health Services] Self Help for the Elderly, Newcomers' Association—in my book you will find that there are a couple of dozen of them. Some are big and some are small, and they come and go depending on the rise and fall of the financial contributions they receive.

Teiser: And I guess partly on the need that they fill.

Chinn: Yes, but the need, regardless of how necessary it is, is also dependent on the amount of income they receive.

Housing Facilities in Chinatown

Teiser: I have been interested in the number of housing facilities that have been built—there aren't so many—especially for elderly

Chinese. There's a new one here, Lady Shaw. I gather that they're built on the assumption that this sort of thing was needed because the Chinese community has not been wealthy at all and on short funds. But I believe now the income of Chinese residents has continued to go up, and the average income per family passes the general population in San Francisco now. Those structures will always be useful, of course, but I wonder if those particular services will continue to be needed as Chinese families become more comfortable and can take care of their people.

Chinn: I think I should have my two cents worth. Your saying that the income of Chinese is equal to the general citizenry of San Francisco is only true to the extent of the number of poor people they have, or the number of lower income people. The Chinese, as a rule, have a situation where as long as they are able to make a living and get by, they live in Chinatown. It is new immigrants, mainly, who want to be housed in Chinatown for the reason that they are the ones who have a language problem. They come into Chinatown because that's the place where the rent is comparatively low; but even if it's high, if it's within their earning income they'd rather cluster in Chinatown, mainly because they have compatriots who live there and they can communicate with them.

But if they went out amongst a larger community where English is the spoken word, they would be lost, they would feel strange, and it wouldn't serve their purpose because it wouldn't enhance their income; their income would still be limited to their ability to fit into a non-Chinatown business. Chinatown speaks Chinese, so they would feel more comfortable living there [even though] the place where they work doesn't pay a comparable wage. But the minute they can get outside and learn English to enable them to work outside Chinatown, they move out.

That creates a certain amount of vacancies to allow new immigrants to come in. So Chinatown is always on the lower end of the economic ladder. When you take that into consideration, and then you add all of the income of the Chinese in San Francisco, you're adding those that are making millions elsewhere and trying to lump them together and then arrive at an average, and it doesn't work out.

Teiser: It sounds familiar to me because I heard a similar explanation of the need for a residential facility for elderly Italians.

Chinn: I wouldn't doubt it for almost all new immigrants. They tend to cluster where they are more comfortable.

Immigration Quotas for Chinese

Teiser: Looking toward the future, as the Chinese become increasingly Americanized and better educated—the educational accomplishments of young Chinese do surpass the general public, don't they?—one would assume that special facilities are not going to be needed, unless they keep coming in.

Chinn: That's it. There's a little story behind that, too. Up to 1965, and that's just three decades ago, there was a very, very limited quota for Chinese immigrants here.

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Chinn: In 1965 President [Lyndon B.] Johnson signed the law that allowed the Chinese to come into this country on a quota basis more balanced with that of other immigrants of whatever extraction. A larger number of Chinese immigrants, therefore, will be able to come to this country. So the need for living quarters will always exist for these increased annual quotas that come in here in a steady stream.

Teiser: I suppose that depends a little on the situation in the Orient, but I don't suppose you can anticipate that conditions there can be sufficient to keep their people at home.

Chinn: That is a question that needs to be addressed, too, because China, being the main country that is sending Chinese here, is in such poor economic circumstances that Chinese will always want to immigrate to America. If you ever go to Hong Kong, where the American consulate has been established, you'll find that if they were to fill all the applications for immigration to America, people would spend ten to twelve years waiting for a chance to immigrate to this country. So the desire is greater than one could expect.

Teiser: I suppose it also depends a little on what England does, too, whether they let more in or not.

Chinn: Well, England has its own problems, but even without its problems the number of those who want to come to this country instead of England is great, probably mainly because this country is so much larger and can absorb so much more.

Teiser: I don't think there are so many Chinese in England now.

Chinn: Probably not.

IX Career in the Printing Trade

Typographical Union

Teiser: You came into a very vigorous industry that was one of the most important and prestigious in San Francisco, and also highly organized. Do you belong to a union?

Chinn: Yes, but not directly in San Francisco. I think I should go back a bit and say that I started learning how to set type on the linotype machine in 1934, preparatory to starting the *Chinese Digest* in 1935. Later, during the World War II years, I found out there was a need up at Stanford University Press for operators. I applied and got part-time work after my regular job in San Francisco for the army quartermaster. I would go home, have a quick dinner, and then drive to Stanford and work the swing shift until after midnight. In order to work for Stanford University Press I had to join a union, and that was the typographical union. That was when I joined, in 1942.

Teiser: There was no discrimination there then?

Chinn: No. During the war they would accept anybody, so that was my entree [laughs]. I don't know if there was discrimination or not, but I think they found it convenient to use me to meet defense needs.

Teiser: I went to work on a newspaper during the war, and I said it was great that I got hired. They said, "They would hire anybody who could walk up the steps." [laughter]

Chinn: So that's why I had to join a union, in order to work at Stanford.

Teiser: That was good, though, wasn't it, to get your basis as a union member?

Chinn: That's right. Ever since then, whenever I've gone back into the industry full time, I was a union member.

Teiser: It's a good union, too, isn't it?

Chinn: Yes, it is, but like everything else it's gone downhill now since the advent of the computer age, and using the linotype machine is but a memory now.

Teiser: I remember they were a pugnacious union for a time, while they could be. Were you a union member when you were working at Gollan and so forth?

Chinn: Ever since 1942, my work thereafter was as a union member. I was at Gollan's since 1962 until I retired in 1980.

Teiser: I remember that Lawton Kennedy retained his membership in the union even as an employer.

Chinn: That was true of me, too. When I left the army quartermaster in 1949 and started up my business again, that was as an employer, but I maintained my membership. Then in 1956, when I had to close it down because of poor business, I went to work as a union operator. When I bought Gollan Typography in 1971, I was an employer union member until the time I retired in

1980.

Profitability of Typesetting Operations

Teiser: Even in so thriving an industry as the printing industry was here, I imagine it was not easy to keep your economic balance in a trade shop.

Chinn: I don't know what you mean by economic balance.

Teiser: To get enough money to keep going, I guess is what I mean—collect your bills and charge enough.

Chinn: Yes, that is true. But, you see, in 1971, when I bought Gollan, linotype was still the leader in typesetting. At that time the computer had not come of age. They called it "cold type" at that time; it was experimental. Then for many years after that, our business was profitable, let us say, until the late 1970s. Then we could see the writing on the wall that more and more the coming

of computer typesetting would mean that linotype machines would no longer be necessary.

Teiser: I was in Andrew Hoyem's Monotype shop not so long ago, and here was a little home-sized computer that they were setting Monotype with. It's amazing.

Chinn: Yes, it is.

California Typesetting company, 1949-1956

Teiser: My question related partly to your California Typesetting Company, which you closed in 1956. Had that been difficult to keep afloat?

Chinn: It was. I was not going to start it at all, but some friends of mine said, "Well, if you start out, we'll try and get you some business." At that time it looked promising, and people I knew in the ad agencies said they could try and swing some of their business over to me. Well, two factors governed that. When I started and solicited them for business, I got a small amount of business, enough to where I felt very comfortable and was able to hire several employees to work for me. Then the ad agencies started dropping off for the reason that they wanted more sophisticated type styles and designs, and all that required that they get a shop where they could concentrate all of their needs into one shop. I didn't have enough type variety that would enable me to give them total service, like artwork, color separation, and all that. That was something beyond what a small shop could handle.

Teiser: Who was doing that? MacKenzie and Harris—

Chinn: MacKenzie and Harris was not doing that much even at that time. This did not take place until much later, in the eighties. But you could see the handwriting on the wall, that the need was for increased capacity to handle the needs of the customer in one shop, where they could get one billing that would cover all their requirements. The smaller shops did not have that capacity; they could do everything else, but they couldn't do the color work.

Teiser: Was there anyone who could?

Chinn: Gradually there were. By the time I was ready to call it quits, it was in the works. Such places like MacKenzie & Harris, Rapid Typographers, Reardon & Krebs, Service Typesetting, Spartan Type

in Oakland; and, later, Omnicomp, where my son Walter works now as supervisor of their large computer typesetting department.

Customers

Teiser: Did you work for Schmidt Lithograph?

Chinn: Those were specialty label shops, Schmidt Lithograph and Louis Roesch Lithograph. They were my customers at one time. My brother-in-law, Ernest Loo, worked for Schmidt Lithograph for forty-five years. He was a printer. He and my sister still live in San Mateo. They're in their late eighties now.

Teiser: So printing ran in the family.

I'm looking at a list of your customers, and Lawton and Alfred Kennedy, whom you've spoken of, are there. Then Lane Books and Publications in Menlo Park. What did you do for them?

Chinn: You know that Lane Publishing published many books—how to grow flowers, how to cook; they had specialty books that came out. We have typeset many of those books.

Teiser: Did they have special requirements on designs? I remember they were designed kind of openly, and with lots of illustrations.

Chinn: Yes, but we had nothing to do with that. We set the type, and we made reproduction proofs for them. They just used that and cut it up to suit their different ads. They'd tell us how they wanted it set, and we would do that. Mainly we did the text; we did not do any art captions as such, except in a few instances.

Teiser: When you speak of "we," are you speaking of Gollan?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: How much of your work at Gollan went out as reproduction proofs?

Chinn: I would say less than 25 percent of our total.

Teiser: So most of it went out as type?

Chinn: Most of it went out as type, although a lot of it went out as repros, but that is still only less than 25 percent of our work, because we didn't have that big a capacity where we could afford to take our type and set it up in the fashion that the ad agency

or the printer wanted. For instance, up to the last decade or two, if you wanted to set type to form a circle or to make odd shapes—to square it up is easy—you would have to set that type several different times to conform to the artwork so that the type would be within that shape—let's say an apple, or an orange, or a banana, or any other of the fruits and vegetables. The cost would be tremendous because you spent so much of your time not only in setting the

type and then deciding it wouldn't fit, or that it looked awkward; then have to typeset all over again.

Nowadays, with a computer, you can set type just by pressing a button and have type conform to any design. My son, who followed in my footsteps and is now the supervisor of the computer part of one of the largest ad agency shops in the city, can set a block of type; he can make it oblong, he can make it ragged right, he can make it conform to a circle just by pressing a button and setting the type that's already set for the form itself. You can imagine how much time that saved. It would have been prohibitive as linotype.

Teiser: Some of your work went into newspaper ads, I suppose.

Chinn: Yes, I believe so. Or once in a while, in an emergency for these small neighborhood papers—suddenly they'd have machine trouble or something like that, and they'd come out and ask you to set up a story for them. We'd do that, but that didn't happen very often.

Teiser: Did they walk off with the type, then?

Chinn: Oh, yes. And then returned the type afterwards.

Teiser: East Wind Printers—they were Chinese fellows, weren't they?

Chinn: They were Chinese fellows. However, they did a lot of labor work and a lot of ad agency work, as well as magazine work.

Teiser: They were very talented men, weren't they? Maybe they still are.

Chinn: No, they've gone out of business. Two men were the owners of it. One was Henry Louie, and the other was Woody Moy. Henry passed away many years ago, and Woody was not able to carry on by himself; it was too big a plant for him. So they sold it, and there's a story behind that. Woody Moy became a movie actor for Asian movies. He was one of the principals in one of the recent movies that the Asian producing company made. He's been quite an actor ever since, in demand.

Teiser: I remember going and talking to them, and I thought they were very interesting men. Where was their plant?

Chinn: On Sansome Street, a block away from where we were at 1050 Sansome Street. They were at the corner of Sansome and Green Streets.

Teiser: Sequoia Printers? Who were they?

Chinn: They were down on Howard Street. That was an American firm, owned by a man named Hugh Paine. He was actually working in another print shop until he started his own. I knew him when he worked in the print shop, and we became very good friends. I've known him for twenty-five or thirty years or better—more than that, now—and we still send and receive Christmas cards and write messages. He's retired also now.

Teiser: What kind of printing did they do?

Chinn: General printing.

Teiser: When you worked with a general printing firm, that meant some big jobs and some little jobs, didn't it?

Chinn: Everything from a little business card up to a brochure. The same with East Wind Printers, we sometimes did books—not real thick books, but paperbacks that run to two or three hundred pages. Pacific States Printers is one that printed the larger books.

Teiser: They were in San Francisco. What sort of work did they do?

Chinn: General work. They did everything. I still remember him, because he started out and moved his plant to our building at 1050 Sansome Street on a different floor. We did most of the typesetting for him. Suddenly one day (I remember this distinctly) he walked into our plant and said, "Boy, this is heavy in my pocket," and he pulled out a great big roll of greenbacks. He said, "I just came back from Reno, and I hit a couple of jackpots." He meant that he had won between $25,000 and $50,000. And what did he do? He turned around and moved his plant out of our building, moved down to South San Francisco, and splurged on setting up a big plant. His son worked for him, too, and other printers. I think he lasted for four or five years before he finally found out that it wasn't a bed of roses; just because you get a bigger plant you don't have a bigger volume unless you have it already in hand. He went out of business, and soon after that he passed away.

Teiser: What was his name?

Chinn: Andy or Andrew.

Teiser: [laughing] That's a terrible story.

Slonakers Printers in Palo Alto?

Chinn: We did a lot of their typesetting. Practically every other day I would have business from them, and I would send it down by Greyhound.

Teiser: What kind of work did they do? I thought they were more stationers.

Chinn: They were stationers and general printers. They did everything, too, and I typeset all kinds of things for him until he retired and sold the plant. Then that disappeared.

Teiser: Advance Printing Company in San Francisco—I can't remember his name.

Chinn: Arthur and Marion Hiscox. He did general printing. In fact, he did quite a lot of menu printing. One of his very good customers was the foreign trade restaurant down at the Ferry Building. We would set special menus for special occasions for him—you know, these big banquets and things like that.

Teiser: Menu printing must be a terrible bother.

Chinn: It is, because you have to do it practically overnight. They were not the real large ones; they were special organizations who wanted to have a printed menu for that particular group that met there.

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Teiser: I was about to ask you about Beatty Company.

Chinn: Bill Beatty did general printing. He was not a very big printer.

Teiser: I remember people used to make fun of it.

Chinn: You've got a better memory than I have. [laughter]

Teiser: Did he do a big business, though?

Chinn: Not too big. That's why I didn't check him off.

Teiser: FMC in San Jose—

Chinn: Oh, yes, Food Machinery Corporation, which now is FMC of Chicago; they transferred their headquarters there much, much later, after I retired. Before that, for many, many years we set small

pamphlets for their plant in San Jose, and then we set their annual reports. Of course, soon it got to the point where they got big money from Chicago that bought a certain amount of stock, and were able to move their headquarters there. But they still have their plant in San Jose even now that does defense work for the government. At one time the foreman, one of my partners, and the man who handled publicity and printing were good friends, so we got quite a bit of business from them, but it was sort of an annual thing that generally happened at a certain time when their fiscal year ended or something like that.

Teiser: That was a good kind of business to have, was it not?

Chinn: Definitely, but when it becomes big enough, then the small typesetters did not enjoy that part of it. Because when you become big enough and need a variety of type and a variety of demands on a time schedule that forces you out of your normal routine, it makes it very difficult to handle.

Teiser: Did you do many annual reports?

Chinn: Not that many. Mostly for smaller firms whose reports were generally only a couple of pages or so.

Teiser: Bertrands Litho & Printing?

Chinn: That's on Bush Street.

Teiser: Did you do much work for them?

Chinn: I did quite a lot of business for him. He did a lot of business cards and letterheads and very small pamphlets. He was a very volatile person. Oh, he was one of the sweetest persons you'd ever want to know socially or otherwise when he was in a good mood, but I think he had a wife who drove him to distraction. Sometimes after a period of that he'd come out and could be the most obnoxious person you'd want to know. [laughter] It was always a case of your getting a lot of business from him, or he'd get mad at you and keep away for a few weeks, and then he'd come back to you again. But he was a nice person. Finally I think either the drink or his wife got the better of him, and he sold out to somebody who worked for his firm. There's still Bertrand's on Bush Street, but it's a very small firm now.

Drinking and the Printing Trade

Teiser: Drinking was considered an occupational disease of printers before your time.

Chinn: Oh, yes, and even during my time. However, I knew a lot of them before my actual working days—when I was with the government, for instance, and even before then I knew people like Albert Sperisen. I knew him way back. I can't say I knew him actively, because I was not one of his drinking partners. [laughs]

He and my former boss, Gordon Gollan, were drinking partners. Gollan set a lot of his firm's business at that time—the ad agency and so forth. There was also a special hand-type shop, Johnck and Seeger Typographic, whose owners were part of the drinking group of friends. Gordon Gollan bought the firm later, and when I bought Gollan in 1971 it included all the assets of Johnck and Seeger. I know both partners.

Teiser: Yes, that was a great drinking group, with Sperisen and the Grabhorns and Sherwood Grover. [laughter]

Printing the United Nations Charter

Teiser: I want to talk with you a little more about the printing trades because they were so much a part of your life.

Chinn: There's another aspect of it that I'd like to talk to you about, and that is during the days when the Second World War had just ended and the United Nations was founded in San Francisco. Do you remember that?

Teiser: Oh, were you involved in that?

Chinn: Very, very slightly.

Teiser: I have some information on it from various other people, and I keep trying to get more so I can put it together someday.

Chinn: It's just my association with different people who were involved in it.

Teiser: Last time you were talking about various aspects of your career, and you remembered that you had taken part in the printing of the United Nations charter.

Chinn: Our company did, Gollan Typography. That was shortly after World War II, so in those days, of course, I didn't own it. Gordon is a very good friend of mine, so when he retired and I bought the plant, he gave me the proof sheets of the typesetting of the English portion for the Chinese newspapers and the Chinese book that was published about it. I have quite a lot of that material.

Teiser: At the time the charter was signed here in 1945, were you still working with the quartermaster?

Chinn: Yes, I worked until 1949.

Teiser: Did you have anything to do with the printing of the charter?

Chinn: Not at that time, no. But a very good friend of mine was the English secretary for one of the principal Chinese delegates to the United Nations organizations. He was a Harvard graduate prior to going to China.

Teiser: What was his name?

Chinn: His name was Robert Dunn Wu.

Chinese Digest Story on Essay Contest

Chinn: He was one of the several persons who entered a contest sponsored by a Chinese New York club, later printed in the *Chinese Digest*, of which I was the editor, with the theme, "Does my future lie in China or in America?" Because you must realize that at that time, in the 1930s and earlier, there was still a lot of discrimination against the Chinese; there was no chance for advancement, and not even a chance to work outside of Chinatown except for a very, very few qualified people who somehow got in. So it was a timely essay, and they decided we would put up a contest and find out the best essay for China and the best essay for America.

Bob won the America portion, and another good friend of mine, Kaye Hong, who attended the University of Washington, won the China portion of it. Since they were both good friends of mine, I followed their careers over the years; once in a while we would see each other. Many years passed, and, lo and behold, the next time I saw Bob, he came back after the war to San Francisco with

his Chinese UN Charter delegation and called me up to have me visit and meet some of the people of the Chinese delegation and others. I thanked him, and I did.

I asked him, "How come? You were one of those who said that your future lies in America, and here you are—you went to China and spent all of those intervening years in China, when you yourself could hardly speak Chinese." He said, "Well, I guess I changed my mind over a period of time and thought there was a little opportunity, and I would go back and explore that possibility. Then, if I did not care for it, I would come back. I don't lose anything except the trip."

So he did, and he liked it. He was just stunned by the magnitude of the Chinese culture. Young American-born boys and girls tend to pick up the English language as their principal language, and the Chinese was secondary; they had to maintain it in order to communicate with their parents, who spoke mainly Chinese.

The odd part of it is that the other fellow, Kaye Hong, who said his future lies in China, never left America. [laughter] It was just a twist of fate that they went in the opposite directions of what they wrote on their essays.

Teiser: How did the one who stayed here fare? Did he do well?

Chinn: He did well as a businessman and an entrepreneur. For a while he owned real estate and a big lodge up near Reno. He finally sold that, and he's retired now and living with his wife in the Fontana apartment complex. So he's doing very well, and even in retirement he has no worries. The other one, Bob, went back to China after the United Nations conference for a brief time to clear up things, and then he came back to retire. He couldn't stand retirement, and he finally went to work for the Library of Congress. That part of it is in my *Bridging the Pacific*. Both

essays are in it.

Chinese Language Schools in the U.S.

Teiser: You said he was surprised or impressed by the culture he found in China. In the Chinese language schools in the U.S., where the kids went after their regular school, was it just language, or did they teach something of the culture of China as well?

Chinn: It's interspersed; you can't learn language without learning culture because they are tied in so closely together. You have to understand that basically the Chinese written language is developed from pictures; they drew pictures of hands for the word "hand," and so forth. If you take that in the present-day writing, it's still very similar. Like "a mouth" is practically a little oblong square to simulate a mouth. For "a man," it's nothing but one straight line with a foot on one side and another foot on the other side. For "a woman," it's a little bit crossed over, and a portion indicates that the women are the childbearing sex. For "water," you write three little trickles of water coming down. And so forth.

Teiser: In the Chinese language schools, was anything taught of the history of China?

Chinn: Yes, you learn by rote, and you learn because they tell you stories. That is one thing that has come down through the ages since times even before Confucius: the heavy emphasis on education and reverence for your parents and your family. That is why the Chinese have always, down through the ages, revered education and family above everything else.

Teiser: Learning by rote still obtains in China?

Chinn: It does; that is a large part of it.

Teiser: My friend Robert Beck, who taught English in a college in China, said that it obstructed the students' learning English conversation; it was difficult to get them to converse because of that.

Chinn: As an illustration of that, in 1980 a small group of us friends formulated our own travel itinerary in China. Of all the fifteen or sixteen people who went to China in that particular year, only one was a Caucasian. He married the daughter of one of my Chinese friends, who was also along, but his wife did not come. He was a graduate with heavy emphasis on Chinese history, and he spoke Mandarin. When we went to China, instead of going around with us to see something that he thought might not be as important as trying to see people and mingling with people, he went off by himself. We said, "You don't know too many people here, and you don't know the direction of things," and he said, "I'll get around."

Towards late afternoon we had all come back, and he was still not there. A little later, along he comes, followed by a gang of about fifteen or twenty young people. They were listening so closely to everything he said and asking questions about how to

speak English. He would tell them what hotel he was going to, and they said they would follow him. So they all came just to learn a word or two of English, because in 1980, when China was opening up, America was one of the countries that many wanted to come to in order to further their education.

Teiser: They didn't do that with you because you didn't look foreign, I suppose.

Chinn: Not only that, but the rest of us were Cantonese-speaking and didn't speak Mandarin, so we were not able to help. But this man, Dale Bratton, who was with one of the large law firms here (he's a lawyer now and is doing very well), could speak perfect Mandarin. While he was teaching them English, they were teaching him more Chinese, so it worked out perfectly. That's what he loved. Later on, when we came back, Dale organized a group to get hold of as many textbooks as he could, and he talked one of the steamship companies into transporting them to China to the big universities for them to use. That has happened for many years since then. Now he's too busy, but he has others doing some of it whenever they can get together.

Teiser: Again back to my friend, Robert Beck—he's not only Caucasian, but he's very tall. He said that when he traveled around in China, people came and gathered around him and asked him questions as much as they could; they were all interested in him. He had a hard time walking down a street.

Chinn: That's right.

More on Printing the United Nations Charter

Teiser: Did you go to some of the sessions of the United Nations?

Chinn: No, I didn't, because it was pretty much a closed affair; they had all they could handle with just delegates and their staff. I got to meet a few of them in these sessions where they recessed and came out and walked around, or in the evenings for dinner and later chitchat and camaraderie.

Teiser: It must have been interesting. It was an exciting time then. I remember picking up someone who was on the staff at the Fairmont and looking up and seeing sentries all around the top of the building.

Chinn: It was interesting. I even have a scroll—one of these small ones that open up horizontally (instead of hanging, it went crosswise)—on which Bob had a famous calligrapher write a phrase. It had his stamp on it, and he put down there, "To my friend, Tommy Chinn," and signed it. That was his souvenir gift to me when he came back.

Teiser: I'd like to know everything that you know, secondhand or any way, about the printing of the United Nations charter, because it was such a big event in printing circles here.

Chinn: That I wasn't able to do much about because I went to work for the U. S. Army in 1942, and I worked continuously for them until 1949.

Teiser: Were you working at Stanford Press during any of that time?

Chinn: Some of that time I was doing that work, and other times I was helping out in community work, even before 1941 and Pearl Harbor. It was actually in 1937 that we were raising money to send back to China in their fight against the Japanese who were encroaching into China. I had sold all of my typography plant when I went into the service, so I didn't have a chance to come out and mingle with the printers.

Teiser: Did Stanford University Press set some of the type?

Chinn: If they did, I was not privy to it.

Teiser: What had Gollan done, then? How could you reconstruct that?

Chinn: Gordon was the one who told me most of it. He said he was going to give to me some of the proof pages of the type he set for the Chinese community for them to print in Chinese for the Chinese public, after they had gotten the whole charter translated into Chinese, and also because that was necessary for the Chinese delegates who could not read or write English. That's why they had this staff around with people like Bob Wu, who could speak English perfectly and who had learned Chinese over the years. These delegates actually had to have a Chinese version of it, and they didn't have time to send it all the way back to China, so they did it locally.

Teiser: Had Gordon set the body of the material that he pulled proofs from?

Chinn: I don't remember him saying anything about that, excepting that he set the type for the Chinese portion.

Teiser: He set the type in English that was then translated into Chinese?

Chinn: Yes. The English copies were then given to Chinese translators.

Teiser: That was the whole charter?

Chinn: Oh, yes.

Teiser: Did Gordon set the type for the body of the United Nations charter?

Chinn: I don't think for the whole charter. That would be some of the biggest firms in the Bay Area. I imagine they got together to pool their resources; some set part of the type, and some set other portions of it, or captions or whatever was necessary. Then they worked together as a group to put it together, just like newsmen reporting the fighting in the Gulf. They have a point person who gathers material for the benefit of the entire staff, because they couldn't send all the foreign correspondents.

Teiser: I guess it was Tommassini who coordinated the effort.

Chinn: I believe so. I don't know from firsthand knowledge, but that is about the only way they could have done it.

Teiser: I guess he was working for the University of California Press?

Chinn: I would presume either that or with Stanford, or maybe jointly, and maybe with institutions down south, too. I don't know this personally.

Teiser: It seems to me that MacKenzie & Harris had something to do with it, and everybody did.

Chinn: Oh, yes, MacKenzie & Harris, and another big monotype firm also did work for them before their merger.

Teiser: How could they have all gotten together and used the same typeface?

Chinn: Oh, that's simple. You just decide on a kind of typeface that everybody has, just like they'd use Garamond or some other universal type face.

Teiser: What typeface did they use?

Chinn: Oh, I couldn't remember that. [laughs]

Chinese Delegation to the United Nations Conference

Teiser: You've just showed me a book, and the title is *United Nations Conference, San Francisco, California, April 25-June 26, 1945*. It's inscribed to you by Thomas Tong.

Chinn: Yes, and that's his wife, May Chinn Tong.

Teiser: It was published by the Chinese Hour, a radio operation of the Golden Star Company, San Francisco.

Chinn: It's all owned by Thomas Tong.

Teiser: It's printed by Ming Sing.

Chinn: Yes, that's the Chinese name for Golden Star.

Teiser: Was that his printing company, too?

Chinn: Yes. He still has it; I believe he still has a linotype machine in his basement.

Teiser: If he has a linotype machine, I guess he has metal, too?

Chinn: Oh, everything that you use on a linotype.

Teiser: The book begins with pictures of the national leaders, including Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, and then pictures of the flags of all the nations, and then an essay by Ralph D. Scott, "Backgrounds and Highlights of the United Nations Conference." It's a folio-size book, isn't it?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Does the introduction give special attention to the Chinese participants?

Chinn: You know, I have not read it through because I just haven't had the time. I wouldn't be surprised, because that would be the focus of this book. Otherwise it would be so general that they wouldn't have to copy it.

Teiser: Then comes an illustrated chart of the organization of the United Nations, then the charter itself, and the statute of International Court of Justice. It's very nicely set, isn't it?

Chinn: Yes, it was very well done.

Teiser: Did you have anything to do with setting this?

Chinn: No, because he has his own little linotype machine.

Teiser: Then comes the story of the UNCIO in pictures, which, as you pointed out, has a good many of the Chinese people who came.

Chinn: The key people that China sent over here.

Teiser: The captions on these are in both English and Chinese: pictures of the Civic Center and the Opera House where it all took place, and meetings.

Chinn: I believe that almost all of these pictures are more or less special. They would not be using this many of these same pictures in any other media excepting this one, because here the entire focus is on its connection with the Chinese delegates and their participation, of course, in the bigger group pictures.

Teiser: This is fascinating. Here are pictures of Dr. T. V. Soong speaking to the delegates; the delegation chairman of the Big Four, with Dr. Soong again included; Dr. V. K. Wellington Koo addressing a group; a picture of the charter with the signatures of the Chinese delegates. It's a wonderful record. Here's a whole page of the chairmen of the delegations from fifty United Nations signees, and each of them has a little sign saying what country they represent, and under each is identification in Chinese. Then comes photo credits.

Chinn: Both in Chinese and English.

Teiser: Yes, and here are the editors and staff who prepared this book, in both Chinese and English.

Chinn: This picture is the owner, Thomas Tong, with President Truman and Gilbert Woo, the Chinese commentator for his Golden Star Radio.

Teiser: And there are more pictures of the broadcasts—Voice of America.

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Teiser: I'm describing this a good deal because it may not be easy for people to find copies of it, as you say. How many copies were made?

Chinn: I don't imagine there were more than a few hundred copies printed.

Teiser: Here's Madame T. V. Soong christening the victory ship *S.S. Grove City*. There are a lot of pictures of Chinese participants not

only in the conference but in other events. Here's a banquet given by the Six Companies to the UNCIO delegates. Here's Jackson Street, after the meeting. These are wonderful pictures—and not badly printed. [laughter]

Chinn: Considering its day, yes. And then to be able to get it all engraved so uniformly.

Teiser: Here's UC Berkeley. Here are the Chinese delegates paying homage to Dr. Sun Yat-sen, standing in front of his statue in San Francisco. Staff workers of the UNCIO, and of the UNCIO press office. And all bilingual, including the organization staff. That's a wonderful record of a very important event. It mentions here the honorific Chinese scrolls; is that what you said was given to you?

Chinn: Undoubtedly the other scrolls are much larger, and they were presented to these various delegates. In other words, they brought them from China and presented them to other VIPs.

Teiser: You still have proof sheets of some of it, given to you by Gordon Gollan?

Chinn: If I can find them. I don't know what I'm doing with my collection of Chinese-Americana material. I might decide to give all my collection, after I am not around anymore, to The

Bancroft Library, or the section that would be appropriate.

Teiser: Looking at the state of private organizations today, I suppose one is going to rely upon public organizations for stability.

Chinn: Yes. For stability, of course, you still can't get around the large universities, where you have that, and where they will be most important and utilized. I think it would be judicious. I'm influenced by that mainly because my wife went to Cal. [laughs] Not only my wife, but my grandson graduated from Cal. He's only in his very early thirties.

Teiser: What did he study?

Chinn: The social sciences.

Walter Wayne Chinn

Teiser: I must ask you your son's name. I don't think you mentioned it.

Chinn: Walter Wayne Chinn.

Teiser: He started out working with you?

Chinn: He started out being my apprentice. Then he had to serve in the Korean War, and before he got out I had dissolved my business. He couldn't finish his apprenticeship with me, so he went to work as an apprentice for Kennedy ten Bosch. He finished his apprenticeship there, and then he left there to go to work for a typesetting plant. In other words, he didn't want to be involved with a great big printing company where he was in just handsetting in one phase of it. He thought he would do better if he went to work for a typography shop, which he did. There were several small ones, and he went to work for one of them. Then, when I started up again in 1971, he was a junior partner with my foreman, who was Gordon's foreman. The two of them together held 40 percent of the stock, and I held 60 percent.

Teiser: Did he work there, then, until you sold?

Chinn: No, he was the silent partner, and my active partner was Robert Stevenson.

Teiser: What did your son do during that period, then?

Chinn: He went to work for several other typesetters.

Teiser: As a handsetter?

Chinn: Yes and no. It was handset, then cold type, and gradually into computers.

Teiser: Has he continued that?

Chinn: Oh, yes. He is in charge of the computer typesetting department, which is composed of a dozen or so operators. They have another branch of this company in Palo Alto, and the typesetting part of that is under his jurisdiction, too.

Teiser: What is the name of the company?

Chinn: That's Omnicomp. They do everything, from taking the manuscript to the finished product, including colorwork and making up enough color samples for ad agencies either to print somewhere or for presentation to clients—like ad agencies would go to Macy's or Emporium and show a finished product that will be all in color as it would actually appear. He's been there for about ten years now.

Teiser: Is that pretty much the sort of thing that Kennedy ten Bosch did?

Chinn: Kennedy ten Bosch was a printer, principally. He did not have a full typesetting department. I have never thoroughly studied their physical ability to complete a printing job, but I know that they had small, handset material, and the largest jobs they sent to the bigger typesetting firms like Gollan or others.

Teiser: I'm trying to think of a comparable earlier company. MacKenzie & Harris furnished material—

Chinn: Mainly typesetting.

Teiser: But in finished form?

Chinn: In those days, in the time that I knew them, I'm not sure that they finished up anything. It was not as sophisticated as it is today, certainly, because even color did not come into printing until quite recently—that is, in the last few decades.

Other Family Members

Teiser: What is the name of your son's son?

Chinn: My grandson's name is Louis Wayne Chinn. He's working for a large computer manufacturing company—software and other—and he is now regional manager for about four or five western states.

Teiser: You have a talented family.

Chinn: Oh, no. Just born at the right time, when the opportunity presented itself.

Teiser: What company does he work for?

Chinn: Everex Computer/Software, Fremont.

Teiser: Who did your son marry?

Chinn: He married Frances Lynn Quock.

Teiser: Is she from San Francisco?

Chinn: She was born in San Francisco, but the family moved to San Mateo. My home was also in San Mateo, and that was where they met.

Teiser: When they grew up, were their lives much different from yours and your wife's?

Chinn: Oh, yes. [laughs] I'll have to tell you a little story. My mother, at the time we were living in San Mateo, lived with us. She also lived with us in San Francisco, and when I bought my home in San Mateo after Pearl Harbor, she went down with us. She lived with us for seventeen years. My wife and she got along very, very well.

When she went down to San Mateo with us, both my future daughter-in-law and my son attended San Mateo High School.

Teiser: No segregated schools for them.

Chinn: No. That was a different period entirely. My son had a bicycle that he always went to school and came back on. My mother would be looking out the front door or the front window, and about the time the school let out, here comes my son riding his bike, and riding on his handlebars was his future wife. My mother, who practically raised my son—that is, she was the babysitter, and he was the apple of her eye—said, "Look at that hussy," in Chinese. "She's going to cause an accident and hurt my grandson." That is, in essence, what she said. She didn't mean it maliciously; she was just making a comment to my wife. She was concerned for my son. Of course, we knew that he was fully capable of handling anything like that.

When they became serious and then got engaged and got married, there couldn't have been a happier person than my mother, especially when they gave birth to first a daughter and then Louis, a son, which meant that he became the third generation Chinn in our family. When my grandson, Louis, and his wife got married and produced the fourth generation of males, she was no longer around; she passed away in 1969.

Teiser: What is your granddaughter's name?

Chinn: The first granddaughter's name is Deborah Elaine Chinn. The baby granddaughter's name is Sherryl Ann.

Teiser: Didn't you have an addition to your family fairly recently?

Chinn: The beginning of last year. We just attended the first birthday of Deborah's second daughter. I have five great-grandchildren. By January 1992, it will be seven great-grandchildren.

Teiser: That's quite an accomplishment! [laughter]

More on San Francisco Printers

Teiser: Let's continue on your printing years. You gave me a list of people with whom you had worked.

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Chinn: I've added quite a few others. Some of them you may know. This is a person whom I met and knew a long, long time ago, in the thirties—John Henry Nash. Do you know him?

Teiser: I do, indeed. You were speaking of someone who had a terrible temper, and I remember that he had a terrible temper.

Chinn: I've got something cute to tell you about John Henry Nash. I'd met him a few times, and we had talked.

Teiser: What did he seem like to you?

Chinn: I really couldn't form an impression of him because he was always civil enough to me; I never caught him in a temper tantrum. I had just about forgotten him over the decades. In about 1975 or 1976 I was going through a lot of the old files of Gollan Typography that we never had a chance to look over when we bought it, and lo and behold I found an old box containing unused envelopes. I thought I'd take them out and we'd use them; why not? I held one of them up to look at the water mark, and it said, "John Henry Nash" on each envelope. If I can find them, I'll give you a few.

Teiser: I'll put them in the library. That would be wonderful. I know he was given to having paper made with his watermark.

Chinn: Tedd Lynn Pressroom was even earlier, before I started my paper. And then there's Marier Engraving Company here in San Francisco. Ed Marier was mainly a business card and social stationery printer. He was one of my main customers for the last two or three years that we were in business. He did thousands of dollars per month business with us. I think he is still alive, and his son-in-law now runs it. It is out on Howard Street.

Teiser: Is that the kind of work that is sold through Magnin's, for instance?

Chinn: Yes, I imagine they have it done outside, so he probably gets his share of that business.

Teiser: I suppose a lot of it goes through business stationers.

Chinn: Oh, yes, the smaller printers or the engravers that do raised letter material.

Teiser: Has that not been supplanted by what Lawton Kennedy used to call "fried type"?

Chinn: Well, that's about the size of it, but he did a lot of that, too— everything. He did very fancy work, too.

Teiser: Thermographic printing is what it was.

Chinn: There's another well known ad agency typographer who's name is Johnck & Seeger. When we bought Gollan Typography, we also bought Johnck & Seeger.

Teiser: Did you get their types?

Chinn: Yes, everything. I had a lot of special types, and now I'm sorry I let them go. But if I'd kept them, there wouldn't have been room to put it all. We had many, many dozens of type cases, and each type case holds about twenty-four fonts of type, so you can imagine—we must have had thirty or forty cases, and we took the entire floor of one of the buildings down on Sansome Street.

Teiser: Albert Sperisen worked with them.

Chinn: Yes, he did. I knew them when they were on Clay Street.

Teiser: Did you know John Johnck?

Chinn: You're talking about the son?

Teiser: No, the father.

Chinn: I met him, but I never knew him that well. I met the son several times before we finally closed up.

Teiser: And Harold Seeger?

Chinn: Oh, yes, Harold Seeger was a good friend. I never got close to Harold Seeger because he and Gordon loved to go out, and I don't drink. [laughter]

Teiser: You never went to Harringtons?

Chinn: Oh, yes, I've gone there, but all I'd drink was ginger ale; it made it look like I was holding something, anyway. After a few

attempts, I said that was not my cup of tea, and I didn't feel I could spend that much time that way.

Teiser: I remember Lawton stopped drinking for some years, and it put him in a different social segment.

Chinn: That was Alfred's downfall, finally. I knew him and his wife very well.

Teiser: They were fine people, and Alfred was a talented man.

Chinn: You knew Sally, his wife?

Teiser: Yes. She's still active.

Chinese Customers

Grant Printing Company

Chinn: A few of my Chinese customers, who were my mainstays—

Teiser: Grant Printing Company—what did it do?

Chinn: They did printing, but they needed type occasionally, and I did a little bit before we closed. He opened only shortly before I closed.

Teiser: Were they general commercial printers?

Chinn: Yes. Now he is the publisher of *Asian Week*, John Fang. You might as well put his wife's name down, too, Florence Fang, because there's quite a story behind that. John Fang went from mainland China, Shanghai, to Taiwan, and from Taiwan he came to America and went to Chicago. He worked as a printer's helper or something like that and learned printing. Then he came out here and started a very small print shop. I met him when I was editor of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce souvenir pamphlet—that Miss Chinatown U.S.A. publication.[13] He was the printer for that, and I set the type. That's how we met.

Now, so many years later, he owns *Asian Week*, and I'm the editorial consultant on it. His sons are very active, and they are

13. Thomas W. Chinn (ed.), *San Francisco Chinatown, 1972* (San Francisco: Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1972).

a very close-knit family. One son is James Fang. He is the one who finished law school and very, very recently barely nosed out his opponent in running for the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] board of directors, and he is now on the board. Ted Fang, the younger son, is the publisher, with his father's influence and backing, financial and otherwise, of the San Francisco *Independent*. The family also publishes the Chinese *TV Guide*, and very recently, in the last few months, the *Real Estate Guide* that contains a little pamphlet illustrating different properties for sale. That has been incorporated into the *Independent* now, just recently. So they are going by leaps and bounds into everything.

Florence, the wife, became the owner-operator of one of the large restaurants in Chinatown, the Grand Palace, when the family bought the Grand Palace Restaurant. I have to call it family, because they work together on everything. They hobnob with March Fong Eu, the secretary of state, who is also a friend of mine. Florence Fang is a member of some federal board—small business, or something like that—and lately I hear that she is being considered as a highway commissioner of California. So she is very heavily into politics. But they always hedge their bets: John is a Republican (or vice versa), and his wife is a Democrat (or vice versa). [laughter]

Chinese Newspapers

Teiser: What is Young China Publishing Company?

Chinn: That's what was formerly a daily newspaper; I think it's a weekly now.

Teiser: Did you set type for them?

Chinn: I set whatever English type they had in their paper. For instance, during election time they would have all the candidates, and at various times there were different programs that were community related and in which they wanted English participation.

Teiser: I don't think we've discussed Chinese newspapers. I think the only Chinese newspaper composing room I was ever in had banks and banks and banks of handset type. How do they set type for Chinese newspapers now?

Chinn: Up to the present generation they set it by hand, walking miles and miles a day and picking each character by hand from the typecases. Now they have some machines that set type, but it's

very stilted, with a limited number of characters that they can set on a machine—there would be just so many keyboards. I don't know how it works. They've overcome some of the problems, but basically most of them still use hand type.

Teiser: Not only do they have to set it, but they distribute it again after printing.

Chinn: Well, that's their job. They have their type monkeys. When they finish printing an issue they put the type over here, and then these fellows pick them up and start redistributing the type. You know, it's not that long ago that a lot of our smaller printers did their work, even before World War II. Adrian Wilson loved to set beautiful handset type.

Teiser: I'm sure he did it on principle, though, not because he had to.

Chinn: That's right. He loved the smell of printer's ink.

Teiser: Yes, and he liked design, too. You list the *Chinese World* newspaper here.

Chinn: Yes, that was the daily newspaper. That was started just prior or just following the turn of the century. They published a daily newspaper entirely in Chinese. But in the mid 1950s they bought a linotype machine and started an English page. They had a Chinese operator who knew how, and every time they would get in a bind with machine trouble or something like that, then they would call me in and ask, "How would you handle this?" Or once in a while I would help them out a little bit by setting a little type for them when their machine was down.

In 1961 or '62, they asked me if I would write a column for them, so for almost a year I did, until finally I decided it was too much for me. My column was mainly about Chinese-American history. I thought I would make it a long-term column, going into a little bit more detail than most people knew. I don't think they were very happy with it, because I started out with the period before the Chinese were really into it. I started out when the missionary people helped hold English language classes in their churches or places of worship. So when I started out with a long history of some of these various reverends, all Americans [Caucasians], some of the Chinese were a little put out and said, "This is a Chinese newspaper; why don't you publish things about the Chinese?" I said I was getting around to it, but if you want to know the whole story, you have to get it from the beginning. I didn't want to start halfway; I wanted to give credit to those people who helped the Chinese get started.

After while I decided it was getting to be too much for me, because I was working and doing everything else. This was a job I did voluntarily; I never got paid for it, so I decided I'd better drop it.

Teiser: The Golden Star Printing Company—that's the one that did the United Nations book.

Thing Wan Printing Company

Chinn: Thing Wan Printing Company—their main job was printing laundry lists, menus, and local community tickets, and whatever event needed English, they had to depend on me. Formerly, before a Chinese typesetter came into view, they had to bring it out to American [Caucasian] typesetters. So it was a step closer, and I was able to help them because sometimes their grammar was so poor that I had to rephrase things for them. They appreciated that, and it made them good customers.

Teiser: Who ran that company?

Chinn: The father was an old-timer, and I can't remember his name. The son's name was Joel Wong.

Chinese Pacific Weekly

Teiser: The *Chinese Pacific Weekly* ?

Chinn: It was a very politically liberal weekly newspaper, but not Communist. But it earned the scrutiny of the McCarthy commission. [laughs] It was one of those things where you wanted to speak out and not take the word of an extreme conservative. If you wanted a different viewpoint, Gilbert Woo was one who was willing to voice that opinion. He had a wide circle of

friends, not only locally but his weekly got back to the East Coast, back to China, and all over the country.

Teiser: What happened to it finally?

Chinn: He died. He passed away ten or twelve years ago, but then his brother took it over—not the newspaper, but the printing of commercial jobs.

Teiser: What were the men's names?

Chinn: Gilbert Woo, and his brother, who is still alive, is Norbert Woo.

Teiser: But the newspaper itself no longer exists?

Chinn: No. But it was a very, very well-respected paper.

Bock Ngar Chy Printing Company

Teiser: Here's the Bock Ngar Chy Printing Company.

Chinn: I'll have to tell you something about that. When I as about thirteen or fourteen years old, in '23 or '24 (and we had just moved to San Francisco a few years prior to that in 1919), a young man used to come calling, trying to get to see one of my sisters. She was a year older than I. My parents didn't care for him because he didn't have much of a job at that time. He was a few years older than I was. Finally the parents told my sister that she was not to marry him. However, she liked him, and they arranged to meet outside. My parents never wanted her to go out alone in those times in Chinatown, so I would have to be the message-bearer and the intermediary to get her out of the house by saying, "Why don't you come down with me to so-and-so." I'd go down with her, and we'd get to the corner and there he was waiting, and they'd go out by themselves. It got to the point where she got independent enough to say, "I will marry him," and she did marry him in 1924.

The thing about it is that when I met him, he was working part time for Schmidt Lithograph. He was a pressman for them, finally, and he spent almost his entire life working for that one firm from way back in the early 1920s until he retired. I think he worked for them for about forty-five years. [end tape 15, side a; begin side b]

Teiser: You said he operated small presses?

Chinn: Here's the thing about it. They didn't pay much money in those days, and now he was married and expecting his first child already, so he got a second job, in Chinatown, printing for one of the small presses. He worked with Bock Ngar Chy, and that is actually where I learned printing because he and the proprietor would allow me to come down and watch him hand-set the press at night, after his regular job.

Teiser: Did he make the press ready for printing?

Chinn: He did everything. They were these very small presses, not automatic; you had to put it in one by one. You were lucky it had electricity instead of a foot treadle. I got fascinated with that,

and I helped him once in a while to gather up the printed work, and that's why the proprietor allowed me to stick around once in a while to watch him work. I didn't get paid, but I got to smell printer's ink, and I think that's why I later on decided to get into that field of work, since I wanted to write about Chinese-American history anyway.

Teiser: What is your brother-in-law's name?

Chinn: Ernest Loo, and my sister's name is Marian Chinn.

Teiser: A lot of printers get into it just that way, by being fascinated as kids.

Chinn: That's right. His whole family—his brother, younger brother, and nephew—were all working for Schmidt Lithograph.

Stecher-Traung

Chinn: That gives rise to another story that I must tell you. This was a printer who used to be on the corner of Pacific and Sansome, called Stecher-Traung. They were a couple of brothers who started a very small press, and they started printing labels. They did a lot of that, but they lived pretty close to the edge. When they got too much business they had to buy a lot of paper, so they went into hock for that. One day they got themselves into a real bad bind, and who did they turn to for help? Nobody would lend them money; the bank wouldn't lend them money because they were a poor risk, hand-to-mouth. So they turned to their pressmen, who were Chinese, and the pressmen loaned the brothers a large sum of money and were their financial backers.

But there was a catch to it: every time there was an opening, the brothers would allow the pressmen to bring in a Chinese workman, one of their distant relatives. So their extra money was being put to good use because they were working there. That saved the company, and the brothers were forever thankful for it. Even the son or grandson of one of the principal owners came to my brother-in-law's retirement party; even though they were not in the same firm, they were still printers, and they were invited. That's how I learned some of these stories. [chuckles]

Chinese Membership in Printing Industry Unions

Teiser: I asked you earlier how you joined the union, and you said you joined out of the city. But later did Chinese-American printers who worked in San Francisco manage to join?

Chinn: As far as the typographic union is concerned, I think I'm—I shouldn't say the first typesetter; I shouldn't say even the first linotypesetter, although I believe I am. Nobody has told me differently; they all say, "You seem to be the first." But I do claim to be the first Chinese trade typesetter—that is, doing the work for other printers as a livelihood.

Teiser: Were the other Chinese-Americans who came into the printing industry in San Francisco taken into the unions?

Chinn: Yes. From my brother-in-law I learned that his brother, Clarence Loo, became the first Chinese to become a member of the San Francisco Printing Pressman's Union #24. He joined in 1930. My brother-in-law, Ernest, joined in 1936. After my transfer back to the city, I understand that

some of the others got in. But I've never attempted to join locally. Oh, yes, I did. I opened my typesetting plant in 1937, and I was always moaning about how I wasn't getting any business from American [Caucasian] firms, and in 1941 or '42 a salesman with the linotype lead company that supplied me with lead came around and said, "I guess one of the reasons is that you don't belong to the union. How about getting into the union and then going out and soliciting their business?" I remember that I was so small a business that I couldn't see joining the union and paying their big dues. That was just about the time that Pearl Harbor came around, and that furthered my anxiety that I might be called up either into defense work or into uniform, so I didn't join. Of course, I eventually had to close in that same year, 1942, and went into the army work.

Other Print Shop Customers

Teiser: Let's continue with these other print shops with which you did business. McDougall Press—

Chinn: They're still around. I didn't do a great deal of work for most of these shops. It was just in an emergency, or once in a while they needed a special type face and had to bring it to me. Most

of them are in that category. The only steady ones were these I checked off.

Teiser: McKenzie's, Lane Books, East Wind, and FMC. The others that you mention are known, interesting, printing companies. Willats Printing Company—

Chinn: I did some work for them, too. They were general commercial printers. They're still around. Little City Press and Little City Litho were Italian boys, each one with their special field, printing and lithographing. They're both still around.

Teiser: They are some of the few little shops left.

Chinn: I did most of their printing. I did a good part of Mackay's printing, and they also were a small printer, in the same category. Marier was the big one we talked about. I did thousands of dollars of business a month for them. Warren Waller was a very small press out on Waller Street. Pacific States Printing Company was the one located on the floor above us. He was the one I told you about who came in one day and plunked down $25,000 in cash. [laughter]

Printing Job Requirements

Teiser: The printing industry is full of wonderful stories. When you did work for different print shops, the requirements must have varied considerably.

Chinn: No, when they give you a job, they give you the specifications or the draft or whatever they want typeset, and they plainly mark what they want—the typeface, the width or the space they have to fill—and it's up to you to go ahead and work from there with the typeface. You either use a typeface that will fit in the size that they have laid out, or whatever. Sometimes they don't even give you that latitude; they'll tell you how much type they want set, how wide to set it, and what contour to fill. If it didn't fill, it was not your job to try and fiddle around with it, because that costs money. You'd call them up and say, "It won't fit," or "There's not enough type to fill that space." Then it's up to the printer; he's the one who told you what to do, and he has to make

the change.

Teiser: I remember when Les Lloyd was foreman at McKenzie & Harris.

Chinn: Yes, I knew him.

Teiser: I was working with Catherine Harroun at Wells Fargo, and we would have little things set for the history room. He'd forever be phoning to say, "You have to find one more word."

Chinn: Yes, those are the things you have to put up with, because you can't take it upon yourself to do anything without the customer's consent.

Typesetting Poetry for Lawton Kennedy

Teiser: You were showing me two books of poetry that you set for Lawton. They are: a book of poems by Nancy Lee Tilden, called *Response from Puyexn*, San Francisco, California, 1987, designed and printed by Lawton Kennedy; and *A Winter Garden*, by Nancy Lee Tilden, San Francisco, 1965, also printed by Lawton and Alfred Kennedy. I thought setting poetry was harder than setting prose. Is it?

Chinn: Not when I was dealing with Lawton. He was very, very careful. He will come up and talk to you and tell you about what he wants to do. He would ask, "Do you think this will work out well?" Of course, he knows the type size he wants. He'd guess at the size, and we would set a few lines and show him what it looked like, and then he would go back and figure it out all over again. He was very meticulous, and that was a good way to work because you know that he knows his business and is not going to blame you for anything you took arbitrarily from him, and make you do most of the guesswork. He doesn't allow you to guess; he'll tell you just what he wants. But he'll be forewarned, by checking with you, what you think.

Teiser: He decides where it's to go on the page?

Chinn: The page we have nothing to do with.

Teiser: He gives you the type width?

Chinn: He gives me the maximum type width to set. If he wants to put more than one poem on one page, that is his prerogative. He would take it back, and he would spend a lot of time just looking at it to see if it looked balanced and if it reads so it doesn't clutter up your mind when you turn the page. He didn't like to jam in a lot of type, where your eye would tend to stray away from the center portion of the poem. He has it very well thought out, and all the white space you see there is purposely done for that reason. You think it's not a lot of work sometimes; a lot of

people don't know, and they think, "Well, there are only a few lines of type there." But all of this white space, no matter what it is, has to be filled in with blank type that will not print, because the dimensions are the same, the depth is the same. It still means a lot of work, and that is his job—to make it pleasing to his client.

Teiser: He knew how to design a page. I think there's one typo in this book—the quotation marks out to the left margin.

Chinn: No, he wants it that way.

Teiser: So he specifies all the spacing and indentation?

Chinn: He is the only one I know of who specifies that, but he's the only one who gave me material on poems. I didn't set poems for anyone else who was so exacting. With others, I would have set the quotes inside with the regular reading, but, no, that was one thing Lawton always insisted upon; he wants the quotes on the outside. So what can you do? You might think that's easy, but it meant that wherever it occurred I would have to allow for that much space—put in two blank spaces in front of every line, just because of that.

Teiser: Because you had the quotes to the left of everything else?

Chinn: Yes. Or, conversely, sometimes when it was a tight line, he would have to move that first line back out.

Teiser: I see. You really worked back and forth with him.

Chinn: Oh, yes. It's not just a straight, "Here, you go ahead and set it," and forget about any interplay. That's why I say—when I started the Chinese Historical Society in 1963, I was not able to put out a monthly bulletin. But in 1966, when I was able to get Gordon Gollan's consent for me to use the linotype machine to set my bulletins free of cost, that's when I approached Lawton and said, "I have this little bulletin I'd like to set every month. I have to find out if I can afford it or not. How much do you think you would charge me?" He said, "Well, let me set the first issue and see how much time it takes." I thought I'd probably get that one free, if he was going to check first, so I had that done. The next month I asked him again, "I don't want to continue if it's going to cost too much." He said, "Why don't you continue, and I'll tell you when it's too much." I set the type from 1966 until 1980, fourteen years, and he and his son, Alfred, printed it all that time for nothing—paper, press work, binding, everything.

Teiser: He did a lot of things for people, I think. He was supposed to be kind of tough and crusty—

Chinn: He is that way by nature, but he was very good to us. Even when he does speak a little roughly-well, that's his nature. In a way it brought Alfred into the picture. Later on we invited Lawton and Alfred and Sally to our anniversary dinners, and Lawton would never come because he says he doesn't like to eat foreign food. But Alfred and Sally loved it, and eventually I got them into membership in our society, and at various times both of them were directors of the society.

X The China-United States Connection

China and the Western World

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Teiser: Before we started taping I was asking you about connections between China and the United States. The impression that I have, and it's just a vague impression, is that almost everyone in China has a relative who has been to or lived in or does live in the United States. I'm sure that's an exaggeration, but you mentioned that your maternal grandfather lived here and returned to China, and as a young man you met a number of people in your village who had been here and returned. Is it your impression that there is a very high percentage of people in China with these direct contacts in the United States?

Chinn: No, not a great deal. It takes a long time to talk about this, because even giving you an outline will take a little time. As you know, China has always considered itself a nation sufficient unto itself: it didn't need the outside world; it had everything that civilization or mankind wanted. They've always been very proud of that, being the oldest continuous living civilization known.

This was so until the time of Marco Polo. Prior to that time, we don't know too much, but when the Europeans came, the only way they could get into China, because they were barred from all other places, was way in the interior, over what became known as the Silk Road, by way of India and so forth. When they came through there, that's when the outside—the Romans and the Europeans—discovered the wealth of China, especially silk. The women loved the silk material, and they would pay anything for it. The Romans had a regular stream of traders going back and forth into China, into the one road where it was the farthest point from

the seat of the government. They wanted to keep the foreigners out, but a little bit of trade wouldn't hurt.

Well, that gradually developed into a flood, and this went on and on for many, many decades—centuries, in fact—until the English discovered that China made the best tea. Of course they were in India, and they discovered that India had tea, but China had better tea, so they started sending their ships to China. China wouldn't receive them, and finally they said, "If you don't receive us we will come in with soldiers." So the emperor allowed them to trade at the farthest point away from their government, which was South China, which is Kwangtung.

Teiser: Oh, that is the tradition!

Chinn: That is the only foothold they got, and they got it secondhand; the Portuguese got in first, at Macao, the upper middle island right next to Hong Kong. The English didn't get in until the Opium War in about 1842, and they forced China to give them a trading area. China, losing the war, gave them that trading concession near Canton, and in turn they were later on given a ninety-nine year lease to Hong Kong, which we now know is going to return to China in 1997.

All the way through, until the discovery of gold, there were no Chinese worth speaking of who wanted to leave China, unless they were forced to—sold as slaves, or went to South America as indentured servants. Naturally, since the imprints of the Westerners, especially the Americans, was through these trading posts in South China, in Canton, that's where the news of the discovery of gold was first made in China. So that's where all of the Chinese came from in the early days; those who got the news first, before the rest of China, started trickling out here. At that time, and probably still today but in a much less pervasive way, China was suffering with famine, floods, wars, bandits, which left Kwangtung particularly destitute. China was never known as a big manufacturing country; all they did was farm.

Chinese Immigration to America

Chinn: These starving people, living in distant places around that South China area decided to send their eldest sons out to see if they couldn't make a fortune, or at least earn some money to keep them alive. Among them was my maternal grandfather, who came in 1849 to California.

That's how they started that great big flood of Chinese at that time. The large majority, 90-95 percent, were South Chinese in the first waves, until gradually news trickled out to other areas, and then those Chinese from the interior or further east came to board the ships out of Canton.

That's a thumbnail sketch.

Teiser: You've tied together some things I didn't realize. It answers my question about the ties between China and the United States and how they came to be.

Chinn: Oh, yes.

Chinese Affinity for America

Chinn: Let me tell you one thing that may be why China and Chinese have always had a closer, warm feeling towards America than towards any part of Europe. All the first white traders were Europeans. The Americans didn't start going to China for trading until very, very late, many decades following the English. The Europeans also had these big wars and tried to bring opium into China, and that brought about the Opium War, as you know. It was the English who fought that war against the Chinese, and the Americans didn't have any part of that early stage.

After England won the war and settled down into trading, then the American vessels started coming in—the China clippers in the early days—and suddenly there was an upheaval in China. They said they wanted to get rid of the monarchy, and many also wanted to get rid of foreigners. It was a peasant uprising, and they were fighting all foreigners and the emperor. Of course, they were defeated, and the foreigners—the Americans, the English, the French, the Germans, you name it—all got a concession. They wanted reimbursement for the war that they fought and which China had lost.

Among them, America demanded over $10 million, and in those days that was a tremendous sum—but not as much as England and the others demanded. What did America do? They took it, and then later they said, "This money we are going to set aside for you to send your students to America to find out about Western culture." That is why several universities were utilized in China to further that relationship, preparing students to come to the U.S. Every year, up until, I'd say, the birth of the Chinese Republic, and thereafter until the twenties and thirties, until the Second World

War, that money kept students coming; it was invested, and they were able to keep it up. There were thousands of Chinese who came here.

Now, here's the other thing. In the late 1870s, one Chinese who had graduated from Yale much earlier, Yung Wing, was the first Chinese to get American citizenship, first to graduate from an American university. He went back to China and became a minor official, and then he was

forever trying to get the emperor to send students here. This fund was set up before the Boxer Rebellion. Finally, he prevailed upon the emperor to allow a hundred Chinese boys, ages twelve and up, to come over and learn, from elementary school until supposedly they finished college. Then they would go back to China and help modernize their country.

Well, like all nations, and like human nature, everyone got jealous that this Yung Wing was getting that much power and was able to influence the emperor in doing that, so they started bickering and pointing out what was wrong with the system. These students, of course, kept on going to school. I don't recall the exact years, but after they had been to high school and a small handful got into universities and were almost ready to graduate, these conniving elements were able to get the emperor to rescind this allowance, and all of the Chinese boys were sent back to China.

However, that was the nucleus—I have a book that explains it all, called *China's First Hundred*, written by Thomas Lafargue, an American. It's very interesting reading; it's not heavy, and it's very amusing. One of that group who got close to graduating from college was an engineer. He was the one who built the first Chinese railroad in China, with all Chinese help. He's always been revered for that, because that was a big step in transportation.

So that was the beginning of the process of why the Chinese like the Americans so much. They've given the Chinese so much—a chance for education, and they did everything possible to encourage them to come here and study, in spite of the fact that when they did start coming after the Gold Rush the Chinese were met with people like Dennis Kearney. [laughs] That's the story, in a nutshell.

Teiser: Are there any other countries with which China has had similar cross-civilization?

Chinn: The Chinese never had much use for the English; they're the ones who forced opium upon them.

Teiser: As well as tobacco.

Chinn: That was also a factor. They introduced a lot of things into China, for better or worse, especially their manner and attitude towards China. As you know, they always thought of themselves as superior beings, especially in the larger settlements. You've heard of that Shanghai racetrack? It had a big sign on it that said, "No dogs or Chinamen allowed inside." It was things like that which aggravated the Chinese.

Teiser: Later on I guess China had certain relationships with France and Italy.

Chinn: Yes. Friar Ricci—I've got a book on his activities in China.

American Missionaries in China

Teiser: The influence of missionaries, primarily from America, I suppose, must have been rather strong, too.

Chinn: Yes, but there again, European missionaries got to China first, like the Catholics, the Jesuits. It wasn't until a good century later—not until the 1840s—that the American missionaries went there.

Teiser: Were the American missionaries subsequently quite influential?

Chinn: Very. In fact, they were instrumental, too, in sending individual Chinese over to America to get them to learn more English and to go back to China and help it modernize. I've got considerable material on that, too.

Teiser: I know there is a lot of literature on this, but to put it together, as you do, is very valuable.

XI More on the Printing Trade

Foote, Cone & Belding

Teiser: I was going to begin today with a continuation of your printing industry career, with mention of Foote, Cone, & Belding, the advertising agency.

Chinn: I only got in at the tail end of some of their activities, really. Sperisen was their art director, and he and Gordon Gollan were very close friends, together with Harold Seeger of Johnck & Seeger. When Gollan was over on Clay Street, Harrington's Bar was there, their favorite headquarters. [laughter] I was just a pipsqueak at that time, just starting my Chinn Linotype Company, so in a way you can't blame Gordon for feeling that I was a minor competitor, after a fashion. But anyway, I got to meet these people, and I got along with them, but I didn't know them well, of course, because I was so reluctant to join them in their deliberations in bars.

Teiser: Did you yourself do work for Foote, Cone, & Belding?

Chinn: No, I never did. My relationship with them was more or less social, if you can call it social; since I don't drink, I didn't become much of a pal to any of them. [laughs]

Teiser: In the years between 1950 and the time you retired from the printing business in 1980, what were the most important typesetting facilities in San Francisco?

Chinn: Overall? Gosh, I'm hazy on that.

Teiser: I can pull some of that out of my memory. Gollan was one, and MacKenzie & Harris.

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Patterson & Hall?

Chinn: I never knew them, never had much to do with them.

Linotype vs. Monotype Metals

Chinn: But there were several, including a small linotype firm that was operating at that time. They did some work for Lawton Kennedy, and I had quite a little run-in with Lawton Kennedy because of that. Lawton Kennedy was wanting some monotypes set for a particular book that he wanted to set in a face that only monotype had the typeface for. After the job, just like linotype, the printer has to return the type to us, just like he'd have to return the type to any of

the firms—MacKenzie & Harris and all the others. That type is only on loan from them for the time of the printing; when they're through with it, they could junk it or anything, as long as we got back our linotype metal weight for weight. The only thing about it is that linotype metal is a little bit softer than monotype metal.

Teiser: Oh, I didn't know that.

Chinn: You had to keep them separated. Otherwise, when you start melting them together they're going to get out of balance as far as their density is concerned, and their hardness. Linotype being a little softer, it took less heat to melt down and form them into ingots to hang on your linotype machine. So when we had our metal being processed, the processor says, "I've got to charge you more, because you're mixing up linotype with monotype." Lawton was the only one among our customers who did it in any quantity, and I had to tell him. It was not a serious quarrel; we laughed over it. He said he never knew that, and I said I didn't know either, so there we were. That's one of the little quirks of business that you have to get into to know about. To the average outsider, type is type. [laughs]

Teiser: I remember something about sales tax on metal—whether sales tax should be charged for metal, since it didn't actually change hands. Do you remember such a dispute?

Chinn: Yes, there was such a dispute, but it was only for a very brief time until the typesetters got together and fought it, and they won. It was just a matter of a few years when they tried to put that law into effect. The typesetter's group and the metal

companies fought that, and we won. Either it just started, or it never was put into effect.

Becoming an Expert Linotype Operator

Teiser: I've never asked anyone else what it takes, in general, to be an expert linotype operator, as you were.

Chinn: You have to start in at the very, very basic step, and that is setting type by hand. That is where you learn all the terminology—what a "stick" is, for instance; you handle it where you assemble your type, and from there on you know what spacing is, an "em" or an "en"—

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Chinn: Your handset type is arranged in a certain way, according to the size of the type. The type in the letters "m" and "w" are wider, so you'd need a little larger space to assemble the same number of characters as you would the same number of "i's" and "j's," that take up little space. All of that has to be learned, and the finer elements, such as—

[doorbell rings; tape off]

Chinn: After you became at least familiar with the terminology of printer's type, you could, when the opportunity presented itself, learn how to set type on the linotype machine. In 1935, when I was getting ready to start the *Chinese Digest*, those were the steps I had to take. I went to a high school in Oakland, and I had a lifetime friendship with the foreman of the high school printing shop, a man by the name of Middleton. He taught me a lot of things. He had a storehouse—well, his life was wrapped around the printing shop, so we got along very well, and he taught me a lot of things that the normal high school student wouldn't get. I was a little

bit older than the average high school student, so I was able to absorb more and pay more attention to what he was saying.

Anyway, I learned my handsetting type, the linotype machine—

Teiser: You have to learn the keyboard on the linotype machine, do you not?

Chinn: Yes. That is one frustration that got to me, because I was going to start to learn how to type on a typewriter, and I had just barely got started when at the same time I was learning printing. Suddenly, when I finished handsetting and was getting into the linotype machine, the keyboard was altogether different! For instance, on the linotype machine all of your lowercase letters are on the left side, and all of your capital letters are on the other side. Here you are, working back and forth, and you forget all about your typewriter fingering. It made it difficult, and finally I had to forego the typewriter keyboard and stay with my linotype. I never could use more than the two or three fingers on the typewriter. That's why, when I finally got down to writing my book, *Bridging the Pacific*, I wrote everything out longhand.

[laughs]

Teiser: On the linotype keyboard, then, you learn by touch?

Chinn: Yes, you did, although I was at that time fairly new at it because I had a quickie course in each step of printing. I was never that skillful that I could just take my eyes off the keyboard and go to work.

Teiser: Never in your career?

Chinn: Never in my career. I watched it all the time. Of course, I was pretty good at it, but I never have considered myself as skillful or as capable as a linotype operator who spent his whole lifetime doing nothing but going to work and going home.

Teiser: Were there some people at Gollan's shop who could just look out the window and set type?

Chinn: They could do anything. They could carry on a conversation with you sometimes and keep on working. But that is something that I was not able to do, because every step—from day one when I started the newspaper, when I started my plant—I was not just an operator; I had to do everything. I had to sweep the floor, melt down the metal, finish setting my type. Then I had to make up into pages, and then I had to lock up. Many times I've had to do my own proofreading. It just made for a variety of skills.

Teiser: It must have made you more sensitive to printers' needs.

Chinn: Yes, it made me quite sensitive to printers' needs in that I was in the trade typesetting—in other words my business was keyed to printers and ad agencies, as such, and authors; it was not a

retail business where you can sell something and get rid of it. So I did try to help all of my customers in any way I could, and that is what earned me their continued friendship.

Teiser: Albert Sperisen told me that he knew you were a fine linotype operator because Lawton Kennedy liked your work, and Lawton was very fussy. So whatever lack of familiarity with the keyboard you may have had must have been more than made up for by your carefulness or your intelligence about how things should be set.

Chinn: I've got to confess, that's one reason why I never made much money. I spent a lot of time just trying to help out the customer. I am just astounded that so many printers don't have a basic education, enough to know, for instance, to compose an invitation for a special type of wedding, an engagement announcement, or things like that. They bring it to you and say, "Here is So-and-So, who is going to be engaged to So-and-So at such-and-such a time. Will you put together something for me?" And you do it. If you didn't do it, they'd have to bring it to a friend of somebody who would do it for them, and when they'd bring it to you, you'd find errors in it. In my business then, the minute I knew I had to do something like that, I went to a source, one of these technical bookstores, where I could get a book and find out about it. Over a period of time it becomes second nature. I'm especially thankful for having been editor of the *Chinese Digest*, because it gave me a variety of situations where I had to learn every facet of not only setting type, but how to do it correctly.

Teiser: You saw the operation through to its end.

Chinn: To its very end.

Teiser: I thank you for explaining what it takes to be a good linotype operator, and I'm sure there's more to it than that.

The Mechanics of Linotype Equipment

Teiser: Did you have to learn something about the mechanics of your equipment?

Chinn: Oh, absolutely.

Teiser: Did you do repairs?

Chinn: All minor repairs we did. We used all the rubber bands and all the clips to temporarily fix minor problems, but for major problems we had to call in a regular linotype repairman.

Teiser: They are very complicated machines. I just can't imagine the effort that went into inventing the linotype.

Chinn: That is something that is altogether fantastic. It's one of the things that has never been improved upon from the basic arrangement, up until the time it was phased out, and it took computers to do that. It was a marvel. Well, you can imagine—today, in most foreign countries of small size, they still prefer the linotype machine to anything else. They can't keep up with computers; they don't have technicians who go over there and teach them how to operate them and maintain them. But any little out of the way country has a linotype machine of one type or another, or has a record going back to its heyday when it first came into their country, so they know how to operate it.

Teiser: I suppose a mechanical device is easier to understand than an electronic one.

Chinn: Oh, definitely. Electronics pose not only the problem of trying to fix them, but of trying to get replacement parts.

XII Community Service

Foreman, Civil Grand Jury, San Francisco, 1983-1984

Teiser: Maybe I should ask you right here about your service on the grand jury in San Francisco. Was it federal or city?

Chinn: City and County of San Francisco.

Teiser: It was 1983-84, and you were foreman. How did you happen to be selected for service on the grand jury?

Chinn: One of my good friends was at that time Superior Court Judge Harry Low, who has now gone up to the court of appeals, and he has been considered for a position on the state supreme court. He's been a good friend of mine for a long time. When he was first being considered for municipal judge, it was way back in the late fifties when he first got out of college and was assistant attorney general for the state—one of the many, many assistants. He worked at the office of Pat Brown [Governor Edmund G., Sr.], who later became governor of California. Someone appointed Harry Low for consideration into a judgeship, and the first step, of course, is as municipal judge. That was a tough one, because you have to get the first step before you can start going up the ladder.

I was one of the several people whom he asked to write a letter recommending him for the job. At that time I was very happy to do so, even though I didn't know him quite that well. That developed our friendship, in spite of the gap between us; he was and always has been a Democrat, and I've always been a applicant for a judgeship. [laughs] He was always a fair-minded judge and a very well-liked person, even today. All the different

facets of different parties—he overcame most of that by being friends with everybody. He's fair-minded, but he's firm.

It was much later, in 1982 or so, that he tried to talk me into being on the grand jury. I said, "I'm so busy," and he said, "That's why we want you, because you are busy. We don't want people who have nothing to do. I know you will make a good one." So I said okay, and he sent in my name. I was one of those chosen for jury duty. When I got in, I was one of the nineteen jurors. I started out as a juror, but the man chosen as foreman liked me. I never knew him before we met at the grand juror's choosing. He had looked over my resume when I was being considered for a grand jury position, and he liked it. So he said, "I would like you to be my assistant."

When our turn came up, he served for two or three weeks; we met every Monday. Suddenly he had to go on vacation, and he said to me, "Will you take over for me? I'll be gone for three weeks," so I took over for three weeks. He hadn't done anything to set up the system—what we were to do and so forth—so I worked with the secretary who was appointed, and we set everything up. When he came back, he took over for another couple of weeks. Finally he came in one day and said, "My doctor won't let me continue, and I've submitted your name as the one I would choose for the foreman of the grand jury." I said, "If you can continue, I'll be glad to help you out all I can and fill in for you. Why don't you do that?" He said, "My doctor says I cannot continue."

So to make a long story short, he submitted my name to the Superior Court judge, John Ertola. I was interviewed and finally appointed. I only actually became foreman for the last eight months of the term that he started, but his name never appeared; my name appeared for that entire period of '83-'84.

Teiser: What were the primary subjects that you considered?

Chinn: All civil cases, all civil problems that we wanted to delve into. Prior to the past couple of decades, there was only one grand jury. Then it became so burdensome, because not only did we have to work on civil cases, but we had to work on criminal cases. Finally the judges decided to split it and have one grand jury for civil cases and one for criminal. I served on the civil; I didn't have to touch any criminal cases, which would be more in the area of those familiar with law and order, like lawyers and so forth.

We checked into the complaints of ordinary citizens. Basically, that is why the grand jury was formed. Somebody had to be a watchdog on our government servants.

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Teiser: Was there any kind of complaint that predominated?

Chinn: There were all kinds of them, but one of them concerned the municipal railroad, and we delved into that.

Teiser: What was the accusation?

Chinn: Well, it was just not efficient. We had to look into prisons, too, as well as Muni [San Francisco Municipal Railway]—how well they were serving the public, whether they were understaffed or overstaffed, whether there was any overlapping of duties, and so forth. Grand juries, as a rule, make all of their recommendations towards the end of their term, as you know, summing up their work. For all the good it does, the only thing I can say for it is that it makes government workers aware that somebody is looking over their shoulders. But we were never able adequately to address the problem of being able to effect corrections in the system. That is one thing that has always nagged me, but unless you want to make a project out of it and go into that line of work, you're not going to get anywhere. You have to keep on hammering on government bureaucracy.

Teiser: I see. None of the problems you attacked have been resolved?

Chinn: I rarely saw any great amount of improvement, where the recommendations of grand juries were adopted and put into use—very, very seldom.

Teiser: What a lot of wasted effort.

Chinn: That's what frustrates many of us. But when you get people who are busy and who have their own business, and they know they are just trying to do their civic duty and serve their term, unless you are dedicated enough to forego your business and come out and get the public to be aware of it and get the media to publish the problems of it, you're just another Ralph Nader without any other cause.

Teiser: Is there a better way?

Chinn: I don't know. They've tried different ways. Before the last two decades they never even had a watchdog on the police department. Any citizen's complaint about the police—either roughing them up or false arrest, or whatever it is—is taken to this particular committee that is appointed by the mayor, and they look into it. Those are your watchdog committees, and you need a paid staff to

do all that work. For a grand jury to be that effective, it would take tons of money.

Teiser: Still, as you say, it does make people aware that somebody is watching.

Chinn: Oh, yes. That's about all you can say for it. And it is mandatory that they have a grand jury, so they've carried it forth and spent a certain amount of money to set up the system. They pay us the grand sum of $6 per meeting, which doesn't even pay for an hour's work in your business.

Teiser: I'm sure it's a good thing for a good citizen to do.

Chinn: Yes. Unfortunately, not a lot of people want to do it. But I've been thankful to Harry, because I feel that I have done my part—at least tried to do my best. We made a few friends out of our association with members of the grand jury during my year.

Committee for the Celebration of San Francisco's Birthday

Teiser: Have you done any volunteer work for the city and county, other than in connection with the historical society?

Chinn: For the past thirty years I've been on the mayor's Committee for the Celebration of San Francisco's Birthday. I've been on that committee in spite of all the changes in mayors over the years. I think I was appointed in the early fifties (more than thirty years!). It's something that only comes up once a year, but I've been faithful in doing that.

Teiser: You must know Mrs. Applegarth.

Chinn: Yes, she's a friend of mine. Her mother, Laura Bride Powers, was the founder of that committee. Four years ago I received the Laura Bride Powers Award for outstanding community service or something. So I've done my part.

You know Al [Albert] Shumate, a very good friend of mine. When he was appointed chairman of the history committee for San Francisco's twin bicentennial, during our nation's bicentennial, he appointed me onto his committee. So I was on the committee at the same time that he served during that bicentennial, 1976.

Teiser: Did you know Laura Bride Powers herself?

Chinn: No, I never did. She was not alive when I started.

Historical Preservation of Chinatowns

Teiser: Are there other civic or state groups that you've served upon?

Chinn: Not directly. Indirectly—let me put it this way: various Chinatowns living or past, had certain problems. A little Chinese town along the Sacramento River which I've mentioned before, Locke, had a lot of problems. The Chinese started that particular little town, and somehow or other they got into a bind because the land was lent to them by a rancher up there. It was called Lockeport at one time; the owner's name was Locke, so they called it Lockeport, but later this town was called Locke. He allowed them to stay there indefinitely, but if he wanted them out, they had to get out. He allowed them to build on the property, and they built a little town.

After a period of years he passed away and his descendants took over, and they wanted to sell it. The Chinese resisted, having been there for so many decades, since shortly after the turn of the century in 1915. Sacramento oversaw that portion of the township, and it was the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency that handled that part of it at that time. The director of that agency asked the Chinese Historical Society if they would come and verify the needs and requirements—in other words, to see if they deserved to remain where they were, or if they should receive redevelopment funds for putting in a new sewer system, for instance, a water system, and an electrical system that was deteriorating and going to pot. They needed a lot of money to fix it up. There were no streets, as such, just wooden planks.

At that time I became the chairman of the Chinese Historical Society committee that went up there to survey the town and look it over. My committee's recommendation to the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency was that the Agency restore basic needs of the oldest all-Chinese town in the country, that the town that had been written up in many newspapers and magazines and had added much to the history of the area remain as such for the dwindling and aging residents of Locke.

Little things like that are all volunteer work. I don't know if you'd call it civic duty or not, but it was an offshoot of it. We did a lot of that, and not only for Locke. When our Chinese Historical Society got started, little individual places, whether they were Chinese or whether they were Caucasians who were friends

of the Chinese who wanted our help to get historic status for Chinese buildings or grave sites and so forth, they would ask us to look into it. The only ones before us were Caucasian people who occasionally did this or that, with or without any background or being capable of verifying certain aspects of historic requests. Ours became the first, and we were much in demand.

Have you ever heard of Fiddletown? They have a Chinese herb store there, and an American Caucasian group wanted that made a historic monument because there were no other historic monuments in their area, and [chuckles] they wanted to do it. They liked it; it was one of those old adobe, pounded earth buildings. They wrote to us and wanted us to go up there and study the building, the artifacts in it, and the Chinese writing that was all over the place. Well, this was another one, so we trotted up.

We've been going every year to different places to verify, to authenticate, or to help out the sponsor in writing letters and things like that. I've been among those that for ten or fifteen years, almost twenty years, have done that, until I figured I'd have to pass it on to the younger people. We've had to put certain limitations on it, because we're all volunteers, and when we go to these places we pay our own way; we pay our own gas, and if we stay overnight we pay ourselves. We don't get reimbursed for that.

Teiser: It's a very fine activity, though, for your organization.

Chinn: Even today no one gets paid. It's a labor of love, you might say.

Teiser: Is it the aim of your organization to preserve what the Chinese have done in California?

Chinn: We're trying to preserve history, and that was my goal ever since I was a youngster.

Board Member, California Historical Society

Teiser: How long were you on the California Historical Society board? You were elected in 1981.

Chinn: It was 1981-84.

Teiser: What was going on in the society then?

Chinn: They've always been strapped for money.

Teiser: Who was director then?

Chinn: It was right after James Holliday left. I can't remember.

Teiser: Were you there when Holliday left?

Chinn: Part of that time.

Teiser: There was a good deal of a row about that, wasn't there?

Chinn: Yes, but I followed that; I wasn't involved in any row. [laughs]

Teiser: Did you try, then, to redefine the aims of the society?

Chinn: I couldn't. I was talked into going on the board of trustees; they solicited me for a long time. I told them, "You should be getting some more prominent people in, since you're so strapped for money. I don't have any money; I'm not a big donor who can afford to do that, so if you can get somebody else, go ahead and do it." But I think they needed a diversity of minority representation in there, and they felt that they wanted me. Finally I agreed for one term. When I got in, then the solicitations started again, and it finally wound up that I had to donate some money into it. Then every time you have a meeting, you pay for your own lunch. Wherever you went or whatever you did, it was the same thing.

Even in a prestigious organization like that, I saw so much petty politics. It was almost as if—well, I was on the board, but "keep your comments to yourself," more or less. It was that attitude, sort of. So it wasn't anything that was very congenial, like you were working together as a group, where you are all volunteers and nobody gets paid for anything; in fact, you are paying into it. But you still have different levels of acceptance, let's say. [chuckles] It was an experience.

Teiser: Lawton Kennedy used to look back on its beginning years, when it was run by a group of very dedicated people, and it wasn't big and didn't take in a lot of money. I guess all organizations change. Did your experience in the Chinese Historical Society serve any good purpose when you worked in the California Historical Society?

Chinn: There was nothing in the California Historical Society that we did not try to do in the Chinese Historical Society. [laughter] For a long, long time we were a united group that happily paid

our own way and worked together.

Awards from the Conference of Historical Societies

Teiser: I see you twice received awards of merit from the Conference of Historical Societies. Have you given papers at their meetings?

Chinn: We've always been represented there; we've always tried to make the annual meetings, and if we had any news we wrote in about it for their paper. If they wanted anyone up in Chinatown, or anything about Chinese affairs, they'd call up and ask us, and we would work with them in every way possible. I've always made myself available for all that, but any of those awards I've never solicited; they just came.

Teiser: Well, I suppose your work was known and outstanding.

Chinn: I don't know. Sometimes I think my family thinks I'm crazy for going out and doing so much of this work.

Chinese Community Organizations

Chinn: I must say, in all fairness, even though it's a slap in the face for the Chinese community, that when you belong to one group—not only organizations, but church or religious groups—your focus and your activities generally evolve around that particular group first, naturally, if you are a member. As a boy, I was always active in the very beginning in the Boy Scouts and with the Chinese YMCA, and between those groups there was no competition; the Boy Scouts are the Boy Scouts, and the YM is the YM, and you worked your heart out for them. In church groups you become a volunteer teaching Sunday School, or attending church, attending choir practice, attending young people's meetings, you help out the church in any way you can.

But we also have an annual meeting of all the Chinese churches because, going back to the early days of the Chinese in San Francisco, when the Chinese passed away they were buried here. Before Colma, they were buried wherever there was vacant land. There were quite a number of Chinese burials up at Lone Mountain, a University of San Francisco area now. Even though a lot of these gravesites and remains were shipped back to China, there were still remnants of these Chinese, even well after the turn of the century, who were buried in San Francisco. They considered this their home, so their remains were never shipped back to China.

Those people had to be buried in their own cemeteries, because no other cemetery would accept Chinese in those early days. But it's hard for any one group to have a cemetery, and then another group to have one somewhere else, so that's when the church groups got together and decided we would have a Christian cemetery, for instance. That is how they all got together. But then it came to a question of money and the amount of dedicated volunteer work each group would contribute in handling certain things. Each one wanted to say, "I am the chairman of the church cemetery committee," or whatever, and they would start fighting with each other in an underhanded way, not physically. The same thing with Chinese organizations, the same thing

with the tongs. Of course, things have simmered down considerably in the last few decades.

Family Associations

Chinn: In the beginning there were no such things as fighting tongs; it was just group and family associations who looked after their people. The Chinese were always leery of organizations like the Salvation Army, which was never strong enough in those early days to really have a kitchen to take care of hungry people. The family association, if it was very small, might be a store operated by, say, the Chinns, and all the other Chinns that were down on their luck would go to them.

Also, in the early days, how do you think that the Chinese in China, who had sent their eldest son or sons or fathers to America to earn money to send back for survival at home in China, communicated with them? They wrote, but where did they send it? He's moving around to different places trying to find work, and the letter is written in Chinese, so how could the post office here handle it? That's among the problems on why the family associations came into being. The one who came over here from China would find his group, tell them that his name was Chinn, and that he came from such-and-such a village in China. "Is it all right for them to write to your address, and have you hold the letter for me?" Of course, because sooner or later this person is going to need supplies, and he is going to buy them from his store association. That is the reward for receiving his mail.

Teiser: He'll buy supplies from another member?

Chinn: Yes. As these family associations grew stronger, they would say, "We'll buy this building—" or, in the very early days, "We'll

erect this building to take care of our less fortunate brethren." Inside of that building—which would be called, for example, the Chinn Family Association Building—on the very top floor—

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Chinn: —there would be a little altar where the members could pray. There is a large meeting hall where the Chinn Family Association members have annual, quarterly, or monthly meetings, depending on the agenda—whether they have a lot of things to discuss. Somewhere, above or below, would be a floor devoted to little bunks where these men who can't find jobs can stay. There is a community kitchen where enough food is prepared for the number of people they have there, and they feed these people free of charge.

In other words, each family association took care of their own. There were never any beggars or homeless Chinese in this country in the early days before social services came into being; we always took care of our own.

Teiser: Do you belong to a Chinn family association?

Chinn: I'm automatically a member of the Chinn family association, but I don't pay dues because I don't plan on using their facilities or going there. Their type of people are those who speak Chinese and gather together to play mah jong or different things, and I haven't got time for a lot of that socializing. They've never asked me for money; they've never needed money, because on the ground floor of each building there may be a store or a couple of stores that are rented, and their income is derived in part from that source, and then from the members who are willing

to pay dues. We who do not contribute do not expect any assistance from them.

Teiser: Have you avoided other organizations, too?

Chinn: Well, they fight against each other. Not physically, but each one is competing against the other, trying to uplift their clan group or for whatever reason. Once a member, you are expected to devote time to it. One of my main reasons for not joining is because everything is conducted in Chinese.

Board Member, Chinatown Neighborhood Center

Teiser: When you were on the board of directors of the Chinatown Neighborhood Center in 1982—

Chinn: That is a different situation. They belong to a nonprofit group. Nonprofit groups are a new American type of organization in Chinatown. They have come into being only in the past generation or so, since the 1960s, I would say. They are doing a marvelous job of taking care of all the new immigrants, all the people who need help in learning the English language, who don't get it from our schools; these are the older people who work and have to learn language and culture later, after work. Also, in order to survive, these organizations have to come out for grants; you need grants, you need money to survive, which is fine. I would like to help, but I haven't got that many hands. I already belong to too many organizations, and they all want is for you to join. But each time you join, you're expected to be involved in some of their activities, or you're obligated to donate money.

So they're all competing for grants from the same foundations, the same government sources. I have tried to steer clear of any of that and have done the same thing with the churches, as I mentioned. Any Chinese group (and I hate to say this) is just like a group of Irishmen who can never work together, a group of Hebrews who can never work together. We say a group of Chinese can never work together for the same reason. [laughs] So I've kept myself clear of any involvement where there is a chance of conflict or competition, one group against another. I'd rather work with the historical group, my Boy Scout troop, and my YMCA. These are my long-time associations.

Yoke Choy Club

Chinn: I also belonged to a club that started a long time ago, in 1921, that still survives today. It's now a friendship group, called the Yoke Choy Club. (You'll find it in my *Bridging the Pacific*.) It had three main objectives: music, athletics, and church. Now, none of these aims are used—just social affairs.

Teiser: What kind of music?

Chinn: First, bear in mind that Yoke choy Club and Square and Circle Club are American-type organizations; language, minutes, and correspondence are all in English. Generally the music is not

operatic but mainly popular music. We used to have quartets and choral groups, light operettas. I was not one of the founders of the Yoke Choy Club because I was only twelve years old in 1921, so I was not eligible yet. My wife's Square and Circle Club (which is also in my book) was started in 1924, and she was fourteen when she joined that and was one of the seven founders. They still meet monthly, with no summer vacations, and they still raise money every year for community service.

Teiser: I hope to ask her about that when I interview her.

Next time I'll ask you about your book, *Bridging the Pacific*.

XIII The Creation of *Bridging the Pacific*

Focus and Scope of the Book

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Teiser: I have here a book Mr. Chinn has loaned to me, about the first Chinese students to go to American schools. The binder's title is *China's First Hundred*, by Thomas E. Lafargue. His introduction is dated Pullman, Washington, February 3, 1942.

Chinn: I think one of my former research students left the book for me.

Teiser: I'd like to ask today for an account of your creation of your book, *Bridging the Pacific*, which was published by the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1989. It has been a notable success, hasn't it?

Chinn: Well, it's the first one that has come out regarding the second and succeeding generation Chinese in America in depth.

Teiser: It's subtitle is "San Francisco Chinatown and its People," but you've gone a little afield.

Chinn: I've had to, to be able to bring the reader into why certain things happened that led into it. Actually, so far as I know, I have not seen any stories on the Chinese who were born in this country. Their parents were born in China, came over here, and these are the first generation of children born in America. Yet, they were lumped together with the immigrants from China, their parents, and no distinction was made between first generation or second generation Chinese; they were just Chinese—or Chinamen, as they used to call them. [chuckles] These Chinese had to suffer through all the things that happened to their parents or grandparents, regardless of the fact that they had never set foot

in China; they were just as much excluded from all of the activities outside of Chinatown.

That was the focus of my book, but I had to bring in other things because there was an overlap. A lot of these immigrants from China brought very young children over with them; maybe some of them were only two or three years old. For all intents and purposes, these children never had any recollection of their homeland, so I've included many of their stories because I consider them just as much Chinese-Americans as those born over here.

Research Base Provided by Chinese Historical Society

Chinn: I never thought I'd have a chance to write a book. I always thought I would only be able to research and record and maintain a file for future generations of Chinese historians to write about our experiences. But over the years no one has succeeded in doing that. Just like prior to 1962 there was no Chinese historical society as such in America that has lived beyond a few months, so I finally decided I would invite four friends of mine to join me in founding the Chinese Historical Society of America. A lot of people say that's wonderful, and a lot of other Chinese Chinatowns have since asked us to help them organize a Chinese historical society. We've said we'd be glad to, but we don't want to run it; we'll advise you as much as you want. There have been several Chinese historical groups founded, like in Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, and in between.

Creation of Syllabus on Chinese in California

Chinn: Founding the Chinese Historical Society in 1963 also did a lot of other things that brought out the Chinese-American experience. When we started this society, we had no home until a Chinese foundation gave us one and we were able to install a very small museum. From the very beginning various segments of the American public at large were writing letters to us, asking for information about Chinese-American history. Educators, professors, researchers—they were all coming to us, and, being a volunteer group with no paid staff, we answered them to the best of our ability. Finally, the requests got to be so numerous that we decided we had better do something about it, so I organized a seminar. That seminar was the result of quite a number of our

educational professors who wanted us to have such a seminar so they could come and be able to talk to us and have an interchange of ideas.

So in 1969 we held a seminar in Chinatown, and several hundred people came from all over California, and some from further away. Because of that seminar, I invited two younger members of the society, who had never written anything or done very much in Chinese-American history, to join me in editing the syllabus, *A History of the Chinese in California*. That was a syllabus that has been used, and has gone through six printings and is still quite popular and is in demand.

Membership of the Chinese Historical Society

Teiser: A question comes to mind. You started by speaking of Chinese-Americans who, even if they happened to have been born in China, were essentially Americans. Were your colleagues in these efforts mainly Chinese-Americans? Were the others who worked with you to start the Chinese Historical Society of America and these others mostly American-born?

Chinn: No, they were not, and we wouldn't have it any other way than to have it be an open society, an open organization. We had many Chinese scholars from China who couldn't speak decent English; we had Caucasian members. I don't know whether you know it or not, but before the Chinese Historical Society was founded I had been going very often to libraries to get hold of any material that I could find there that I didn't already have. One of my main sources was

going up to the Special Collections Department of the San Francisco Public Library, and you know who was in charge of that—Gladys Hansen. Even prior to that time I had known her just from her assisting me in locating certain materials and so forth.

She always asked me, "What are you going to do with all this information you're accumulating?" I have always said in answer to her that sooner or later somebody's got to make use of it. There was no such thing as a historical society, there was no such thing as Chinese writing in depth about their own experiences in this country. She said, "Well, why don't you start one." I said, "I'm a working man. I've got a family to support. I don't have any money to start anything that would be significant." She said, "Start it anyway. Others will help you out." I asked, "Will you help me out?" And she said, "Sure."

She was the one who finally gave me the push to start the historical society, and I held her to her promise. I said, "Okay, I'm going to do it, but you'll have to give me a hand." And she did. I invited her to become a member of the board of directors, and she held that job for several years. From that I think that you'll understand that when you ask me if it is just Chinese-Americans who belong to the Chinese Historical Society, I will answer now that I could not restrict it solely to Chinese-Americans; we had to make it something where everyone could contribute something. There are a lot of people, not necessarily Chinese-Americans, not necessarily even Chinese, who have a lot of information—like Thomas Lafargue; I didn't know about that until I got into his book, *China's First Hundred*.

Historical Source Materials

Chinn: The important thing is that not necessarily does every Chinese-American know how to read, write, or even speak Chinese. So here we are, a society carrying on all of our transactions—records and research materials—in English, and yet the great preponderance of any material about Chinese-American history, if any existed, was written by the Chinese pioneers who first came to this country, and they didn't know any English. But they wrote in Chinese about whatever experiences they had, whatever money they received, their number of trips back to China, the number of children they had, and all those little frustrations that are more personal history between husband and wife or between families and their sons over here. If we Chinese-Americans who couldn't read or write Chinese couldn't understand what that paper was, we wouldn't have anything.

Teiser: Isn't there an opportunity for a bilingual scholar to search out, in China, accounts of American experiences by people who came and returned to China?

Chinn: There probably would be a lot of them, if somebody had the financial resources to allow such researchers to go back and do it. Because you're not going to go into every village and start looking around for people without any leads. Traveling around is very frustrating. You don't know what is authentic and what is not.

Teiser: One of the sources for historical material has been the writings of people who visited from other countries; there's literature in Britain on Italy in certain periods, and in France on Italy in certain periods, and so forth. This business of travelers coming

home and wanting to write a book—I wonder if there were any books in China telling about these people's experiences?

Chinn: I think you will find out that there is less than one-tenth of one-one hundredth of one percent of the Chinese in China who had the resources to come over here to visit for the sake of visiting. Outside of that small handful who controlled large sums of—

Teiser: You said that when you as a boy returned to your parents' village, you found people who had been here to live and then returned.

Chinn: Well, those are the laborers who came over here, just like my grandfather and my father; they came over here from China to make money, but they were only sojourners. They were not going to stay here; they were going to go back to China.

Teiser: Do you think, when they returned to China, they ever wrote about their experiences?

Chinn: We are finding occasional individual families that might have saved material, but the descendants of these people who went back to China to live after coming over here—and that's over 150 years ago—never thought that any of that written material was important. Other materials, like souvenirs, cups and saucers, American knives and forks, were probably saved. But written material? They couldn't care less, because the one who came over here had passed away, and none of the others had any money to come over here, so they wouldn't keep those things. We've had so many of our friends who, since we started recognizing mainland China—that's not too long ago, you know—can't find anything. They've tried.

Teiser: Partly I suppose it was because there was not a high degree of literacy.

Chinn: Of course not, not at all. Prior to this modern age, the last couple of generations, there was no one who was that literate. They all have an understanding of it; in their own village they have the elders who try and teach them, but that is barely enough to communicate.

Literacy Among Chinese Immigrants

Teiser: I was looking at your list of Chinese newspapers here in *Bridging the Pacific*, and I was amazed because a lot of the people must have been able to read newspapers.

Chinn: Yes, but when did they start? These newspapers only started around the turn of the century. Prior to that time, you'd get a Chinese laborer over here, and about three-quarters of them couldn't read or write. That's why they have what we call Chinese letter writers. I'll bring you a painting of a professional Chinese letter writer. All these Chinese laborers, if they got letters from home they'd bring it to this letter writer, and he would read it off to them. The funny thing is that a lot of people don't realize that the letter from home was also not written by the family but by some literate person who helped them write the letter. It's sent over here, and then has to be translated again for the recipient. These are some of the problems that we have encountered that probably many other immigrants have not experienced. Most of the Europeans are literate in their own language.

The main problem, as far as I'm concerned, is the fact that in the early days, from the 1850s when so much antagonism started to accumulate against the Chinese until almost World War

II, there was not that much incentive for us to really get into any great amount of maintaining a history. There was just the fact that you wanted to make a living, and that was all.

Oral Traditions in China

Teiser: How did news circulate for people who were not literate? How did they know what was going on around them?

Chinn: By hearsay, by friends, or sometimes by friends of a friend of a friend—just like gossip. They would trace it from one step to another. In the beginning, the first Chinese who came over here during the Gold Rush were from Kwangtung province in South China, the only port where foreigners were allowed to trade and have intercourse in China. That spot was designated by the emperor, and was where all the ships, both from Europe and from America, had to land to do trading. That's where news of the Gold Rush in California was first received in China.

Yet, South China was the last bastion of resistance against the Mongols and the Tartars and the invaders who came into China during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. So these people kept going farther and farther south to get away from the invaders, and they kept getting into areas where the land was so sparse and unable to be cultivated that a flood or something like that would wipe them out and they would have famine, or

bandits would come in, and warlords later on, and so forth. They were desperate to try and make a living for their families, and that is why they were willing to spend a year or two going abroad, like coming over here during the Gold Rush. They had to hock everything they had, or the village might even put together enough money, a little bit here and there, to send one or two of their sons to represent them over here in California to make enough money to send back there to repay those obligations. That's how it was all the way through. In the beginning they were all common laborers or fortune hunters—anything to make a living. A little later, contractors lent money to those who wanted to come to California.

Teiser: To go back to how information was circulated, there was never anything equivalent to the English town crier?

Chinn: In China we wouldn't have a town crier as such, but there would be the elders of the village, which is the basic foundation of Chinese community living, except in your larger cities and metropolitan areas like Beijing, Tiensin, Shanghai, and so forth. But you get outside of these larger areas—just like outside of San Francisco you get your small towns and your tiny villages; it's the same way. Always, no matter what, as long as there is a grouping of so many families living together in a community, there are one or two acknowledged leaders that everyone looked to for help.

Teiser: Did they then tell people what they learned about what was going on?

Chinn: They must have. They would tell each other what they could, but financial matters they would keep to themselves. Because if you kept on saying, "I've got so much money," and "I get money regularly," and here were another two or three families who never heard from their offspring, you'd develop friction there. One family would say, "They're getting a steady source of income, and they may or may not share any of that income with us by giving us a few dollars here and there." If you're up against it and just barely making it, you have no dollars to distribute.

Secrecy, Thievery, and Trust in China

Teiser: I wonder if the kind of Chinese you've been speaking of feel threatened because they are so close to the subsistence line.

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Chinn: That's all the more reason they would be secretive about whatever they have. If word got out that here was a person who was tabbed as a miser, or a family that is getting some source of income and nobody knows how, then sooner or later you'd find that family subject to burglary or something more serious.

Teiser: I'm asking you things about China, really, but only as a source of tradition in this country. Was there in the nineteenth century, say, a great deal of robbery and burglary in China?

Chinn: Everywhere you go, all those below the level of city or town officials, or anyone who has a steady source of income, are struggling. You see, China was never considered a rich country with manufacturing facilities, production facilities enough to export some of their goods, excepting silk, of course; that was started early. Outside of silk and a few other minor exotic items, the ground was all that was left to the rest of the people, to till or starve. In an average village in the interior—not anywhere near the coast—where they cannot travel the distance to the more populous areas, you will not find any employer, anyone willing to hire someone to work for them, because there just are no manufacturing facilities, and also no trust. They never developed that to any great extent.

Teiser: Trust between people?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Was there much thievery?

Chinn: Not only thievery, but that's what led to beheading, which was so common centuries back, and even as late as 150 years ago—even until 1911, when monarchy was disposed of and China became a republic.

Teiser: Was there a higher standard of living later?

Chinn: Well, it was a more democratic country, but there was also, like every new struggling regime, a lot of turmoil, a lot of politics, a lot of factions that were fighting each other for the power of leading the country.

Teiser: But did low-level crime drop?

Chinn: Low level crime of every conceivable type has always existed, not only in China but in every country, I understand. During the Communists' early reign, before the last generation or so—thirty years ago—you'll find that there was a lot of thievery, a lot of burglary. It was not too uncommon for a thief to be flogged for

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the first offense; after the second time he was caught he was probably beaten up pretty badly. But if you became a habitual criminal, they would start cutting off your hands, because they had to establish a deterrent; if you burglarize or steal; your hands will be cut off. That was the only deterrent for more serious and greater crimes of the same type.

Teiser: Do you think the immigrants from the Orient since World War II— those who came through Hong Kong and so forth—brought with them a lot of illegal activity, a lot of stealing?

Chinn: I'm sure they did. That's been proven time and time again. You read it even in the American newspapers. It's not uncommon, and wasn't even in the early days. I had a whole cardboard box full of court cases (I gave them away; I shouldn't have, but I didn't have any more room). This was a file case, dumped as garbage from a court in Marin County, of cases of Chinese against Chinese— robbery, small criminal acts of every kind. It showed up even among those early Chinese people who came over here; there were some criminals among them.

Crime in Chinatown

Teiser: Do you think, just taking San Francisco's Chinatown as a neighborhood, that there was a higher crime rate there than in the city as a whole?

Chinn: [laughs] Let me expand on that a minute. The American newspapers, prior to World War II, have always extolled the Chinese as being a model community, having less crime, less juvenile delinquency, less truancy, higher literacy attainment than any other community. That goes not just for the city or for California, but nationally. I think that's been brought out many, many times.

Teiser: But in Chinatown, where the new immigrants came—

Chinn: Oh, yes, since they've opened up the immigration laws for the Chinese and did away with the exclusion laws, you get all kinds of people coming in. But that doesn't mean that the Chinese were always that law-abiding. Even as early as those Gold Rush days they were importing prostitutes, and throughout all the period that the Chinese have lived, whether it's in China or here in America—to this day, gambling is one of the vices they have. They say, "That's between ourselves; we pay off our debts. We're not hurting anybody but ourselves." It's true, gambling is illegal, but the Chinese do it. Prostitution, to a small extent,

still exists. You've heard of cases where Taiwan sent over girls to attend dancing schools, but when they got here they were solicited as prostitutes.

Opium Problem

Teiser: Then there was the opium problem. I don't suppose we even considered it illegal.

Chinn: It used to be very, very bad, too, among the Chinese. To a great extent this was true of your early laborers, especially on the Central Pacific [Railroad]. A lot of Chinese smoked opium at night, but they only smoked it for relaxation from their hard labors, and they did not do it to excess; they smoked just enough to get to sleep, and the next morning they'd be back to work. That was their method of relaxing.

Teiser: I notice that in *Bridging the Pacific* you reprinted a Bishop directory of 1876, and I saw that in the classified section there was one opium dealer.

Chinn: That's right. Opium was not illegal then. The selling of it was legal up until shortly before the turn of the century. That was nothing that was considered really bad. It was considered

something that helped for medical purposes and so forth.

Teiser: That wouldn't fall into the category of crime?

Chinn: No, no.

Gambling

Teiser: So far as gambling is concerned, I wish I had kept a couple of the lottery stubs that I noticed when I walked through Chinatown in the forties.

Chinn: Oh, that's common. You can get hold of some of those even today, if you wish. All you have to do is go over the Reno, Nevada, and they call it Keno. [laughter]

Teiser: Lotteries were flourishing quite openly then.

Chinn: Now Reno has gotten to the point where they have adopted most of the Chinese gambling games. They publicize it in Chinatown, and in Chinatown whole busloads sometimes go up there to play these games.

Teiser: Yes, I see a lot of people waiting for a bus in front of a little travel agency in Chinatown.

Chinn: That's right. There are at least three or four—they don't call them travel agencies; they represent certain gambling establishments, like Harold's Club. You buy your bus fare to and from, and when you get up there they practically reimburse you for your bus fare by giving you various chits to play in their casinos. They always make out, because they still maintain them.

Teiser: Oh, I'm sure people bring money and leave it. I always thought it would be fun to go on one of those. [laughter] I don't think the other travelers would like to have me.

Chinn: I don't think many of us are that big a gambler.

Decision to Write *Bridging the Pacific*

Teiser: I want to go back to *Bridging the Pacific*. You explain the idea of the Chinese Historical Society and Gladys Hansen's part in it, but how did you decide to write a book on this subject?

Chinn: I had always entertained the idea that if someone approached me and wanted me to write a book, and I thought that person was sincere enough in his attempt to do so, I would have assisted him or her. But I never had the idea that I would write a book, because I have never been a rich person.

One day in 1985 I received a phone call from the president of the Empress of China restaurant. His name is Kee Joon. He was calling me from Burlingame, where he and a bunch of his friends were having a banquet at a new restaurant he had started down there. It used to be called Kee Joon's, until he retired. He said, "I'm here having a bunch of guests, and some of them are from Hong Kong whom I've known for many, many years from my school days. I have a person I want you to meet and show him Chinatown, especially your Chinese Historical Society museum. He's very interested in it." I said, "Sure, have him get in touch with me." He said, "I'll let you speak to him, and you make the arrangements with him right now."

So he presented this person, a Mr. J. S. Lee, to me, over the phone, and we agreed to meet in Chinatown in a few days. I took him up to Chinatown and showed him the museum. The biggest thing that shocked me from the very beginning, from our very first meeting, was the fact that before he left the society he had bought a copy of every book we had on Chinese-American history, and it was close to a hundred dollars worth of books he had bought; he had a great big armful of them. I didn't think too much about it; I thought "Gee, he must read a lot and like that subject." I didn't think anything more of it, but I had made a friend, evidently.

A couple of months later, when he came to San Francisco again, I got a phone call from him. He said, "I'd like to get together with you." I said fine, and when we got together and had lunch, he said, "Do you know that my grandfather and my father used to live over here? My grandfather worked over here as a cigar manufacturer's laborer—he rolled up cigars. Then my father went to public school here." I said, "Oh, that's nice." And he said, "I can't find any trace of them, and maybe you can find out something for me." I said, "I'll try, but it's very tough. I want you to know that all the records of San Francisco were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire, as you know, so that makes it likely that there won't be any records that I can trace"—which proved true; I never did find anything concrete for him.

The next thing he said was more stunning.

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Chinn: He told me he had a business in Hong Kong. I said, "That's nice," and didn't think much more of it. He said, "I have a big hotel in Hong Kong, and investments all over. I own the Lee Garden Hotel," which is a twenty-two story hotel in Hong Kong, "and other properties throughout South China. I also have a foundation that I have established, and I'd like to have you write a history of San Francisco's Chinatown." I said, "I've always entertained that idea, but I never had the money to do so." He said, "Well, why don't you send me an application to me as to what you need, and I will see if we can't get together on that."

Funding the Book

Chinn: To make a long story short, later on I found out he is one of the richest Chinese in Hong Kong, not a multi-billionaire, but

certainly many, many times over a multi-millionaire. He said, "Okay, let's get started," so I sent back that application. I was very, very modest and said that I thought my project would run in the neighborhood of quite a lot of money—probably $50,000 or $60,000—but since I had never entertained the idea of writing a book, I had never inquired as to the cost of publishing a book. I said I was just guessing, and I hoped he would realize that. He said, "Okay, go ahead. I'll fund you for the first year. How many more years do you want?" I said I should have it out in about three years. "I'll fund you for the first year to start, nd then you give me a report on how it's coming and how much it has cost you, and then we'll see about the other years."

I had nothing to lose; he was paying for it. So I went ahead. Well, it ran to about three and a half years. And I did it all without compensation—only expenses necessary to run the book project.

Teiser: How thoughtful you were to have at least worked out three years, because you'd have to know something about how those things are done.

Chinn: I couldn't have written this book, even if it took me ten years, if I hadn't accumulated my material over forty-five or fifty years. I had my materials, but I had to bring them up to date and make sure that all the material that I had gathered was still something that had not changed in the story. He was very cooperative. Everything that I did, every request for funding, was never refused. (Off the record, it cost over $120,000 to put out this book.)

Teiser: I believe it. I don't think it should be off the record, because it's an interesting—

Chinn: First of all, he wanted to go first class, so he allowed me to put out not only a paperback but a hardcover edition, too, that came out simultaneously.

Teiser: As long as we're discussing expenses, it sold for—

Chinn: The paperback copy is $19.95, and $34.95 for the hardback.

Teiser: That's pretty good. Does that reflect in any way the cost? You can't know that, can you?

Chinn: I've never gone into it to see if it will pay off. He was willing to do it, and he's been a very good friend to me all the way through. I had to tell him, too, that this book represents the

first attempt to present a full community of Chinese and tell their stories.

Research Obstacles

Chinn: I also had to tell him another thing that I was very disappointed in. In spite of the fact that so many, many decades have passed, the descendants of a lot of these Chinese who came to this country illegally as paper sons and paper daughters (because of the 1906 fire and earthquake), whom I know, would not talk about it.

When I first started trying to line up my stories and to write about them, a lot of my friends said, "Sure, we'll work with you in any way possible and tell you about our [family's experiences]," because they were pretty well-known people at the present time. When I got ready to set a date for them, I'd go up to their house, and they'd say, "I'm sorry, my parents (or my grandparents) won't let me tell our story because they came here illegally. I can tell you that, but I can't tell the public that, because there's always the chance that the immigration authorities will say, `Since you came here illegally, we'll have to deport you.' " So there was always that worry, even to their sons and grandsons.

Teiser: Could a grandson actually be sent back?

Chinn: All those who were born in America, even though of a non-citizen of this country, are considered American citizens. But some of them, the children themselves, did not want to have the stigma of saying their parents came here illegally. They don't want their friends to be talking about that.

Teiser: Can you categorize? Did the fact that you couldn't get the stories of those particular people balance the account one way or another, or were they similar enough?

Chinn: There was nothing I could do, I was already so deeply obligated to continue this work; I couldn't cancel it, in other words.

Teiser: But if you had been able to include them, would the final work have been really different in any way?

Chinn: This doesn't even begin to tell the story of the hardships of the early Chinese, but it's not my idea in this book to tell about the hardships of the early pioneers. This is a story about Chinese-Americans and how they made their own way to get out of the stigma

of being shunted into their own community and not able to come outside and interact.

It's been terrible. Finally it got to the point where I had to make a decision. Originally I had not intended to tell more than the story about my father and mother and their life here, and maybe an outline of a few paragraphs or two about the author. But in order to make it meaningful, the more I looked into it the more I found out that I had a story to tell, and I might as well tell it. That's when I decided I'd write my own biography, practically; I left out a lot of it, too, and the same thing with my wife. I've had to. Otherwise, there was not enough in the book to tell a complete story from beginning to end, from the first date that we Chinese-Americans, my wife and myself, were born up to the present time.

Teiser: It's a particularly good story because of your grandfather having been here. There's all that continuity.

Evolution of the Story Idea

Teiser: When you decided to write it, I'm sure you had a general plan, but those things never work out precisely.

Chinn: No, never.

Teiser: Did it change much from the time you planned it and the time you got it finished?

Chinn: When it finally got to the point where I had to write my own stories, I was thinking that I would just leave it at about a 250- to under-300-page book. Yet, it seemed like such a waste to spend all that money to write a shorter book. I feel that it's very incomplete the way it is, because now, after this book came out, I've gotten such an avalanche of people who say, "Why didn't you tell me? I could have given you so many friends of ours. I can give you my story, too, and tell you about certain things," and they'd tell me things that I had originally sought and never could find. Originally, I even publicized in the *Asian Week* and said in the beginning when I first started that I wanted volunteers to write to me who felt they had a story to tell. I only got a couple of nibbles from that. I've gone to all possible ways to get people to contribute.

Teiser: I can see how people, seeing this book, would suddenly realize there was lots of credibility.

Chinn: As I say, this is the first time such a book has been written. They were under the impression that I was going to write about gambling and the tong wars and prostitution and the slanders of this or that, and juicy stories about things. That's all they'd been hearing about or reading about—even these light books, like *The Joy Luck Club* and others. They're fun things, some

of them, but they don't tell true history. I asked one person in particular, who came to me afterwards and said, "What "Why didn't you *insist* that I tell you my story?" I said, "What do you want me to do, use a club over your head to force you to tell me? I asked you two or three times, and after that I can't be that persistent. If you don't want to tell me, I can't help it; I can't write it."

Teiser: It must be a big temptation to pick up your pencil and just start again.

Chinn: I've been asked time and again when I'm going to start in on the next one. They want to get in on the next book! I say, "I'm eighty-two years old this year, 1991, and I can't find another angel like I found for the first book, nor do I have the energy to write it." So I don't know. It hasn't stopped me from still trying to research things, but I've cut out a lot of—

Hang Far Low Restaurant

Chinn: [turns to book] Here's that directory of 1876 you were talking about. I want to point out one name here.

Teiser: Hang Far Low & Company.

Chinn: That's a Chinese restaurant.

Teiser: Is it still?

Chinn: It was started prior to 1876, and we don't know how much earlier—maybe five or ten years. It came all the way up and was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire, and it was rebuilt practically in the same location, a door away maybe. In 1930 my wife and I were married there. That was over a half a century after this place was started. Then on our sixtieth wedding anniversary in 1980, which took place last year in June, my wife and I went back to the restaurant and had lunch there to celebrate the occasion. The name has changed; it was sold, as he had no descendants who wanted to continue it. He sold it around 1960, and the name is now The Four Seas Restaurant. Still in business.

Teiser: I remember going to Hang Far Low.

Chinn: A lot of my friends couldn't believe it until I showed them that this was an old, old restaurant.

Chinese Laborers

Teiser: I also noticed in there—you were mentioning that your sponsor's father or grandfather was a cigar maker. That was a big occupation for Chinese, wasn't it?

Chinn: Once upon a time it was.

Teiser: And I think some of the anti-Chinese people used that as a weapon, didn't they?

Chinn: Yes. The Chinese people never belonged to the cigar manufacturers' union. But I understand that for a short while they started their own Chinese union, just to offset the anti-Chinese elements' claim that the Chinese have no unions.

Teiser: This is somewhat unrelated, but the garment shops around here that used to hide behind curtains—people would go in and out without hardly opening the door-have suddenly put up signs within the last six months. They are all called the Happy Manufacturing Company or something. I keep wondering what has made that happen.

Chinn: They still try to be inconspicuous, but it got to the point where the federal or state people—I know the post office insisted that they have some sort of a name instead of just a number. It kind of forced them into it, because there was no identity if the Department of Public Health or some other agency wanted to make an inspection. As long as you are in business, your premises are always subject to inspection for health or labor violations and so on.

Organization of Book

Teiser: As your book is now, part one is the early San Francisco Chinatown, part two is the first generation, part three is Chinatown coming of age, part four is breaking through barriers,

and part five is contemporary Chinatown. Was that initially the plan?

Chinn: Yes. That's what we outlined in draft, because that's what I wanted to adhere to—just a little introduction on old Chinatown, and then to get into the stories. Most of the stories are original efforts of Chinese-Americans to get into non-Chinese functions, such as starting a nightclub or cocktail lounge, going on stage and making a big name for themselves, and so forth. All of these people work outside of the standard Chinese identifiable positions as cooks, waiters, or laundrymen. Those were the staples of the old Chinese vocations; that's all they could do in their own community.

In all of these stories, as much as I could, I wanted to show that the Chinese are coming out of their cocoon into the mainstream. One story is about the Chinese milkman, and how the unions fought against him trying to open up a milk delivery business in Chinatown. They brought in the health department, the union, and everything else, even to this day. Although he's still in business, he does not have his wholesale license; he probably did not pursue it any longer. He is licensed only as a grocery milk vendor, and yet he has his own milk delivery route.

Reception of Book

Teiser: Who did you think would be the readers of this book?

Chinn: I was hoping it would be more into the mainstream of the American public. I had never inquired before, but I found out that I didn't have the credentials to establish myself as, let me say, a professional writer with a background in education—

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Chinn: I didn't have an A.B., I didn't have a M.A., I didn't have a Ph.D. After I got started, one of my staff production people who helped me on the book, said, "Of course you know that this book is not going to be accepted among academic circles." In other words, it's not going to be used in colleges or high schools. So all I knew was that I would write the book and let it fall where it may; there was nothing else I could do. And I'm not too disappointed, because I've gotten good press all the way through from those who have read it.

Teiser: Do you think young Chinese are inspired by it?

Chinn: Oh, yes. Last July a boyhood friend of mine threw a big party at his ranch near Pacifica; he has an outdoor vacation home. He wanted to give a party in honor of this book, and to honor me. There were almost two hundred people who came to that party, which was by invitation only. He must have spent a fortune on that, because he had everything under the sun that you could think of. The people there were close friends of mine, and others I didn't know who were his friends became my friends later.

Distribution of Book

Teiser: I got my book at the East Wind Bookstore on Stockton Street. They have a lot of Chinese books. I wondered if they had an autograph party for you.

Chinn: I never knew that store had it for sale. I've had two or three autograph parties, but they were put on by clubs, and the party was for their members and the public.

Teiser: I see a lot of young Chinese buying books at the East Wind Bookstore; that's why I was wondering.

Chinn: I am very pleased that the book now, even today, is being sold across the country. I get orders from the libraries, especially up and down the coast here. It's gone quite a ways.

Teiser: How many copies do you think have gone out so far?

Chinn: I have no idea now. I put it in the hands of a distributor, and I let him worry about it.

Teiser: Who distributes it?

Chinn: Publisher's Group West.

Teiser: It's not always so easy to get a distributor.

Chinn: Many of them don't handle off-the-cuff books.

Appraisal of the Book

Teiser: I think what you have done is an inspiration, and you have done it so well.

Chinn: Thank you. I wish I had paid more attention to what I should or shouldn't do. There are certain things I would have made a little change on. But certainly one thing I've done is overcome the bugaboo that a good book can't be written without all the flak— slander, illegal activities, crime, and all that. Too many of the old-timers, like Richard Dillon, an old friend of mine who wrote *Hatchet Man*, talked a great deal about tong wars and so forth.

Teiser: Those are the sensational things. There's plenty of that in the literature, too. [laughter] Maybe others will pick up now and go forward.

Chinn: Well, a lot of them have.

Teiser: What's so admirable about it is that not only is it very professionally put together in very literate writing, and the picture captions are literate and clear, but you have a fine index. I always appreciate good indexes. I know how hard they are, but also how helpful they are.

Chinn: I appreciate that, too, because when you do research that's the first thing you look at.

XIV Personal Collection of Materials on Chinese-Americans

Scope of Collection

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Teiser: I'm going to start today by asking you about your own collection of material on Chinese in California and whatever the boundaries of it are.

Chinn: Frankly, I have no boundaries as such; as long as it deals with Chinese in America I try to find a place for it in my files. I'm not a politician, and I don't care for politics, but it's an item, and they do control certain events that happen in our lives and changes in our system, so I've included that in my files, too. I have everything from statistics to individuals.

Teiser: Can you describe the extent of your files? Do you have several file drawers, or seven yards of stuff?

Chinn: I have one of these regular business files, twenty-six inches deep, containing five drawers, and a good part of them are filled with material on Chinese-Americans. I also have another file, a smaller one that's also twenty-six inches deep but only twelve inches wide—standard size. I also have boxes and boxes that I haven't organized. Among the things I've wanted to do, and I've been procrastinating for so long, is to adopt the library system of classifying. And yet I haven't done so, because I know that the library system is too big and cumbersome for what little ilk as I have on Chinese-American history. It's still something that has to be done correctly in order to be useful.

Library

Teiser: Do you also have quite a lot of books?

Chinn: Yes, but I've been limited as to what I can collect because it's so difficult to keep on buying books. You not only have to limit yourself to what you can afford to buy, but also to the amount of shelf space you have to put them on. I've got quite a few shelves full of books, and some in boxes and crates. They're scattered all over.

Teiser: Are your books on the same general field?

Chinn: No. In books I've enlarged the field. I felt—this is more personal—that I wanted to get a little bit more of the culture of China, because that's the place where our forefathers were from; and the life of the people in China; the overthrow of the monarchy; what forced the Republic of China to enable some of the Chinese in South China, who were starving and all that, to come to America after the discovery of gold in California. All of that is the starting place of what happened—what type of people came over here, and what kind of hardships did they have in China that forced them to separate themselves from their families to come over here. I felt that was necessary to add to the thread of the beginning, the source, so to speak.

So I have books not only on Chinese history, but also on its culture and every aspect of it, from its rivers to its dynasties, its emperors—you name it, and I have at least one book on everything. Just recently I paid nearly $60 for one huge volume. It's a great big volume [demonstrates about the size of a big folio and two or three inches thick], and some of it in color, about medicine the world over.

Other Published Work by Chinn

Teiser: In this book, *A Search for Meaning*, I see there is a discussion of Chinese medicine as compared to Western medicine.

Chinn: I've edited the syllabus, *The History of the Chinese in California*, and I wrote and put together *Bridging the Pacific*, but I have also written a lot of articles, and I've never kept track of some of them. Some of them have gotten into *National Geographic*, and you saw the one in *Smithsonian*. I gave them two

interviews, but they just took little dabs of them, because they were choosing people from throughout the community.

Anyway, that doesn't mean that I didn't do much in the way of helping others, because this man, Dr. Albert H. Yee, asked me to produce a book [*A Search for Meaning. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1984*] for him. All he did was send me the manuscript, and I had to scout around and do everything for him.

Teiser: It's an impressive book.

Chinn: Well, it's nothing that I did; I just put it together for him. But I did have to help him find an editor, because I realized that the manuscript that I had to work from was not exactly very polished, even though he's a dean and has been on the campus staff at the University of Nevada, and he was dean of men at a California state university down south and has had a number of other distinguished jobs. He could write what he felt, but he's not a writer per se.

Teiser: Who edited it?

Chinn: Rebecca Pepper. She was with Edit Cetera, a group of independent writers, publishers, editors, and so forth. They each have an expertise in a certain line, and they banded together to form the company. If you have anything you want published, they will take it, and each one of them will contract for certain parts of it.

Teiser: Is that a local group?

Chinn: A Berkeley group. Most of them are graduates of the University of California. Some of them worked for the University of California Press, but they did this on the side.

Decision to Start the Collection

Teiser: When did you consciously start to gather things for your collection?

Chinn: It all started when I developed my first typesetting business, way back in 1937. These printers came to me for their typesetting, and a lot of them had would-be writers who wrote little poems and things like that which they gave to the printer to print. A printer is generally nothing more than somebody who knows how to print a menu and do odd things, but he doesn't know how to put together a book. I had a few friends, like Rebecca Pepper, who

also needed typesetting at various times, and they helped me formulate a set of steps to take to produce a book. Over the years I've helped dozens of people, some of them with regular books, like Albert Yee, some of them hard cover, some of them soft cover. Just like the Chinese new year souvenir magazine—oh, I've done so many of them that I've forgotten how many.

Teiser: Do you handle layout?

Chinn: Layouts? Oh, yes. I've done everything. [laughs] You have to. Once you get into it, then people start asking you to do this and that. Those days, if I didn't know I went out and spent time finding a source to do it, so I have that knowledge—everything down to bookbinding, almost.

Teiser: You started working with Lawton Kennedy in the 1950s, is that right?

Chinn: Easily, yes. I'd known him for some time before. He had no idea that I had the capability of setting type for him. He thought maybe I was all right for the Chinese community, but not for the outside community. That's when we first began getting acquainted with each other.

Teiser: Here in San Francisco when he was here?

Chinn: When he was here; he was living across the bay. I met him quite a number of times in various groups. I joined E Clampus Vitus.

Teiser: Are you the only Chinese member of that group?

Chinn: As far as I know, yes. I've been a member of that group since 1942.

Teiser: How can you be a member of that group without drinking?

Chinn: That's why I don't go to that many functions. Finally, when they let the wives join, as "widows" of the Clampers, then I was a little bit more active in it. I still belong.

Teiser: So you knew Lawton through groups like that?

Chinn: Oh, yes. Then later on I met Alfred and Sally, his son and daughter-in-law.

Teiser: I wondered if working with Lawton broadened your knowledge of putting books together, or did you not have anything to do with larger aspects?

Chinn: Oh, no. Well, he wouldn't let me touch it anyway. It was his baby! If he wanted me for typesetting, that was all I was to do. [laughter] In fact, Lawton helped me out so much. As I told you earlier, he printed the society's bulletin free of charge, including the paper and everything, for fourteen years. And I have around eight or ten copies of hard-cover syllabus that his son Alfred brought to a bookbinder and had them bind that many copies. He took half a dozen, because he liked it, too, but he gave me eight of them. So they did that for all those years. When I retired in 1980 I put out the last issue of the bulletin that I handled, and in it I gave thanks to all the people who helped me, including thanking myself for spending all those years doing the research, writing, and then free typesetting. And I thanked Lawton and Alfred and all the others. I'll give you a copy.

Teiser: You said you started collecting in the thirties. Did you have any special aim in mind?

Chinn: My interest in Chinese-American history started when my father sent me back to China. The two old men who had come over here and gone back to China to retire really sparked my interest, and I was only a kid, barely fifteen years old. I determined to write a history because I had never seen one before over here. But you know how young boys are, and nothing happened. Then in 1933, when I had my sporting goods store and was offered an opportunity to go back to China to represent the Wilson Western sporting goods firm, I rediscovered my ambition to start a Chinese-American history.

XV World Travel

Trips to China

Teiser: I'd like to ask you some more about those trips to China. You made one in 1924, one in 1933, and then one in 1980. Were there any others?

Chinn: A very brief one in 1981, when I made an around-the-world trip. I went back to Hong Kong and then briefly into China just for a trip.

Teiser: Let me ask you to compare your impressions of China that you got on those various trips. On the first one, you had only America to compare it with. How did the China that you saw strike you when you were a kid?

Chinn: Let me put it this way. In my boyhood years, the 1924 and 1933 trips, which were only trips covering the coastal areas of China, I did not go back into the interior, nor was I able to, because the first time I was too young and the second time too business-oriented. So I really never got to say I was a tourist or a traveler to look at China's culture and all that. But in 1980, I did. I gave my wife and myself an ambition for the first time in our lives to really travel and enjoy ourselves. We felt we owed it to ourselves. We had several friends who also were in that vein.

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Chinn: An old-time friend of mine, named Albert Lim, was briefly an instructor in Mandarin at the University of California in the forties or somewhere around there, when Mandarin was supposed to be the coming thing for China to unite the language into one predominant language. He had been to China; his family had sent

him back to China to learn Chinese, just like myself, but he was there for a number of years, and he got a good education. So he was more or less our chosen tour leader.

He had sixteen members who traveled back to China practically every year from 1978, shortly after Nixon opened up China. They'd been going back every year, and when we went we traveled extensively in China in 1980. We traveled along almost the entire length of the Great Wall of China. We started from Beijing, and we went all the way up to Dunhuang, a small town which is the last Chinese territory (or close to it at that time). Beyond that was the outside world.

That was the Silk Road, and all those early Europeans, including Marco Polo, traveled that route and went through Dunhuang into China proper. It was also the place from where India's religious disciples of Buddhism came. Inside Dunhuang they carved big statues of Buddha, beautiful artistic paintings in caves that have survived, if you will believe this. They were the first Buddhists to arrive in China, and that was where they arrived. It was dark inside these caves, so all the colors they used have never changed since the year 500 AD, over a thousand years.

They also told us something else that was unusual. The Western travelers who came into China from around the turn of the century on were also allowed to visit these caves. Artists and fashion designers copied a lot of these costumes, the way they were cut and the way the colors were assembled, and that's where Europeans got a lot of their ideas for what they called "Far Eastern" influence.

Teiser: Can visitors still go through those caves?

Chinn: Oh, yes. The time we went, we had to travel on a train for twenty-seven hours to reach that place, and when we got off at the last railroad station we had to take a bus for several more hours to get up to that place. But now the demand to see it is so great that they've built an airport nearby there, just an hour's travel away from Dunhuang, and you can make it much easier now.

So that was the route that we took. Do you remember some of the Chinese paintings you've seen here over the years of great huge mountains, and all you could see were clouds that hid half of the top of the mountain? It looked so unrealistic that one said, "Someone must have been dreaming when they made these paintings." But you know, when we climbed some of those mountains, they were real. It was unbelievable. Now you will find so many Westerners who were also awestricken by the fact that the early painters were

able to capture that and paint it so realistically, and yet most of us thought it was nothing but a pipe dream or somebody's imagination that such things could be.

Where oceans used to lie, and where mountains used to lie many, many millions of years ago, the flood waters have receded and exposed a lot of the ocean floors. There are magnificent things that you wouldn't believe. You'd have to travel there. There are whole forests, as large as Golden Gate Park, of petrified logs.

Conditions in China

Teiser: Since you were there under such different circumstances on these three trips, can you compare anything about the people and their lives?

Chinn: The only thing I can say is that when I first went back as a boy, there was no such thing as tap water, for instance; you carried your water from a well, and that was true of most of the interior of China. But to a good extent, even today in some of the more remote areas, you still have to travel to the well to get water. There was no such thing as sewage systems. You had to go out to an area way in back of the village, and there would be a few stumps there, and a section that was dug down where you did your thing and then walked out. Every so often special villagers would come around and dig up that material to use for fertilizer; that's all they had. It was that primitive.

Teiser: Was there much infectious disease? That's a good way to spread it, I suppose, if you aren't careful.

Chinn: That's the way they've lived their lives, and their forefathers, too. So it was something that they were so accustomed to that they never thought anything of it. But to us who went back there and for the first time encountered such a thing, it was unbelievable. But you had to put up with it if you expected to stay there even overnight; you had to use those facilities.

Teiser: How about the second trip when you were there?

Chinn: In 1933 it was the same thing. My brother was back there very, very recently, just a couple of years ago, and my son was back there just a couple of years ago, also, to the same village where our grandfather and father were born.

Teiser: What is the name of that village?

Chinn: Gop Sak village. It was only about a dozen or a dozen and a half buildings at the time I was there when I was a boy, and I don't think it's grown too much more.

Teiser: Did your son and your brother describe it to you recently?

Chinn: They said it hadn't changed much at all. Our father moved out so long ago, and then our near relatives were given permission to move into these houses that were built more substantially than just wooden structures. They said that nothing has changed even today. The only thing they've done is whitewashed it a bit. The thing about it is that there is no earning power for them. They couldn't buy anything; they had no way to get money. Without money you can't buy materials and you can't hire anybody to make improvements. Putting in a whole sewage system or pipelines for water and things like that require a united effort from the whole village. Some people were so poor they couldn't even eat two meals a day, so how could they pay their proportionate share of an expense like putting in tap water leading to your house? That situation has existed up to this day, although a lot of our friends have since found a certain amount of work, and we who live over here once in a while, when we think of it, send back a few dollars to them. But by and large it has remained exactly zero.

Trip to China, 1933

Teiser: Where did you go on your 1933 trip?

Chinn: Essentially the same area where our village was, and surrounding areas there. We were there just briefly. It was a business trip, and I couldn't afford to spend too much time to stay and visit and get acquainted with our different villagers. I went to Beijing, and from there I went to Shanghai, then to Hong Kong, then to a little place called Tinyen, a little island near Hong Kong. From there I went to Kwangtung (Canton).

Teiser: You made quite a trip, then.

Chinn: Well, it was a business trip. I was supposed to check out and see what the climate was for improving the sporting goods that the Chinese were using. Everything was handmade at that time, and our idea was that if we could arrange to set up a system of manufactured, uniformly perfect balls—perfectly round instead of being lumpy here and there—we could eventually set up a

manufacturing facility there to make sporting goods, instead of their having to import them. Those were the ultimate dreams we had. Of course, they never materialized.

Teiser: Where were you thinking of settling?

Chinn: It depended on where we found our business, and we never found it because America went off the gold standard and we couldn't find any business anywhere.

Trip Around the World, 1980

Teiser: When you returned to China in 1980, did you go to any of those same places?

Chinn: No, because there were so many of us, sixteen, and we didn't all come from the same area. We sort of divided up, and some went here and some went there. It was too much for us for each one to travel several hours to his own place, and then come back and meet again, so we didn't try to go back to our village.

Teiser: But you did go to Beijing?

Chinn: Oh, yes. That was the first stop on most of the trips. I only went back with the group that one time, and it was an extensive trip of almost six weeks. We went from the U.S. to Japan, and then jumped over to Beijing. From Beijing we took local planes or trains or buses, following the route of the Great Wall.

Teiser: Had anything changed much since your earlier trip?

Chinn: In our boyhood days, we never dreamed we would see the imperial palaces of the monarchies and all that, and yet when we did visit, it was so overwhelming. In 1949, the Nationalist Chinese who had to escape from mainland China to Taiwan had taken so much of the treasures out of the imperial city to Taiwan, that we only saw the remnants that had been left behind—the bigger pieces. Luckily for us, the Red Army did not destroy the city. For that we were thankful, and by 1980, when we were there, most of what had been damaged had been rebuilt. It was still a fascinating trip.

Teiser: Were there any Caucasians with you?

Chinn: Only one in our group. That one had a Chinese wife. He was a professor and could speak Mandarin, where most of us could not. So he could talk with the Beijing northerners, and we Chinese

couldn't. [laughs] It was a unique situation, and we laughed about it. The townspeople would gather around this professor—he was a very young man, only in his late thirties—trying to learn English, and he was trying to talk to them in Mandarin to get their ideas about certain things that he wanted to know. So there was an exchange. He was always surrounded by Chinese locals who wanted to get more information and to perfect their English. They were all young students and their friends.

Teiser: Did the rest of you draw that kind of attention?

Chinn: Not that much. We did only for the fact that we were dressed differently from them. In 1980 the people were still more or less drab looking; they were all dressed in grays and navy blues and nothing colorful. Our group went back there practically in the fall, and it was still warm, so we were in light clothes—shorts, sport shirts and so forth—and for that reason we were unique. People came around and peeked in our tour buses, and they commented on the way we were dressed, almost as if we were a specimen behind bars, and they wanted to feel our clothes and things like that. Of course they were people who hadn't seen too many visitors in certain areas where we went.

Teiser: Here we are taught not to stare, but apparently in China they are not.

Chinn: You can't help it; they do, either openly or covertly.

Teiser: When you went back briefly in 1981, was anything very different?

Chinn: I didn't go to Beijing the second time. Only eight of us went around the world. We started from here; back to New York; jumped over to Lisbon, Portugal; from there to Spain; then stopped briefly at Nice—

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Chinn: —from Rome we went to Turkey; then to Bombay, where I fulfilled another— By the way, this was one trip I was determined not to miss, even though the 1980 China trip was supposed to be our big one. When some of us decided we'd love to make this trip around the world, I couldn't forego that either. I mentioned earlier that when I was a boy I went to the library often, and the librarians would give me books, so I knew practically more about European history than I did about China. So I had this ambition of wanting to see Europe, wanting to see the things we had read about. It struck us that there were things we would like to see at least once in our lifetime.

So in Spain we went to Toledo, where they made armor and swords and other weapons. We went to Rome, where we saw the coliseum—the broken remnants of it—and I just wandered all over the remnants. Every place we went to there was something special we had always wanted to see. I should mention that in Cairo, Egypt, we had left the city just two days before Anwar Sadat was assassinated. If we had delayed, we would have been held there; they wouldn't have allowed anybody in or out after that for a couple of days. When we went to Bombay, I made a

point of seeing where Mahatma Ghandi had his roots and the museum that was established in his memory. None of the others wanted to visit it, but I told my wife that, regardless, I wanted to see it. I have a few little souvenirs from that museum.

Those are the highlights of what I saw. From Bombay we went to Thailand; then we jumped over to Hong Kong, and had a brief one-day trip into China proper, just around the Hong Kong area. From Hong Kong we came home.

Teiser: Did you see Hong Kong on your first trip?

Chinn: Oh, yes. We stayed in Hong Kong. There were two main points. One was in Beijing, where we arrived from the U.S., and the other was Hong Kong as the last stop in China before returning to the U.S.

Teiser: Did you see Hong Kong in the twenties? Has it changed much over the years?

Chinn: Oh, yes. Between the first and the last visit, it's the difference between day and night. In 1924, and even in 1933, it was still so British. You'd see these big policemen, and they were all Sikhs, wearing their turbans; they were really majestic looking. They were a force in those days. In 1980 there were a few around, but the Chinese had taken over traffic duties and other duties. Then there were all those tall buildings that we never saw prior to this last trip.

XVI Ethnic Identity and Minority Status in America

Chinese Consuls General in San Francisco

Teiser: Before the Nationalist government went to Taiwan, did you here in San Francisco know representatives of the Chinese government?

Chinn: Yes. We'll have to go back to earlier days to establish the identification of this person. I think I mentioned that when I lived as a boy in North Bend, Oregon, there were only two Chinese families there. In another town nearby that was called Marshfield when we first arrived—it has since been renamed Coos Bay—there was a Chinese merchant who had a large family. They had one boy named George Chen. We moved to San Francisco, and in the latter part of the 1920s he had attended Stanford University. From there he went to China. I don't know if he was married over here or in China, but he married an American Chinese girl. The thing about it is this: the wife later (I'm not sure of the date) became the private secretary of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. They are both still in Taiwan in retirement, and we still exchange Christmas cards and get together when they come over here. We have never been to Taiwan to visit them.

Teiser: Was there a Chinese consul in San Francisco?

Chinn: You asked me if I knew some of the consuls general here, and I was going to bring you some information on that. The first one I knew was in 1935, when I first published the *Chinese Digest*, and the Chinese consul general wrote a congratulatory letter to us that we published. His name was C. C. Huang. Over the years I have met briefly or known the names of most of the consuls general here, but when I got away from publishing later, I didn't try to maintain any ties because I wasn't the social type who just wanted to know the Chinese consul general. It

wasn't until much later, when I started the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1963,

that the consul general's office became very interested in our work.

Teiser: This was, then, representing the Taiwanese government.

Chinn: Yes. It was in 1949 that the Taiwanese government came into being, so thereafter it was with the Taiwanese that we did business. In other words, we followed whatever government the United States government recognized. Later on the United States government recognized mainland China, and Taiwan had to withdraw its consulate and establish a coordinating office just for business purposes. We knew who they were, naturally, but by the time the U.S. had recognized the Communist regime, then the Chinese consulate became the focal point for all visas for entering China, so we had to get acquainted with them, too.

Divided Loyalties Among Chinese in America

Teiser: Looking back over all the consuls general that you knew, were they good representatives of the government?

Chinn: Well, in the beginning Chinatown in San Francisco, and the Chinese in general in the U.S., were divided in their loyalties. There were always the very liberal Chinese who jumped right on the bandwagon of the Communist group. There were others who were just as loyal to the Nationalist Chinese in Taiwan. There had been almost, you might say, open conflicts between them at various times—not really violent, but there have been fisticuffs, disruptions of parades, and so forth. But gradually it has slowed down to where they, let's say, tolerate each other. They try to get along with each other now, but the core of the groups behind the scenes are still at loggerheads with the other side. Until that situation is overcome there will always be two different groups with two different philosophies.

Teiser: I believe you told me that one indication of this was the different flags that are flown in Chinatown.

Chinn: Yes, that's right. They still have them. The Nationalist flag still flies over Nationalist-loyal individuals or organizations, and then others fly the mainland Chinese flag—the People's Republic.

Reconciliation Between Chinese and Japanese in America

Teiser: It occurs to me that earlier there must have been a great deal of animosity between Chinese and Japanese at the time the Japanese were at war. Since then I see that, for example, Mr. Yee has talked in Japan, and I think you addressed a Japanese group once and gave a talk. Has there been a conscious attempt at reconciliation between Chinese and Japanese in America?

Chinn: Yes, definitely, to the point where there have been quite a few intermarriages between Chinese and Japanese. By the same token, you'll find some diehard Chinese who will have nothing to do with Japanese. Among them, I might even say that my niece's husband won't even buy a

Japanese car for personal reasons. Evidently one of his relatives must have been killed in World War II, so he has a lot of deep-seated feelings about the Japanese. But by and large I think that the Chinese and the Japanese get along about as well as any other mixed group here now. There's still a little bit of feeling, but it's not that deep.

Ethnic Identity and American Citizenship

Teiser: I just got a mailing from Chinese for Affirmative Action, urging people not to be resentful of American Arabs. I'm thinking of Chinese-Americans working with other minority groups, or being sympathetic with them. There was recently a business fair at Stanford, mainly for black people, but also for Chinese and other Asians.

Chinn: There are some groups that are so closely related to, if not part of, the Ku Klux Klan that are trying to foster a growth of anti-minority groups. I don't know what can be done about it. The government definitely has not made an attempt, in my view, to oversee the result of what is happening to the various racial groups that now are American citizens.

And yet, as American citizens they still have deep roots in their mother country. I feel deeply about that, because we have these individual groups that maintain ties that are very loyal to their mother country and want, for instance, to establish their own language as a second language to English. It's nice to have it as a second language, but not to the extent of some areas in Canada that want to secede and establish a separate French-speaking country. There are attempts that go beyond the role leading to a unified country.

In today's paper it says the Hispanics have just voted their first woman into office, Los Angeles supervisor Gloria Molina, and now that gives them a greater voice, and they will try to get in more of their people. It seems like it's always going to be rocking the boat back and forth. If we're Americans, we're Americans; we shouldn't be Hispanic-dominated, we shouldn't be black-dominated, we shouldn't be Chinese-dominated. If you're an American citizen, you're an American citizen. Maybe that's the way the politics are intended to be, an idea of checks and balances, but you can only go so far in checking and balancing before you suddenly discover that one side overcomes the other numerically. I don't know what the answer is.

Bilingual Education and Ballots

Teiser: This brings us to bilingual education and bilingual ballots.

Chinn: That's right. It means that a lot of our money is being diffused from the central course of governing a united states, not a divided states.

Teiser: Are you against bilingual ballots?

Chinn: As such, I am against it. I believe that if you intend coming to America, if you intend staying here and rearing your family here, your first loyalty and your first language should be the language of the country you have adopted, that you have become a citizen of. Everything else is secondary. To me, that is so obvious. Look at our own Chinese groups. Our parents were raised in China, they came over here and spoke Chinese. When they had us children, we Chinese

children had to learn Chinese because of the very fact that we lived under the household of our parents and had to communicate with them. But the minute we came out of that house and go to an American school, we learned English. That means that every time we were away from our household we were using English, because we were mixing with other groups outside of home. We could see that our parents were a diminishing factor in our learning English.

Suddenly new immigrants come in, and they upset the balance; they want to hang on to their mother tongue. These things are so disruptive. You take the Chinese who insist on learning Chinese, but they don't intend on making it their primary language; that's their second language. Other groups may not be that strong in that regard, and I think that the very fact that we have

affirmative action groups is good in a way, but they go too far. I mean this sincerely. I don't mean that I'm against them; I think a lot of things they do are admirable. I object when affirmative action groups and other liberal groups that tend to help out new immigrants—help them get American citizenship, help them get a chance to vote—because of their closeness and ties with these immigrants, they give them a ballot when they don't even know how to read or write English and then influence them on how they should vote, Republican or Democratic. That's just like buying votes; there's no difference. That doesn't give the poor immigrant a chance to speak for himself.

Teiser: I always thought you couldn't be a citizen until you could read and write enough in English to read a ballot.

Chinn: That is what was once true. Then you get these same groups that I'm speaking of approaching senators or congressmen and diffusing that particular idea. Philip Burton, the Congressman, did something very great when he helped get through the act that led to the enlargement of our national parks and recreation areas. He was also, prior to that act, in the earlier days, active in seeing that all new immigrants who came to this country, as soon as they got off the boat, were able to go directly to the social services and register for financial help. These people had just come over here, and we have our own poor citizens who don't qualify, you might say; yet here the new ones are getting automatic help from an elective representative. That was something I was very much concerned with. Of course, unless I take an active part in it, which is not my line, I do nothing about it. But personally I'm against it. I'm against anything that does not bring together the different ethnic groups and different nationalities that come to this country, and against those who are then lackadaisical in their attempts to be a loyal American.

Busing

Teiser: Do you think busing has made any difference?

Chinn: Oh, yes, busing is also another factor. There again, you have so many factors leading into it, such as the fact that busing is mandatory. You bus people from the poor areas to a better area because they can learn better in a better school than the poor have. But how is that going to help us?

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Chinn: You have poor children coming into a more affluent area, and I don't see how that accomplishes much. Once the school period is out, these children revert right back to their own neighborhood again, their own families. Is that going to help them? It might eventually, but wouldn't it be better to try and see what we can do to help these more economically depressed citizens of ours to better themselves. These questions go beyond me as an individual, but these are my own personal thoughts. Maybe the government isn't set up to take care of problems like this on a national scale, so let's diffuse it and make it a state problem.

If we would cut out a good deal of our politics—and when I say politics, I still can't understand why it costs so many, many millions of dollars to elect a governor, let's say, for the state of California. How many millions of dollars did Dianne Feinstein, the defeated aspirant for governor who lost to Pete Wilson, spend to become governor? And what is the salary of the governor for that period? It's gotten to the point where I refuse to even voice my thoughts on it, except for now in this instance I'm willing to, because I feel in my own personal thoughts that something is wrong. But I will not change my own way of voting. I've been voting ever since I was old enough to vote, and I've never missed an election. Whether it's a primary or a local election, I put in my vote.

Acceptance of Chinese-Americans as Elected Officials and Professionals

Teiser: We have had a number of Chinese members of the board of supervisors and a number of Chinese public servants.

Chinn: All appointed, until this last one, Thomas Hsieh. He is the first and only Chinese who was re-elected to that post. When it came to voting, the other appointees were not able to get enough votes to qualify.

Teiser: Do you think his precedent will help more Chinese get elected in the future?

Chinn: In the future there has to be. Formerly there were never any Chinese dentists or doctors who worked or were able to make a living outside of Chinatown. Now they go anywhere. Some of them don't make it big, but the majority of them make it in a big way. Some of them are very well respected citizens in their communities of nothing but Caucasians. Some of my best friends are doctors and dentists, as an illustration, and they have nothing but

Caucasian customers, except maybe a handful of their own personal Chinese friends. On the other hand, I don't go to a Chinese doctor or a Chinese dentist; my dentist is a Caucasian, and my medical problems are handled by Kaiser.

Teiser: Are there Chinese on the Kaiser staff?

Chinn: Oh, many, many. In fact, my ophthalmologist is a Chinese, but he just happens to be on the Kaiser staff, and I got him by assignment. But our regular doctor is a Caucasian.

Teiser: I see that in recent decades Chinese have become prominent in all the sciences.

Chinn: Yes, they have. They've done their part. But by the same token, a lot of them are, let's say, in the minority; they are not as fully accepted. But the trend is there, and that is something. The only thing is that it took nearly 150 years to get there. [chuckles] I do feel we're making tremendous progress, but only within the last couple of generations. Before that it was still status quo, very

slow. It wasn't until after World War II that we actually have started making greater progress.

New Influx of Immigrants

Teiser: What effect overall does the large number of recent immigrants have upon the status of the whole Chinese-American population. They are so different, for a while anyway, when they come.

Chinn: There are so many problems. Sometimes I don't blame the authorities for it. You have this big influx of immigrants—not only Chinese, but all races and nationalities. They come here, and things are so different from their motherland where they came from. I'm thinking now, as an illustration, of the Vietnamese who came over here. They spread up and down the country, and a lot of them turned to what they know best—fishing. And what happens? They found out they were violating certain U.S. rules: you cannot use the same kind of nets that they used in the old country; the finer nets catch more fish, but you also catch a lot of the smaller fish.

The U.S. rules say you cannot use a mesh that fine to catch the small fish that still have to grow up to full size; you're cutting down on your reproductive system by taking them out of circulation so early. Right away they are starting to fine these Vietnamese for violating that law, but the Vietnamese say, "But

that's they way we've done it all our lives in our country." They say, "This is not your country; this is the U.S., and if you come over here you have to abide by our laws." The Vietnamese say, "If we can't fish, what are we going to do? That's the only thing we know."

So there are all these problems, not only with the Vietnamese but with other nationalities that have their own particular problems to overcome. We are willing to send people outside of the United States under the Peace Corps to help other countries advance their methods of agriculture and manufacturing, and yet we have our own groups here who are new immigrants. Why don't we teach them some of these things, send the Peace Corps among the poor people here and among the new immigrants?

There is some effort made; I know that. There are some of these nonprofit organizations that are trying to help them, but it's so slow and cumbersome, and they have so much to learn. The first, basic thing they must learn is English. A lot of them say, "We haven't got the time; we're grown up. We came to this country as mature citizens, and we can't go back and spend years learning a language." There is a compromise: they can work, no matter what, and still go to night school.

Teiser: A lot of them do, I guess.

Chinn: Some do, but most don't.

Teiser: In the older, established Chinese-American community as a whole, which has its own culture, I think, is there a resentment against these immigrants who seem to have such a different culture?

Chinn: No, no, there's no resentment as such. In fact, some of these organizations welcome them because with the growing number of children we have and the number of young people who do not want to learn Chinese, who do not want even to marry among the Chinese, some of these organizations, like the family associations, would start losing their membership if it weren't for these new immigrants. So they are the new generation of members into the old family

associations. The immigrants are served, too, because they get to talk with the elders in their familiar Chinese language, so they feel more comfortable there. But at the same time it slows their assimilation into the American public.

Intermarriage

Teiser: What is the feeling in general about intermarriage?

Chinn: That is a more personal decision that resides with the individual. I don't believe anything should stand in the way of anybody wanting to marry a person of any other nationality, whatever it is. If they like each other, if they love each other, why should anybody stand in their way? But parents are parents, and they don't like to see their children getting away from them, and that's what's happened in a lot of cases. By the same token, you have a lot of people who are dead set against any intermarriage, particularly between blacks and whites, or any color with any other color. I don't know the answer to that. I wish I did.

Teiser: I remember a British writer, just after the last war, said that the ideal was to have the whole world full of tea-colored people. [laughter]

Chinn: Well, that's dreaming, too, isn't it? You can't have that overnight. Take our family, for instance. We only have one boy. We have three grandchildren, and we love them all, of course. But not all of the grandchildren want to marry among their own race. Our grandson married a Chinese girl, one granddaughter married an Irishman, and the other granddaughter married an Italian-German boy. We love them, too, because we know that love is sincere for our grandchildren. What are we going to do? Just stay away and exclude all interchange with our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren? We love our great-grandchildren, all five of them, and two more by January 1992.

Sooner or later that trickle-down system is going to take place, whether mothers and fathers like it or not. It now depends on whether the mothers and fathers love their children enough to keep within their family structure all of the newly acquired husbands or wives of their children. You love to see your children happy. Sometimes even I have a hard time seeing black and white, and yet it's happening. It's part of the assimilation process, I guess.

Teiser: I think the next things to talk about are quite different. I'd like your assessment of the Chinese-American community here as a whole. We've talked about a lot of things that are a part of it. I'm interested in the various groups you've spoken to.

Chinn: I wish I had kept track of them all. Even today there are so many things that I do that I don't even keep track of; I can't keep track of them all.

Teiser: I'm interested that so many groups of people have been interested in Chinese-American history. General historical societies I can believe, but Society of California Pioneers, for instance—

Chinn: You know that I am a member of that.

Teiser: Oh, that's right.

Central Pacific Railroad Centennial

Chinn: The ceremony for the centennial of the building of the railroad that you mentioned—maybe you'd give a short account of that event in Utah. You mentioned an episode in which the main speaker gave all the credit to Americans, implying Caucasian Americans.

Chinn: That is true. My connection was in relation to the Chinese Historical Society of America, and our effort to have the general public recognize the contribution the Chinese made in building the Central Pacific railroad. Nothing had been done outside of a few lines here and there in various books, so I'm afraid I'm the one guilty of starting the idea that the Chinese Historical Society should ask the San Francisco Chinese community to donate money toward the purchase of two bronze plaques to put up, one in Sacramento, the starting point of the Central Pacific, and the other at Promontory Point, Utah, at the joining of the Central Pacific with the Union Pacific. We did raise the money, we did make the plaques, and we donated one to the railroad commission in Sacramento to put up when they got their museum built (it hadn't been built yet). The other we held for putting up at Promontory.

I was the one who worded the plaque in English, and a prominent Chinese, Mr. P. C. Lee, put in the Chinese words. Appropriately, we were invited to the centennial of the building of the railroad in June 1969 at Promontory Point. We were promised that we would be given five minutes air and TV time to a national audience. At that time I was no longer president [of the Chinese-American Historical Society], but I was secretary-director. So both the president and I were there, and we were seated on the platform with all the other dignitaries, including the Chinese consul general.

The ceremony went on and on and on. When it finally finished, we were not asked to speak at all, nor was the consul general given any time, either. Afterwards we were very disappointed. The centennial chairman (his name was Goodfellow or

something like that) came to the place where we were staying and said he was sorry he didn't have time to put us on. The *Chronicle*, however, had a writer there, and he interviewed me. He asked, "Do you know why they didn't let you or your colleagues speak?" I said I didn't know, that they said they didn't have time. He wrote all of that up in his article in the *Chronicle*. It was written by Dale Champion.

Teiser: Did you ever figure out any hidden reason?

Chinn: Just that they didn't have time to do it. But that was something we've always known—that some people put us down whenever possible.

XVII The Chinese Consulate in America

Functions of the Chinese Consulate

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Teiser: Perhaps I should ask you what the function of the Chinese consulate is here with regard to the Chinese-American population? Does it have a regular relationship?

Chinn: Are you talking about the present, or the very early period?

Teiser: A little on the early period and the present.

Chinn: The first Chinese consulate was established here sometime in the 1880s or 1890s. Their function at that time was a little different from present-day functions in that they had to help the new immigrants so much more. They shouldn't be called immigrants, actually; they were more sojourners. They came here with the idea of making some money and then returning to their families in China. So their problem was that the Chinese sojourners in those days were more or less trying to find work, trying to adapt a little bit so they could get by in the larger community outside Chinatown. The Chinese consulate served also as a sort of a mother hen, if you will, nurturing, helping out their countrymen in adapting and finding work, or in other ways trying to get them associated with district people who lived near where they came from to help them out. These first consuls also represented the Chinese in America in dealing with the U.S. government.

Over a period of time this became sort of like the groundwork that was established, so that over a period of decades the Chinese, in reciprocation and appreciation for their consulate, also determined that it was the father image of their district. They were the elders, and all the different family associations and district associations would always invite the consulate members to their functions. They looked up to the consulate. It

is also important to remember that after China became a republic in 1912 it entered into a new phase where they had to go to the Chinese consulate to get passport problems straightened out for themselves and in every way possible make sure that they were recognized so that they could freely enter and leave the United States.

That function has remained a courtesy, because nowadays there are more Chinese-Americans who are American citizens, and they have not all that much respect or loyalty—call it what you will—to their mother country. The Chinese only go there for passport purposes. Only when important people from China come over here—important government people or distinguished individuals—do they go through the consulate, and they are given the courtesy of the consulate facilities. Then the local Chinese had opened up their arms to this particular person, but only to the extent of what he or she represents rather than that of any Chinese government status. If they came from an educational institution, then the educational groups over here—the more literate groups—would take them in hand and have them address their group and things like that.

But aside from that, as far as any ties that would bind them to China, the only thing I can think of would be the cultural ties. That they would always look up to, because I think if you are born a Chinese, sooner or later you come to appreciate the background and the culture of things Chinese. I know that among our friends, all our children that are growing up do not have that much interest in Chinese culture, but as they approach middle age and thereafter, then they pick up and want to learn more about their language and background.

Teiser: That's interesting. Has that been true always?

Chinn: Generally that is so, but I also know a few that have no interest whatsoever in trying to pick up anything about their mother country.

Representatives of Taiwan in America

Teiser: In recent years have there been two Chinese consulates—one for Taiwan and one for the mainland?

Chinn: No. The moment the United States government recognized mainland China, then the Taiwan consulate lost its official capacity and recognition as such, and as far as the local office is concerned

their terminology is North American Coordinator for Chinese in Taiwan.

Teiser: Are they mostly a commercial office, then?

Chinn: Yes, sort of like a Taiwan chamber of commerce for passport purposes. Then you get into the other little personal interests, like educational people—professors and those in colleges and universities—who sent their students over here to study. So there is sort of a tie-in with helping their particular Taiwanese people get into the areas in which they are interested.

Teiser: If you want to go visit Taiwan, where do you get your visa?

Chinn: You would go to the North American Coordinator. I think their headquarters is in the Bank of Canton building at Clay and Montgomery streets.

Teiser: So for practical purposes your visa for there is separate from that of mainland China?

Chinn: Definitely.

Notable Chinese Consuls

Teiser: Without going into it in detail, have there been some Chinese consuls whom you have known who have been outstanding men?

Chinn: Yes, I imagine so. Do you mean outstanding in their personal stature and advancement, or those who have been of great help to the community over the years?

Teiser: Those who have made contributions to the community.

Chinn: You have two types of consuls who come here: those who do not speak that much English and interest themselves in doing their duty of coordinating and helping their own Chinese people; even though they are American citizens, they are still Chinese. In that respect their only interest is in being able to be invited to the family associations here to say a few good words or something like that, which raises the stature of that family association—the fact that they have cultural ties back to mainland China.

On the other hand, you have the consul who is fairly knowledgeable in the English language, who not only comes out and speaks before other than Chinese groups, but also works to help

the community in every way he can from a social standpoint and addresses Chinese groups. Among those that I have known and who are personal friends of mine, the very first one was when I started publishing the first English-language newspaper for the Chinese-Americans in 1935, the *Chinese Digest*. His name was C. C. Huang. He helped me out in every way and

encouraged me to continue trying to establish rapport with China culturally as well as keeping in touch with Chinese-Americans through this medium.

In a way, here is how he helped me; now I can say it (this was in 1935): he permitted one of his junior staff members to write under a pen name about Chinese affairs in China, about things that the average Chinese-American might like to know, such as athletics, cultural affairs, and interesting developments in China. China in the thirties was still more or less an isolated country; it was only for those more daring to go into China.

I got to know this particular junior staff member, whose name was Patrick "Pichi" Sun. He is a very, very distant descendant of Sun Yat Sen, the father of the Chinese republic. Here in San Francisco he married an American-born Chinese girl. After he served here he went back to China and became vice consul in other countries in the Far East, and then in the 1950s he came back for a second tour of duty in San Francisco, this time as the consul general. He stayed here for another hitch, and then he was sent back to China and became an ambassador for China in various countries in the Far East, including Manila.

Then he came back here for a brief stint again in the late sixties, I believe. By that time he and I had become good friends, because while he was here the first time when he was appointed to help us out, he was a columnist for me under a pen name, and I was the editor of the *Chinese Digest*.

Teiser: What was his pen name?

Chinn: He used "Pat Sun" and twisted the letters around so that it became Tsu Pan. Here's the funny thing about it. When I started getting ready to write my *Bridging the Pacific* in 1986, his youngest daughter, Sylvia, was living here and was married to a man in Stockton, whose name is Minnick. She became quite a historian around the San Joaquin Valley and wrote a history about the Chinese there. Just to bring you up to date on her, she recently became a city councilor. She went into politics also and was elected to the city council in Stockton, presently serving. She also was one of my seven advisors whom I got together as a panel to advise me on *Bridging the Pacific*. You can find her name in the acknowledgements section of my book.

She, her husband, and I and my wife became very good friends. She helped me out in various ways by being one of those who critiqued the book on subjects regarding the Chinese outside the immediate city here. She knew more about the San Joaquin Chinese than I did. In a way, every one of my panel members contributed something, either in critiquing the book or something else, such as acting as devil's advocate—the pros and cons.

In between, when I was able to get four friends of mine to join me in starting the Chinese Historical Society of America in 1962—and formally opened in January 1963—there was another consul general whom I didn't know very well, but he was very supportive of this new organization. At our opening he came and helped us launch the Chinese Historical Society. His name was Consul General Tung-hua Chou.

There have been other consuls, but I have not been too closely related to them.

Teiser: When you went to China in 1980 and had to have a visa because you were a Chinese-American? Did they make any special requirements for the visa?

Chinn: No, because after the U.S. government recognized mainland China in the 1970s, there was a general exodus of Chinese who wanted to go back to visit China after being shut out for all those years from 1949 until Nixon opened it up again in 1972. The Chinese were not able to go back to their country because everyone was against the Communist China. Here they had a chance to go back, and they had close ties—relatives and village acquaintances. There was such a big exodus of Chinese tourists going back to their homeland that it's pretty hard to say that you got special privileges of any kind, because you are one of many. There were a lot of well-known people who went back then, and they couldn't accord all of them special privileges.

Attitudes Toward Communist China and Taiwan

Teiser: You say that before that, the people were against the Communist government. Were you speaking of the Chinese-Americans here?

Chinn: All Chinese were against the Communists. We followed the concept that whatever the U.S. government recognized, we would recognize, excepting for the diehard Taiwanese who came from mainland China and followed Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek to Taiwan. Those diehards remain diehards to this day, many of them. Their

loyalties are not to the Chinese Communist mainland government, which is still recognized as a mainly Communist government. Of course, it's been softened a great deal now, but you will find today almost as many Taiwanese flags flying in Chinatown as you will the Chinese mainland flags. But of course the American flag is preeminent.

Teiser: You mentioned that you have a friend in Taiwan. Would you have any hesitation going to visit there?

Chinn: I have no hesitation going there because I don't have any political ties with anyone. I have maintained my life following the concept of the U.S. government, and even before then I had cut my ties. I didn't help out the Taiwanese government after they moved there, when they briefly sought my help to expedite the visit of a particular scholar. Outside of that, I haven't ever visited Taiwan, let alone had any written ties or cultural ties with them. But I haven't maintained ties with mainland China, either, because I've kept myself aloof from anything to do with representing them. Of course, when the U.S. government recognized mainland China, I followed suit by visiting the mainland in 1980. Now, politics aside, I am sociable with both Chinas.

Teiser: Would you be happy if Taiwan and the mainland were united?

Chinn: I believe they both could stand being reunited, because they have so much to offer each other. Mainland China is still a neophyte insofar as the modern cultural and financial worlds are concerned—that is, international trade and international finance. They just aren't in the same league with the present-day world.

Difficulties Obtaining Visas for Travel in China

Teiser: About three years ago my friend Robert Beck was invited to teach in a small university in China for six months or so. When he went to get his visa, he had a hard time and kept having to go

back to the consulate. I think it was because they wanted to be sure he was employed and was not going to be a public charge. He had to show a letter from the university asking him to come and teach.

Chinn: You see, the Chinese are still not that well coordinated. All the various provinces have a certain amount of self government, let us say, just like the states have certain rights over here that only federal laws would supersede. These universities, or people involved in the business world, contact and invite people from various parts of the world to come and teach them in certain

specialties. Your friend, for instance, was probably invited by a certain university, but the university had not written to the central government, so the central government had to make sure that when he went there he had a specific purpose. If he was one of those who was going there to foment political turmoil or be a political activist, then they wouldn't want such a person in there. In other words, they're sort of a spy in a way. They have to make sure of certain things.

I should mention, too, that this is the same procedure, even though it is not recognized, that the Taiwanese government has, too, because they have to make sure that the mainland Communist Chinese do not get into Taiwan and start being activists there. So it works both ways.

XVIII Major Changes in the Chinese-American Community

Accomplishments of Chinese-Americans

Teiser: I have some very large subjects to ask you about. I'm asking you to be an Olympian, with lots of perspective. A lot of these things have come up previously, but this is just a generalization, and it's just about the San Francisco Chinese population. You've talked about the main changes in the Chinese-American population since World War II, how they moved all over the city and out of Chinatown, but what else? Has the Chinese community become a more important part, irrespective of numbers, of the city itself and of its government and its psychology and culture?

Chinn: First of all, Ruth, let me mention that what I say is personal. I don't claim any expertise in any of these fields except what I observe, and it's a personal observation.

Teiser: Yes, that's what I'm asking for—just your point of view as an informed person and as a historian. What would you say were the major changes?

Chinn: First of all I should mention that one of the reasons why I wrote *Bridging the Pacific* was to bring out the transition from the old order of so-called pioneer Chinese who came in the 19th century to the second-generation Chinese-Americans who were born here. There is an overlap, because a lot of Chinese families came over here with tiny little babies. The population of the Chinese born in America became so much more numerous—

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Chinn: —that I felt it was time for us to at least have a preliminary publication of their activities. They are practically the first generation of Chinese-Americans who were entering into the larger

community outside of Chinatown and feeling their way, becoming accepted not for their activist activities to force their way out, but more or less in their own patient way of gradually extending their social and business contacts in a more civil manner than would be the case of an activist who would use any means to obtain his viewpoint.

That is why *Bridging the Pacific* became, as far as I know, the first attempt to bring out the accomplishments of Chinese-Americans, of a Chinese community. I did not insist that mine is the first; there probably have been other stories written by different Chinese writers who have pointed out a few of these, but to take the Chinese-Americans as a group and try to assemble some semblance of order in an established community, I believe this is one of the first, if not *the* first book to do so.

In that respect I have to give credit to our predecessors, those pioneers who came from China and worked hard and patiently to support their children in their efforts to get into higher education, to learn a trade outside of the normally accepted ideas of waiters and laundrymen and so forth. Their children became engineers, medical doctors, doctors of philosophy and psychology, and physicists who were on the staff of NASA. In every way possible, they advanced the Chinese as citizens who are deserving of equal consideration in any field of endeavor. I think it's very important to realize that more and more the outside world is finding that out.

Misconceptions about Chinese-Americans

Chinn: The thing that I am a little bit concerned about, but there's nothing we can do about it, is something that happened not only in the late 19th century but has continued almost, you might say, up to the present time, but in a gradually diminishing manner. That is, all the Caucasian writers and historians who have taken up the first Chinese sojourners who came to this country in the 1850s and thereafter make judgments based on only their manner of living. The Chinese who came here, who in China were mostly the lowest form of human beings, wanted to make a living, wanted a better life for their descendants. All they could do was work with their hands; they worked in the soil because there were no big manufacturing businesses in China in the 19th century for the common person. So when they came over here they were just common laborers. But to them the culture of China became important because from Confucius they learned that education and love of family are among the most important things that can happen in

China. They had adopted that as their philosophy, so when they came over here, if they were able to have children they wanted to make sure that children got the advantages they themselves were sacrificing in order to give them a decent education.

Over a period of time—many, many generations and decades since—we are finding out that this is paying off. But unfortunately, the present generation of outside people—Caucasians, or those non-Chinese, let's say—who, in school and in universities, go through the various libraries looking for material on the pioneer Chinese, all they can find is the conceptions and writings of the 19th century non-Chinese.

That has been the accepted conception of the Chinese, in many cases, up to the present day. That is something we are trying to overcome. We want to produce the concept of a Chinese-American who is striving hard to let people know that the Chinese part of a Chinese-American

is something the Chinese are proud of, but at the same time they want to be known more as Americans. We are on a par with them, but the fact that our physical appearance is so much different gives people a different conception. The minute they see a person of Oriental descent, the first thing they say is, "You speakee English?" And they're probably speaking to some university graduate. These are some of the conceptions we are trying to overcome. I set myself down as someone who tries to help solve that problem but without pushing.

Modification of Chinese Surnames

Teiser: People from Russia and Poland who had unusual names often changed them into Americanized names—a long name became Hunter or something. That's not done by the Chinese?

Chinn: Oh, yes, but unconsciously, probably. Take my family: my family name was Chin. It was just how the non-Chinese used to write the Chinese name in English, depending on the pronunciation they got. The tonal differentiation between Chin and Chinn is only in the spelling. My father came over here, and throughout his life his name was written Chin—full name, Chin Wing.

When we came to San Francisco, I was such an extrovert that I wanted to get away from Chinatown and be able to mingle with anyone. I looked around, and the first thing I saw when I came here, after I made the resolution in my own mind that I'd like to have people not recognize me as a Chinese in writing, was an optical firm—maybe they were German—with the name of Chinn-Beretta.

I said, "I'm going to adopt that," and from there on I put down my name as Chinn, and my brothers and sisters followed that. I know that so many of my friends have adopted some slight changes in the spelling of their names from those that were given to their families by non-Chinese writers who spelled the names any way they wanted to. I also anglicized my middle name from "Wing" to "Wayne," and my son became Walter Wayne, my grandson Louis Wayne, and my great-grandson Christopher Wayne. Of course, our last names are all Chinn.

I get many postcards from Dick Dillon. Isn't he a friend of yours?

Teiser: Yes, I know him.

Chinn: He wrote me a postcard just this week. He asked, "Do you know a man by the name of So-and-So up in Sonoma County? I'd like to trace him some more." Well, the name he gave me—how can I possibly trace him when we don't have a genealogical society? We don't have anything close to it, and even if we had, the name would not be the same phonetically to different Western writers. One could write Chin, one could write Chen, one could write Chan, and they would all be of the same clan but quite different in districts where they came from. So there's no way we could identify that person. The only way we could start trying to find out would be to get his name written in Chinese, and the district where he came from. Without those two factors you have no way of going out and trying to find someone, and there's no central library that has that Chinese capacity to help trace anyone like that.

Teiser: That's interesting.

Chinese-American Participation in Politics and Public Affairs

Teiser: To continue with your overview of Chinese-Americans today, I gather there has been an increase in their participation in city affairs and politics and so forth. Is that correct?

Chinn: That is correct [laughs], but let me point out—again, these are my personal observations; I have no statistics or research to back me up—that from all my political friends who want to recruit me (let us put it that way) into supporting their political family, I find one of their first requirements is, "How much money can you contribute towards my campaign or towards my candidacy for a certain position?" That is number one. Then, "How many of your

friends can you recruit to help you out in that effort on my behalf?" And, "Why don't more Chinese become involved in politics?"

First of all, you have to remember that up to the present generation—let's go back about thirty years—you will find that few Chinese were able to enter into business, and I don't mean family business. I don't even mean the mom and pop stores whose only employees are members of the family—a family business, so to speak. I'm talking about those who are in businesses that employ many, many people—salaried people who could be fired or hired at a moment's notice.

Non-Chinese people keep asking me, "Why don't Chinese start a big business and become big employers?" And, "Why don't Chinese involve themselves with larger donations for different community affairs and social needs—the homeless, the hungry, Cancer Society, United Way?" You name it—anything. "Why can't they contribute more? Well, if you look into their backgrounds, you find out that the larger community is the reason why they could not contribute more. Chinese were shunted aside, prevented from coming out into the larger society to earn money; they were generally not accepted as partners in non-Chinese businesses. So they were limited by the small amount of capital they had and were only gradually able to work their way up. It's only in the present one or two generations that larger business and endeavors have taken hold. So financially speaking, the Chinese are largely still in the middle-income area only. And bear in mind that mostly they are in the middle-income area only because the entire family income is pooled.

I think one of the reasons why is because of the activists among the Chinese who have finally decided they aren't going to wait any longer; they want to be able to change some of these statistics now, during their lifetime. This attitude developed from the late 1950s on up—let's say from shortly after World War II up to the present time, or the period when most of the activists learned to group together to form nonprofit organizations. Then you have the Asian Law Caucus, the affirmative action groups, the self help for the elderly, the On Lok organization, and so forth. It is strange that it took active court action in many cases to establish their right to change certain laws, to let the public and the media know that such a thing is taking place.

You see so many cases, even of national interest. Let us take an example. A Chinese young man was walking back in the Midwest, when a non-Chinese father and son, who maybe had a couple too many drinks at the nearest bar, came out and decided that this

Oriental was a Japanese, although he was Chinese. The father and son had just lost their jobs at a major auto manufacturing firm, and they blamed it on the Japanese who were encroaching on American auto makers by bringing in Japanese automobiles. So they went after this Chinese

man with a baseball bat and killed him. The law was extremely lenient and gave them probation or only a very small sentence. That was when the Chinese, led by the affirmative action groups and other Chinese who were outraged, made a public outcry against the laws. This was nationally recognized and published and brought about a retrial of this father and son and enforced a stiffer sentence for them.

These things can be multiplied many times by things that happen throughout the country. I don't like to think that it takes a united force to bring about certain changes that normally you would expect to happen, but many of us who have waited a whole lifetime for such changes to take place now realize that it does take a certain amount of political influence and money to bring about change. That is only possible when the Chinese come out and earn more money and decide that they can contribute so much to effect certain changes or to allow certain actions to be taken on their behalf. Gradually the Chinese-Americans are going to lose their status as Chinese-Americans and become viewed as Americans of Chinese decent, if you will. It's taken all this while for all these changes to start taking place.

I feel fortunate in that I can still relate to a lot of these changes, because when I was young I was among those who were discriminated against. By good fortune I was not born in San Francisco's Chinatown where my English probably would have been limited and where my perceptions of the outside community probably would have been diminished. I feel fortunate that I have an overview that probably some do not have.

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Chinn: I like to think of one of my very, very close friends, going back to my Boy Scout days. This particular friend, Lim P. Lee, later became the postmaster of San Francisco. He was proposed as postmaster of San Francisco by Congressman Phillip Burton. He got the post and served for fourteen years. He is a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, and I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Republican. One day Lim P. said, "Why don't you change your status from Republican to Democrat, and I can get you all kinds of appointments." [laughs] I said, "No, I feel I want to be independent." I do not vote a straight Republican ticket; neither do I vote a straight Democratic ticket. I want to feel free to vote as I see fit. I've always been that way, since I first was eligible to be a

voter, and I have voted consistently ever since then—at every election, my own beliefs.

Voter Participation in Chinatown

Teiser: What is the voting record in Chinatown? Do a large percentage of the people eligible to vote actually cast ballots?

Chinn: I don't know the percentage, but I do know that more and more Chinese are becoming voters because many of these Chinese organizations are actively pursuing that, getting more Chinese to become voters. Sometimes I think when they come out and actively sign up voters they're signing up those who are able to do them some good. They get hold of a lot of these newly-made citizens or immigrants who barely understand enough English and use them as their power base. It's unfortunate but it's true, and that would be true of any nationality who comes to this country as new immigrants; they are more or less subsidizing such helpers.

Teiser: Tammany Hall.

Chinn: That's right. [laughters]

Am I too long-steamed on this subject?

Teiser: No, this is fine. I'm so glad you are expressing yourself about it.

Remaining Obstacles to Future Success

Teiser: What would you say were the main problems that the Chinese-American community has still to overcome?

Chinn: Every day it's becoming less and less of a problem as more and more Chinese-Americans come out into the larger community to get employment or because of their acceptance in different organizations. For instance, I'm think of Dennis Wu, who became president of the World Affairs Council, something that was never even dreamed of before. You were lucky if you could even become a member of that council, let alone an official. And there are so many others who have been accepted, for example as president of the San Francisco Medical Society; they've become members of the governor's committees at various levels. These are people who

eventually will have the ability to overcome their reluctance to become a leader, either on a presidential basis in that organization or to strive even higher for state elected positions, like March Fong Eu and others who have entered state positions.

As they get up higher, they find they need more and more of a power base. Of course, that goes back to the basis of your voters, and it takes money. If you go out recruiting for money, I think you'll find, naturally, that if a person knows that you are of non-Chinese background, and all other things being equal, you would be apt to contribute more to the non-Chinese than to the Chinese because of perceptions of the Chinese background—that they were laundrymen or waiters, and therefore less qualified, if you will, to become a person you would want to vote for.

Impact of Wealthy Hong Kong Families on Politics and Business

Teiser: Is the influx of money from China—mainly Hong Kong now, I guess—changing that?

Chinn: You will find out that to a certain extent everything relates to money. As an illustration only, James Ho is now deputy mayor of San Francisco, on Mayor Art Agnos's staff. His family is very, very well known in Hong Kong, and very rich. Naturally that means his associates are among that group of Chinese that was written up by the San Francisco *Examiner* some time back, whose children are now in San Francisco buying property for the day when Hong Kong is no longer English-controlled.

And that is so true. If they come over here, they can buy up certain properties; their families are multimillionaires or billionaires, and they have the money and the influence. If you want to get a good idea of how powerful that is, I have a good friend in Canada who put me on a subscription list for a Canadian newspaper. I can see where the Canadian government is recruiting strongly for Hong Kong money and people. There have been many, many billions of dollars of investment in Vancouver. A Chinese named David Lam donated quite a few millions

to Canadian universities and other good works that earned him the gratitude of the Canadian government. Not long ago he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia.

Do you remember in 1962, or even more recently than that, a world's fair that was held in Vancouver? All of that land where the fair was located was bought by Hong Kong people. They are developing that gradually. Of course, they have to go through

that mesh of bureaucratic permission. They have just been spending hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars. If you have a million dollars, you can buy a passport and go into Vancouver and become a citizen—a joint citizen of Canada as well as Hong Kong. So when Hong Kong is unacceptable as a Chinese entity, then they can go to Vancouver, where most of their money is. Their children are now taking care of their property for them either in Canada or in America. Those few accepted ones in England are also doing well.

Teiser: Is it more difficult to be accepted in England?

Chinn: Yes, because England is more choosy in accepting them.

Teiser: It's afraid of everybody from Hong Kong coming there.

Chinn: Yes, that's right.

Teiser: I'm sure we, too, are trying to attract Chinese money.

Chinn: Oh, yes, a certain amount. But you are also finding out that the more you accept that, the more resentful the non-Chinese are because a lot of them feel we have more than our share of Orientals here now. Like San Francisco—they say a good 25 or 30 percent, or even higher, are Orientals now in San Francisco.

Teiser: Occasionally there's an incident like the Park 55 Hotel that's owned by the son of a Hong Kong—

Chinn: Yes, the Chan family.

Teiser: They've been holding out against unions. That must create resentment.

Chinn: That does, but by the same token you will find that this Chan family operates worldwide and has hotels in many, many countries. In none of them do they hire union help, except in one case—I can't remember where—they had to in order to stay in business. They bought the hotel but then found there was an ironclad union rule.

Teiser: Every time I read about this, I'm rather sorry about it.

Chinn: Well, we all are, because when you're in a country—San Francisco used to be one of the strongest union cities in the country—you should accept that if you want to be accepted.

Opportunities for New Chinese Immigrants

Teiser: You've told a great deal about many things. Perhaps to make a conclusion you can tell me what you would say to a young Chinese man visiting here from China if he came to you and said, "I want to live in the United States and have a family here. What should I do to be a successful

American resident?"

Chinn: First of all you have to give me an idea of what type of a person this is—one who is just barely literate in Chinese and not at all in English?

Teiser: A person literate in Chinese, but not necessarily literate in English.

Chinn: I would say that during his lifetime, if he's not a rich man, he cannot hope to be a success unless he has the money to support himself or start a business to better his family's situation. During his lifetime the chances of his being a big success are very, very limited, but for his children it would be unlimited because he should work to send his children for a better education and a trade, if possible, or a profession. Then he should keep out of his children's way regarding what they want to do, because if he keeps tight rein on them and want them to do what he wants instead of what the children want, that will delay progress to the second generation. But if he leaves his children alone, then in today's world he could probably reap the successes that his children are able to bring to him—but only in the way of satisfaction to him, because he can never be more than the father or mother of that child or children.

Assimilation and Success

Chinn: I don't see it any other way, because it's not only ourselves; you take any other nationality, and you'll find that same problem. You have to assimilate not only in language but in the culture of the new country. If you are already an adult, your chances of fully integrating into American society might be limited, excepting in your particular community where most of your neighbors are of the same nationality and the same background. Once you get out of that, you're like a fish out of water. You have to learn to get along with your neighbors, and if your neighbors are not of your background it's tough when you're a mature person. For instance, they all have different pursuits in their locations and work habits, in their society and their organizations. You wouldn't join another association if you couldn't speak the language decently or didn't have the same interests as they did.

David Lam Centre Offers A Wealth Of Information

By Jo Moss

VANCOUVER — Everyone is talking about selling business goods in the vast markets of Southeast Asia.

But as a successful company, where do you find out what market opportunities there are for your specific product in, say, Thailand?

The David Lam Management Research Centre in the Faculty of Commerce at UBC has the information. While the building doesn't yet exist, the top-notch Asia-Pacific programs and services do, tucked away in cramped quarters in the Commerce building or operating from other campus locations. By late 1991 they will be brought together and housed in a new building.

"Come to our library first of all and we can access our databanks to provide you with up-to-date information," says Commerce Dean Peter Lusztig, who with Commerce Professor Michael Goldberg, now head of Vancouver's International Finance Centre, came up with the idea of establishing such a forum for knowledge

exchange.

The David Lam Management Research Library, opened in 1985 in a temporary location, has one of the most comprehensive collections of Asia Pacific business materials: 1,000 journal serial titles (500 of them active including the Asian Wall Street Journal), 4,000 reference books, country reports and government publications. It has B.C.'s largest collection of annual reports — 4,000 Canadian companies, 10,000 American companies and the top 500 international companies; preliminary research results from 70 leading business schools in North America, Europe, Australia and Southeast Asia; not to mention a computerized data search service with access to 500 international data bases.

It also has ABI/Inform Ondisc, a compact disc indexing system which offers abstracts of 800 management journals from the last five years.

Heavily used, the library fields enquiries from all over North America.

If that's not enough information for your company's needs, consult one of the faculty's 11 research bureaus. They cover areas as diverse as international business, real estate and transportation. Chances are someone studying Thai markets could brief your company on business opportunities.

Better yet, the Commerce Faculty may organize a weekend seminar, with experts from other campus departments and from provincial government ministries, on how companies like yours could do business in Thailand, Lusztig said.

Sharing information is the whole idea behind the research centre. "Anyone, from small businesses to large corporations, academics to government, can take advantage of what's available," Lusztig said. "It will be there."

Construction is scheduled to begin on the David Lam Management Research Centre building this year. A five-storey complex, it will have conference facilities, seminar rooms, a cafeteria, the David Lam Management Research Library, research bureaus and a student placement service. Initiated by a $1-million donation from Vancouver businessman, philanthropist and B.C.'s Lieutenant-Governor David Lam, the project is being supported by others in

the B.C. business community.

As a community resource, the centre will operate on a cost-recovery basis. "It will support research by faculty members and bring the government, private sector and labor organizations closer to the university," Lusztig said. Up to now, a complex where these groups could meet to share ideas and collaborate on research has been lacking.

The Faculty of Commerce building is strained to capacity, especially on evenings and weekends when more than 10,000 participants every year, from across North America and overseas, take advantage of continuing education business programs. "We were turning away activity because of the lack of space," Lusztig said.

The research centre will be the next step in the faculty's well-established track record of business expertise in the Asia Pacific. It was the first to initiate Canadian academic ties with Asia, setting up business programs in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and later in China, long before such links were recognized as being important. It now has a network of affiliations throughout Southeast Asia.

—UBC REPORTS

Importance of Learning to Speak English

Teiser: Suppose the person who came to you for advice were a very young man who was bright and had been a good student in China and was literate in Chinese, but not necessarily in English. What would you tell him if he were very young?

Chinn: I would first of all find out if he is sufficiently equipped financially to get into education or to learn a trade if it's not something that will give him a title, because without that and without a basic attempt to learn the English language you are always going to be at a handicap.

Teiser: He's willing to learn the English language.

Chinn: Then I would say that his first priority is to learn English sufficiently so that he can converse on almost any subject. For instance, if a person is going to be a mayor of any large city in the United States, he is going to have prominent people from all over the world visiting here. It will be necessary that he can converse in proper and adequate English with them on any subject.

I've always felt that when this country was founded on the basis that "all men are created equal"—the founding fathers never dreamed that immigrants from around the world would try to convert the English language to the country of their origin.

By becoming a United States of many "official tongues," we would become another Europe—a country of many tongues and only a step away from seceding into separate states. If we immigrate here, we should wish to build up instead of eroding our foundation.

That is why I am in favor of the "English first" amendment they're trying to pass, in spite of the fact that the majority of the Chinese who don't know better may not support it. I'm so

sorry, because, after all, if you come to this country and don't want to learn this country's language, just because it has not been officially written in the law of the country that English is your first language, then we are just going to be another casualty some years down the line. This issue is just going to separate us, divide us. I think of those Latinos who want Spanish to be the first language, and in Canada they want French-speaking Quebec to be a separate province; it's dividing the country. Of course I also realize how difficult it is for new grown up immigrants to try to learn English; but that's all the more reason they should encourage their children to attend school. We *are* in America!

Teiser: I'm sure it's one of the reasons Yugoslavia is falling apart.

I'm grateful to you for your discussion of the factors in amelioration of the population and integration. This has been a most informative series of interview sessions, and we thank you for the time and effort you've devoted to the project.

Interview with Daisy Lorraine Wong Chinn

I Family Background and Early Years

##

Family

Teiser: We always start by asking people when and where they were born.

Chinn: I was born in San Francisco, right in Chinatown at 60 Wentworth Place.

Teiser: Then, according to *Bridging the Pacific*, your family moved?

Chinn: We first moved to Stockton, and later we moved to Hanford when I was around six or seven.

Teiser: Your father, Walter F. Wong, was first a pharmacist's assistant?

Chinn: When we were in Hanford he was an interpreter for an herbalist, Y. T. Sue, who was older than my father. At that time, when the herbalist had patients who did not speak Chinese they always had an interpreter.

Teiser: How did he get such good English that he could be an interpreter?

Chinn: I really don't know. All his life he was a self-taught man. Besides the regular well-known Chinese musical instruments, he learned to play the banjo, the accordion, and the zither (by correspondence courses, I believe). He had beautiful handwriting in English and in Chinese calligraphy. Of course, at that time I was too young to take notice of such things, but as I grew older I became aware of them. I knew that he did not have much formal schooling.

Teiser: Had he been born in China?

Chinn: No, he was born here, too, and so was my mother. I think they were both born in San Francisco; I know they were born over here in the United States.

Teiser: Did they have similar feelings to Tom's about being part of the American tradition, or were they in such a compartmented part that they couldn't—?

Chinn: I really couldn't say, but I know they were very modern as far as things were concerned. By modern I mean they didn't stick with the Chinese traditional thoughts and other cultural things.

Teiser: Were they patriotic Americans? That would have been tested in World War I.

Chinn: Yes. I was born in 1908, and we were in the war between 1914 and 1918. He didn't go in.

Teiser: Your father must have been well educated, then, because he became an herbalist himself.

Chinn: Of course he gained that over the years. We were there for three or four years, and he probably gained that knowledge while he was interpreting.

Teiser: Then you came back to San Francisco?

Chinn: Yes, when I was in the third grade—about nine years old.

Teiser: Was it difficult for you to come into a school here?

Chinn: Not really. I felt very comfortable.

Girlhood in Hanford, California

Chinn: When I was in school in Hanford, people were very good to me. I never felt any racism or anything like that. In fact, I remember very distinctly there was a French girl named Yvonne, and I think she came from a quite well-to-do family. We were not well-off; my dad was just plugging along. She would bring me home to her house after school and show me her dolls. I

always remember that, because I didn't have any dolls. I always remember Yvonne, a blonde French girl. [laughs]

Teiser: In Chinese families were dolls not as common as in Caucasian families, or was it just that they were expensive?

Chinn: I guess it was because we couldn't afford them, because we do have Chinese dolls.

Teiser: When you came back here, school was all right, then?

Chinn: Yes, the Oriental school where we went—all Chinese pupils.

Teiser: Do you feel that being in a non-Oriental school in Hanford helped your English?

Chinn: It might have, but I had very good teachers at the Oriental School. I imagine it did give me a better background. They treated me very well in the school in Hanford. For example, they had a play and included me in it. I think I was about the only Oriental pupil in that school, but they would include me in different things. In fact, when we had a play about fairyland—I guess I was in the second grade or so—they made the costumes, but we were all supposed to wear white shoes. I went home and told my mother, and she said, "No, we can't afford white shoes. I'll get you a new pair of shoes, but they have to be black." So [laughs] I was the only fairy with a pair of black patent shoes. It's the little things that I always remember.

Teiser: Did you have any special interests in grammar school?

Chinn: No.

Father's Employment in San Francisco

Teiser: When you moved back to San Francisco, what was your father's first occupation?

Chinn: I can't remember what he did first, but I know he ended up at Boericke & Runyon Pharmacy.

Teiser: He was able to translate his herbal knowledge into Western—?

Chinn: I don't think so. I think he started first as a janitor, because in those days the Oriental people didn't have many

opportunities to do other things. Later they let him become a clerk in the pharmacy.

Teiser: Then did he have a garment factory of his own?

Chinn: That was later, about the late 1920s. Before that we were out on Buchanan Street, and he was an herbalist out there.

Teiser: He had his own shop?

Chinn: Yes, he had his own, but it wasn't a shop. In those days a lot of people would rent a house with two stories, and the family would live on the upper floor. On the lower floor would be his herbal office. Also, I remember he used to brew tea in the kitchen of the lower floor for the patient, but I can't recall how he got the herbs—whether they had to go out first to an herb shop, or whether he had a supply of his own. There are hundreds of herbs, so I don't see how he could have a supply on hand.

Teiser: What part of Buchanan Street was that?

Chinn: The 1800 block.

Teiser: Is that about where Japantown is now?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: So you were out of Chinatown, then?

Chinn: Yes.

Teiser: Did you like that?

Chinn: Yes, I think I did. At that age, certain things didn't bother me that much. I just went along with life. [laughs]

High School in San Francisco

Teiser: Where did you go to high school?

Chinn: I went to Girls' High School.

Teiser: You had to qualify for that, didn't you? Didn't you have to be a good student to go there?

Chinn: I don't recall that, but most of us there were good students. In other words, at least among the Chinese girls it was considered prestigious to go to Girls' High, although all the boys went to Polytechnic High. After I went to Girls' High, I wished I had gone to Polytechnic High, because I missed all the basketball games, and all the boys were there. When we were in Girls' High, we had to dance with each other in the gym when we had recess.

Teiser: Did you develop special interests during your high school years?

Chinn: I majored in math, because I hoped to be a math teacher. So I had four years of math, four years of science, two of Latin, two of Spanish. The others were obligatory, like English and U.S. history.

Teiser: It gave you a good background for the University of California, then.

Chinn: I think so.

Teiser: Probably better than most other University freshmen.

Chinn: I passed Subject A without any trouble, so they must have given me a good background. [laughs]

Father's Garment Factory

Teiser: I'm interested in something about your father's garment factory.

Chinn: In those days they mostly did denim pants or pants with a bib (overalls) for younger children. Those were the two things, but mostly denim trousers. The larger factories would do their own cutting. They had these electric cutters. The denim would be piled up about that [demonstrates eight inches] high, and then they would cut the whole stack following the outline of the pattern. But the smaller factories, like the one my father had—he had about fifteen employees—received the denim already cut. They came in great big bundles; each bundle had about five dozen, all the same size in each bundle, of course.

When they were first delivered, the workers who had a chance to go there first usually took the medium size because the larger sizes needed more sewing and the smaller sizes were harder to handle. The medium size was the best size to get hold of, because you got paid by the piece, regardless of size.

We had the different machines: the ones that do the double fold, and then it comes out in a double seam; the underpart curls up, and the upper part curls like this [demonstrates], and the machines do a double stitch. Then we had the machines that did the tacking—the reinforcements. And we had the buttonhole machine and then the button machine. All those were separate machines. There were people who did the folding after they were sewn.

Teiser: Were they all women who worked there?

Chinn: No, both men and women did the sewing. Also, all the workers got their meals free. The shop hired a cook, and he cooked them lunch and dinner. Every fifteenth of the month they had a special dinner for all the workers, and at that time they made fancier dishes. We always looked forward to the fifteenth of the month.

Teiser: It sounds like an excellent work system.

Chinn: It worked out good, I think. By the way, that was at 708 Kearny Street.

Teiser: It seems like a system that would keep workers there for a long time, that they would have been loyal, too.

Chinn: Yes. I think in those days generally workers were pretty loyal.

Teiser: It sounds as if you worked there. Did you?

Chinn: Yes. I started working there when I was twelve years old. There were no child labor laws at that time, if you recall. But before I worked at my father's factory—before he had a factory—my mother was already working in another denim factory, and I used to work there Saturdays. I would make about five dollars on Saturday, which was quite good. I usually did buttonholes. It's fascinating. It stitches one way and comes back, and that forms the buttonhole, and then the same machine makes a little reinforcement at the end. Then a knife comes down and makes a hole.

Teiser: You must have to have nimble fingers.

Chinn: Yes, you do, and I've gotten mine caught in needles before. [laughs]

Teiser: Often in recent years garment factories have been staffed by women who come for a few hours or at irregular times so that they can take care of their families.

Chinn: If I recall correctly, generally they just stayed there, and they didn't bring their families—not at my mother's place. When she worked at the other place, as I remember, not babies but little ones about three or four years old would come. I remember them being around.

Teiser: It's a very flexible system that I guess works well.

Chinn: When my mother worked at the other factory, she always worked full days.

Teiser: Where did the garments go that came from your father's factory?

Chinn: I guess they must have had a contract with some company or group, and it just went back to them.

Childhood Employment

Teiser: You, then, worked at other places, too, during your school days.

Chinn: Oh, yes. I worked at the Aladdin Studio on Sutter below Stockton. It was run by two Jewish sisters, Minnie and (I can't remember the other sister's name) Mooser. They had a lot of celebrities there. They used to pay us thirty-five cents an hour, and we would work about three hours for lunch, from eleven to two. And we made good tips. The people who used to come were people like Sophie Tucker; Harry Houdini; Vivian and Rosetta Duncan, the sisters who played in "Topsy and Eva."

Teiser: That must have been exciting.

Chinn: Yes, it was. We served, and if we wanted to we could work through tea time. The thing is that when we were there we had to iron napkins. Their napkins were all washed. We didn't use paper napkins in those days; they were always cloth. Any

time we were not busy we had to go into the ironing room and iron napkins. She would provide us with colorful cotton aprons, but we had to take those home every week—we only worked Saturdays—and launder them ourselves. But it was all right.

Teiser: Did you wear traditional Chinese clothing?

Chinn: Yes, the little jacket and the pants.

Teiser: Did you have those at home anyway?

Chinn: No, we had to either make them ourselves or buy them. I'm sure we made them ourselves; I don't think we bought them. And I know they weren't tailored. [laughs]

Teiser: I'm sure that made you more quaint-looking for the guests.

Chinn: Yes, I guess that was the idea. The nighttime girls who worked dinner—the dinner hour was five to eight—made fifty cents an hour, and they made better tips. I had a very good friend, a

schoolmate, who worked the dinner hour. In those days the Bank of Italy—[A. P.] Giannini was the Bank of Italy—had representatives who came to the Oriental School. They went all over the city to different schools, and they would open a savings account for you, even though it was five or ten cents. This girlfriend used to be able to save five dollars every week. That was very good for her, just from her tips.

Teiser: Did you start a savings account, too, when you were in school?

Chinn: Yes. I didn't save that much.

Teiser: Do I remember that the Aladdin Studio had a reputation for being not a speakeasy, but for serving liquor during Prohibition?

Chinn: Not that I recall. I think I was there after that time.

Teiser: Did you have other jobs after school?

Chinn: We had small jobs. Like the YWCA was always looking for girls—how shall I put it? For instance, if a socialite had a big party and wanted a couple of girls there to receive the hats and coats of their guests, then they would call the YWCA, and the YWCA would find girls for them. Those paid fifty cents an hour. We were always thrilled to go—we would get in our Chinese costumes, of course—because it gave us a chance

to see how the other half of the world lived and also to see the insides of these beautiful mansions around Pacific Heights and so forth.

One other time there was a movie about China, and they had a Chinese baritone sing for the prologue. My girlfriend and I sat in the box seats, and they would play the spotlight on us. We would just pretend we were drinking tea. I don't know, in those days there were a lot of little flourishes like that.

Teiser: That was fairly adventurous.

Chinn: It was. And we got to go to the other areas, behind the curtain, for instance, where the theater was.

Teiser: You had a Caucasian friend in Hanford. Did you have one here in San Francisco?

Chinn: No. We had friends in high school, but they weren't really close friends.

Teiser: You never went to their houses?

Chinn: No.

Teiser: When I was in grammar school in Portland in the 1920s, we had one pair of Chinese children in our class, Charlie and Alice Sue, who were twins. Everybody liked them. They were nice, quiet, and very friendly. It was known that they had very little money, but I don't think anybody had any feelings about them one way or the other; they were just other kids.

University of California, Berkeley, 1927-1931

Teiser: You decided to go to the University of California. Whose decision was that?

Chinn: Mine. My mother said if I wanted to go I could, if I could earn enough money after classes to keep me going. In those days the tuition for people who lived in California was either twenty-five dollars or free. The twenty-five dollars sticks in my mind; either it was free for Californians and twenty-five dollars for out-of-state students, or it was twenty-five dollars for Californians and something more for out-of-state students. So it wasn't really that difficult.

We didn't have much social life there, of course, because I always had to come back over to this side of the bay to go to work after classes.

Teiser: You lived at home?

Chinn: Oh, yes, definitely. While we were over there we went to the YWCA very often; that was one place we did go to. We used to either bring our lunch or buy something at the deli, and we ate at the [student] union. One social event that freshmen Chinese always looked forward to was the party at the Chinese Students' Club. I don't remember where that was located, but it was on campus. They always had an initiation for freshmen students into the club. It was something very simple, but I remember mine very well because they made this Chinese boy propose to me. I was seated, and he knelt and proposed to me. I had a raw egg in my hand, and after he proposed to me I hit it over his head. [laughter] I hadn't planned that; the club planned it, and they had given me the raw egg ahead of time. I remember it very well—just little simple things.

Teiser: How many Chinese students were there when you were there?

Chinn: There were only six girls on the whole campus. I even remember all of their names.

Teiser: Who were they?

Chinn: First of all, there was Elizabeth Hall, who just retired four years back as principal of one of the schools around here. She is the sister of Dr. James Hall. Then there was Stella Lee, whose father was an interpreter for immigration, I think. She lived in Berkeley. Renmi Jue lived in Berkeley, too. Daisy K. Wong, a senior. By the way, Daisy K. Wong also worked at Aladdin Studio as a pantry girl. Ella Dong was the sister of Dr. Collin Dong, who wrote *The Arthritic Cookbook*. And myself makes six. But there were lots of Chinese boys!

Teiser: Did you have Caucasian friends there?

Chinn: No, I didn't have time for that. I was too busy coming back to go to work.

Teiser: Isn't that too bad?

Chinn: Yes, those are the things I missed—all the extracurricular things.

Teiser: Did you like your classes?

Chinn: Yes. They are a little bit hazy in my mind. I took math, of course; I continued with math. And I took German. I don't know why; I just felt that German would be good if I were to teach math. Then I took philosophy, where I studied Plato.

##

Teiser: And did you say you took Mandarin?

Chinn: Yes, I took Mandarin because I needed a few more credits, but I didn't do well at all in it because I just wouldn't stand up to speak when I was asked to. I thought that, being Chinese, I should be able to give a good presentation, but I wouldn't open my mouth. I passed, but I got a D. That was about the first D I ever got in school! [laughs]

Teiser: Was it easy for you to learn Mandarin, though?

Chinn: I guess it would have been.

Teiser: Do you remember any of it any more? Do you use it?

Chinn: No. I can only count to ten, and that's about it.

Teiser: Did you speak Chinese at home?

Chinn: Oh, yes, Cantonese.

Teiser: When you first met Tom, did you speak Chinese together, or did you speak English?

Chinn: English, as a rule. I think in Tom's and my age group and where we were brought up, we usually mixed the two together, because at home we spoke Chinese, and socially we usually spoke English.

Teiser: Which language do you think in?

Chinn: I had never thought about that. I think I think in both, because many times in one sentence we would have both English and Cantonese.

Teiser: Can you give me an example of a sentence like that?

Chinn: I want two pounds of *ngow* (beef stew); that would be what we would say. "Two pounds" of *ngow nam.*

Teiser: Why did you stop going to the University of California?

Chinn: Because I couldn't keep up with the pressure of earning enough to continue.

Teiser: It wasn't just your marriage to Tom?

Chinn: Not exactly. It may have had something to do with it, because we were married in 1930.

Teiser: But it was too much to work and go to school?

Chinn: Yes, mainly that.

Teiser: So you went there just two years.

Chinn: A year and a half, and then I went to the University of California Extension.

Marriage, 1930

Teiser: Then in 1930 you married Tom?

Chinn: Yes. In 1929 we were engaged, and in 1930 we were married. They still believed in engagements at that time. [laughs]

Teiser: Did your families both think you were well matched?

Chinn: I don't think they ever gave an opinion like that. As long as they did not object, then we just assumed that they thought it would be all right.

Teiser: No problems?

Chinn: No.

Teiser: You had a rather gala wedding, didn't you?

Chinn: During that period a great many people who wanted to marry in the traditional Western way had their weddings at the banquet hall in Chinatown. They set up a little altar with candelabra and flowers and all that, and then they would rent an upright piano right in the banquet hall. There was a bridal room, and you just had a short wedding march. You had the ceremony there, and then right after the ceremony the banquet was right there. That's the way they used to do it. I guess it went on

for eight or nine years like that. Of course, not everybody did it that way. Some would get married in church and then have a banquet, but generally there was always a Chinese banquet.

Teiser: Was the marriage ceremony Protestant?

Chinn: Yes. Most of my friends were Protestants, so I guess that's all that I recall. My parents wanted to put a little Chinese flavor into the wedding part of it, so they hired these three Chinese musicians. Hang Far Low [the restaurant] on Grant Avenue, was where we were married. It had three floors, and there was a staircase going up to the third floor banquet room. At the head of the stairs on the third floor there were these three musicians. One had a flute, one had a two-stringed instrument called the *erh-hu* (that means two-something in Mandarin; I don't know what the *hu* stands for), and the third man had a great big cymbal. Usually the flute went first, the *erh-hu* joined in, and then as the guests came up—the stairway was not straight up; you make a turn—the cymbal would sound. It was really—well, loud might be the word for it. [laughs]

Teiser: Were there traditional Chinese foods at the banquet?

Chinn: I don't even remember what we had, but I'm sure it was Chinese and traditional, because banquets usually go a certain way—a nine-course banquet, as we always used to call them.

Teiser: Did you have a honeymoon, then?

Chinn: Yes, we went to Fallen Leaf Lodge at Lake Tahoe. We took the train up.

Teiser: Were there many Chinese at Fallen Leaf then?

Chinn: No. We were the only ones. [laughs]

Housing and Racism

Teiser: You then settled down here. Where did you and Tom live?

Chinn: That's another long story. We lived in an apartment in Chinatown on Stockton near Sacramento, right next to the Stockton Street tunnel entrance. The first time we felt a little racism was later

on, when we thought we were able to

buy a house. We drove out to Riviera Street and looked at a house, and we liked it. At that time Tom had a typesetting plant on Brenham Place. They used to have a Chinatown [police] squad, plainclothes men whose beat was Chinatown, and when we came back to Chinatown one day, one of the plainclothes men came to the shop and talked to Tom. He said, "I understand you were looking at a house out on Riviera Street. I would advise you not to buy it." Tom said, "How did you know that I was out there looking?" He said, "Because the neighbors took your license number and checked with the Motor Vehicle Department. That's how we got to know who the person was who went out there." Consequently, we didn't buy it. We just stayed in apartment houses.

Teiser: You did later buy a house, didn't you?

Chinn: Oh, yes, but much later. It was in 1942 that we bought a house down the peninsula. This incident was much earlier, about the mid-1930s.

II Employment and Volunteer Activities

Career with Western Union, 1929-1971

Getting the Job

Teiser: When did you start your own career?

Chinn: With Western Union? In late 1929.

Teiser: I believe Tom's book said that you had taken a test—?

Chinn: No, there was an essay contest back in grammar school, in the eighth grade. The Community Chest, which was the forerunner of United Way, had a contest for grammar school children in San Francisco. The title was, "Suppose Nobody Cared?" We were all supposed to write about that theme. I had a very wonderful teacher in the eighth grade, Miss Agnes O'Neill. She entered my composition, and I came out first in the city. That was nice. I don't remember getting anything but just a little write-up and my picture in the paper. My first publicity picture. [laughs]

Teiser: I was about to ask you about getting a job with Western Union.

Chinn: In those days corporations very seldom hired Oriental people. As a rule, when they did hire Orientals it was because they were opening a Chinatown branch or something that had to do with Chinatown. This was the same thing that happened to me. Western Union decided to open a Chinatown branch at Grant Avenue and Sacramento Street. They had already hired the male manager, who was a Chinese fellow, of course, named Ming S. Jung. He had already been with the China Mail, a steamship line, so he was an experienced fellow. He called up the hairdresser when I happened to be there and asked if she knew

of three Chinese girls who might be interested in working for Western Union. This girl turned around and asked the ones there, and of course I said, "Oh, I would." I guess there were quite a number of girls interested later on, but I was one of the three girls that they selected.

Teiser: Did you have to be interviewed?

Chinn: Yes, I was interviewed. They did tell me that the reason they took me was because I had already had two years of extra schooling, whereas most of the others had just finished high school. In those days very few Chinese girls went to college; that you can tell from there being just six of us there at Cal.

Training Program

Chinn: They sent us to school in San Jose, and we stayed at a hotel. This went on for three months. At the school there was no feeling as to whether I was Chinese or not; we were all very compatible. There were only about thirty people at one time in the school; there were three different classes, and there would be ten in each class. In the first class you had to go through spelling lessons again, and especially the spelling of different cities like Saskatchewan and places like that. Geography was included in this class.

The second class was what they called "routine," and that is how to run the teletype machine. The third class was how the teletype worked. In that class you had to learn how the machine worked and to make certain little repairs, but the main thing was that you had to tell the story of the printer. The story of the printer is that you tell what happens when you push one letter on the machine—what electrical impulse it starts off, which ratchet pushes which cam, how it goes from one section of the machine to the other, and how it comes out on the tape punched as letter A or B or C. That was the story of the printer. Most of the girls flunked it, but I came out with an A. I felt it was because I had had all these math classes. Your mind functions that way; it goes from one thing to another to another.

When we graduated after three months, the students wanted me to be president of the class, and I thought that was very nice. I realized that I was Chinese, and I thought it was an honor for them to select me. We had a little song—I selected it—called "When the Moon Comes over the Mountain." Do you remember that old song?

Teiser: I do, indeed.

Chinn: I made up some appropriate words for the class, and we sang that at our little farewell luncheon. The principal of the school wrote to the superintendent of Western Union and said that up to that time in that school I had made the best record of any employee they had had before. That was rather nice.

Teiser: Did they pay you while you were going to school?

Chinn: I don't remember. They must have, although at that time we were making thirty-five cents an hour when we started. But it went a long way in those days.

Responsibilities

Teiser: Then you came back to San Francisco and took a job?

Chinn: We were already promised a job before we went to school. I guess they figured that we should be able to pass whatever was necessary.

Teiser: What job did they put you in?

Chinn: They always started you off as a teletypist; you just sat at the teletype machine. There was a clerk who sent the messengers out. He—usually it's a he—enveloped all the telegrams that we pasted down. Then there was a manager and a counter clerk. In the smaller offices the counter clerk was both the manager and the delivery clerk.

Teiser: Did you enjoy the job?

Chinn: Oh, yes. People were very good to me. I didn't encounter any so-called racism.

Teiser: Were there other Chinese in the office?

Chinn: Not in my office. There were the other two girls, but one got sick and didn't finish, and the other girl stayed awhile—a few years.

Teiser: This office was in Chinatown?

Chinn: I forgot to tell you that they never did open the Chinatown branch. My first office was at 657 Montgomery Street.

Teiser: Oh, in the financial district.

Chinn: Yes. I stayed forty-one years at various offices and in San Mateo when we lived there. During World War II most people were working at the shipyards and making good money, and I wanted to quit and go there. I was already married by that time, of course, and Tom's mother said to me, "You're not really young any more, and you've given quite a number of years to Western Union. I really feel it would be better if you stayed with Western Union because you've had all these years with them." I'm glad I did, because naturally the war ended, and I wouldn't have had a job at the shipyards anyway.

Teiser: In the meantime you'd had a son. Did they give you time off to have your son?

Chinn: Yes. I just took three months off, because my mother-in-law was still young, and she stayed with him. She more or less raised him.

Teiser: As you continued with the company, did your duties change?

Chinn: Yes. First of all, we had a union, so that was good because you got to bid on the jobs.

Teiser: Did you always have a union?

Chinn: Yes. I went from a teletypist to a delivery clerk, as they called it. As the years went by, I transferred down to San Mateo because we lived there nine years. Then I transferred back up here, and I worked at Mills Tower. They were all nice offices. I ended up as manager of the Van Ness Avenue branch, at Pine Street. That branch and the Mission Street branch were the two top branches in the city—the two largest, with the heaviest volume.

Teiser: How many people did you have working for you?

Chinn: We had a day and a night force there. In the daytime we had four people, and at nighttime we only had two, I think. There were about a dozen auto and bicycle messengers. I didn't have to work nights; I worked daytime.

Teiser: People now forget how important Western Union was. That was the way to get quick messages.

Chinn: Yes. We used to be in competition with the Postal Telegraph, you know. We had these machines where the businesses rang in, and you would read the numbers and know who it was calling in.

We always had to be right on the spot with that. You had to learn all that so that the Postal Telegraph wouldn't get there first ahead of us.

Teiser: Catherine Harroun, my friend with whom I worked for so many years, started working at Wells Fargo receiving teletype messages from Western Union. And in my first regular job after college, I pasted up stock quotations with this—

Chinn: Oh, yes, we call that a gummer. It has a little sponge at the end and water in the middle of a tube.

Teiser: Yes, a dreadful machine. You had to sit there and do it fast.

Chinn: Sometimes when it got busy we would have tape piled up on the floor; it just keeps coming from the machine, and you can't paste that fast.

Teiser: And the newspaper people wanted you to do it fast so they could get the edition out.

When did you retire?

Chinn: In 1971.

Assisting Thomas W. Chinn on the *Chinese Digest*

Teiser: Meanwhile, I think Tom said you had been a great help when he was publishing a newspaper, the *Chinese Digest*.

Chinn: Yes, the weekly. Well, I proofread everything.

Teiser: He's lucky to have gotten someone with a good education in English essays.

Chinn: Well, I thought I was of some help, and because I had such a good background in grammar, I did go over all the articles that came in for grammatical errors—as well as I could, of course. I did proofread everything.

Teiser: Have you since read and proofread what he's written?

Chinn: Sometimes. To tell you the truth, I have never been much of a historian. I never even became interested. Because I was interested in math, I did not like geography or history. Not

until I married Tom and years later he founded the historical society did I become interested in history. While he was doing the *Chinese Digest*, I was working for Western Union. Many

was the night I would be proofreading before the deadline until two or three a.m., and then the next morning I would go to work at nine-thirty at Western Union. Being young, you can take something like that.

The Square and Circle Club

Forming the Club

Teiser: As a member of San Francisco's Chinese women's group—

Chinn: Oh, the Square and Circle group?

Teiser: You must have been active in Chinatown social affairs all the time, in various groups.

Chinn: More or less. In the 1920s there was a boys' group in the Chinese Congregational Church, and also there was a girls' group. We had lots of parties together. We used to use International House here in San Francisco for a lot of different parties—anniversaries or Christmas parties and so forth. When I was fourteen, the Square and Circle Club came into being. One other girl and I were the younger members. We needed someone older to organize things, but we were the youngest of seven girls. All seven of us belonged to the Chinese Congregational Church. We hadn't thought of organizing a club, but every Sunday we usually stayed around the church social hall.

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Chinn: We would read the Sunday papers, and generally we worked together on a big crossword puzzle. We enjoyed doing that.

Then we read about the flood and famine in China, and someone said, "Why don't we try to raise some money and send it back to China to help out?" That's how the Square and Circle Club got started. We decided to form a little club, and the first thing we did, as I recall, was to hold a raffle on a hope chest. We tried to fill it with handmade articles. In those days all of us either crocheted, knitted, or embroidered. We did a lot of embroidery on towels—the usual things that go into a hope chest—but mainly we all worked together once a week on a full-sized bedspread. In those days

they usually had unbleached muslin stamped for embroidery. This was a great big thing, and we all got together and worked on that. That is what I remember most.

We sold raffle tickets for twenty-five cents, and we raised—not too much, but something, and we sent it back to China.

Teiser: How did you find who to send it to in China?

Chinn: I guess the older ones took care of that. Daisy K. Wong was a senior at Cal. The others were all four or five years older, so they would be eighteen or nineteen. I think they could easily have found out where to send the money from the Chinese Six Companies; that would have been very simple, I think.

Social Activities

Chinn: Anyway, back to the social activities we had. Generally there would these raffles, or sometimes we would give public dances. In those days you didn't have to worry about rowdy people coming in. If you had a dance, people paid to come in and everything just went smoothly. We might charge seventy-five cents a person. We'd hire a hall and have a little orchestra. Then we had private dances, where the boys' group, called the Yoke Choy Club, would have their anniversaries, and of course the girls got invited by the boys at those social gatherings.

We loved to go hiking in Muir Woods, and on weekends we'd go over on the ferry. The Yoke Choy group was very musical, and they had boys who played the ukelele. Oh, it was fun. We'd sit out in the open part of the ferry, and the boys would play the ukelele and everybody would sing. Then we'd get to Muir Woods and have a hike.

When Moffett Field was first opened, we would have a hayride down to Moffett Field to look at the hangar, because it was something new. That was a thrill.

Teiser: How did you do that? Did you take a train down?

Chinn: No, the hayride would start with a great big truck with wooden sides. They'd fill the back with hay, and we'd all sit in there. I can still picture it—all these slats on the side, and all the hay in the middle, and everybody piled in. In fact, we had a flat tire that time, but the boys were there, so it was all right. It was a daytime hayride, not a nighttime one.

Teiser: Were the orchestras which played for the dances made up of Chinese boys?

Chinn: Yes. Small orchestras—maybe three or four members.

Teiser: It sounds to me as if however short money was, everybody had a good time.

Chinn: Yes, I think so.

Teiser: These were things that weren't expensive to do, weren't they?

Chinn: Yes—at least the girls thought so [laughs] because the boys usually paid for them.

Teiser: Did you ever go to the theater or concerts?

Chinn: I don't remember. Oh, yes, we did go to concerts, but not as a group. I remember one of the older boys wanted to take me to the Civic Auditorium to listen to Yehudi Menuhin when he was just a four- or five-year old prodigy. At first I didn't want to go, because I was only about fourteen or fifteen and this boy was in college. I wasn't old enough to really appreciate what he was wanting to take me to, but I'm very happy that I did go. It was like a date, you know. I always remember Yehudi in this white satin, full-sleeved blouse and little black velvet pants. That was a thrill *afterwards* ; I didn't appreciate it at the time. And now he is world famous!

I almost got to see Yo Yo Ma, the cellist, when he was little. He was at the Masonic Auditorium, which is only a block from our home. But when the time came, I forgot about it. Oh, I've always been sorry about that.

Teiser: The Square and Circle Club still exists, does it not?

Chinn: Oh, yes, and I'm still a member.

Teiser: What do you do?

Chinn: In the beginning it was very simple, but then it got complicated. We still have the same aims. We do whatever service work we can handle, and then we raise money to support different things. For instance, right now, in May, the American Red Cross is giving blood pressure and cholesterol

tests, and they need volunteers to man the different tables, so we're going to do that. Every year we join in at Laguna Honda Hospital for the food fair. During those times we donate all the food, and we go out there and sell the food to people who go to the fair. Everything goes to Laguna Honda, and generally we raise $800 or $900 at each fair.

Teiser: Do you take Chinese food?

Chinn: Yes. We take Chinese, and the Armenians take Armenian food, and the Greek group does its thing. We usually have chow mein. We're the group that sells out first. [laughs] We charge maybe $1.50 a plate. It would cost us about $200, but we'd make about $800, so that's pretty good.

Teiser: Are there many Chinese patients at Laguna Honda?

Chinn: I would say ten or twelve. I haven't been out there lately myself. I've been there for the food fair, but we don't see the patients. In the beginning we used to visit them.

We also give out scholarships. For thirty-five years we have given scholarships to San Francisco State University and City College. And we donate money to different places that ask for help. One thing I thought was very interesting was the Chinese YWCA, which has classes for young children. They never had the lower urinals for the little boys, so they always had a problem. They never had money to put them in, so finally they decided to ask Square and Circle, so we donated some money for these little urinals. They've been happy about it ever since, because they always had to mop the floor before. [laughs]

Teiser: Those are practical benefits.

Chinn: The other thing we've always been proud of is—I think you've heard of the On Lok Senior Health Services? When On Lok first wanted to get started, they got a grant. They were supposed to match the grant, and for two years they couldn't raise enough money around Chinatown. Evidently the people they approached didn't believe in the project. Finally in desperation they wrote a letter to Square and Circle. This was when Square and Circle was in its fiftieth year, and I happened to be president that year. In all our fifty years of Square and Circle, we have never raised money for one charity; we've always raised the money and then decided how to use the funds as requests come in.

On Lok wanted us to give a dance, but with our experience we knew that we don't raise much money giving dances. We said we would like to give a fashion show, and for the first time we would give the entire proceeds to help with their cause. So we decided to have a fashion show at the Hyatt Regency, and we sold over eight hundred tickets. We could have sold more, but the hotel told us that the fire regulations would not allow us to take in any more.

We made enough money which more than matched their grant, and we gave them the whole amount. That's something we're very proud of. Now On Lok is nationally recognized.

Teiser: Yes, they're very active around here. I suppose they wouldn't have gotten off the ground without your help.

Chinn: Well, they tried for two years and couldn't do it. Of course, now everybody is supporting them.

Changes in the Chinese-American Community

Teiser: Through your Square and Circle organization, I suppose you've seen the greatest demands upon people there over the years. Have they changed materially, as so many circumstances for Chinese-Americans have changed?

Chinn: Yes, I think so. Like they have this center for abused women; we would never have had that in the early days. That's the outstanding one I can think of. In fact, we were amazed when we found out there was such a thing. We donated to them.

Teiser: Were you amazed to find out that women were abused, or that there was an organization to help them?

Chinn: That there was an organization, and that there was a need for it for Asian women.

Teiser: Do you think that reflects more criminality in society as a whole, or in Asian society as a whole? Is there more crime and abuse than there was?

Chinn: I think so. The nature of people has changed, I think. Formerly people were more [laughs] civilized. I don't know; it's just their nature. We seemed to be kinder and gentler in the old days—as George Bush says; that's what he aspires to for the future.

Teiser: Do you think when the Chinese community was more closed in by necessity that its standards were higher?

Chinn: I think so. And another thing is that we were not as mixed as we are now, because Chinatown was practically all Cantonese in those days. Not that I knew anything about others, but because we were all Cantonese we just got along better maybe. For what reason, I couldn't say.

Teiser: A more homogenous society, I suppose.

Chinn: It just takes longer for people to know each other, I guess.

Teiser: I'm reaching back in my memory now. When people started coming in from various places in China through Hong Kong, more criminal activity began, or maybe a looser society. Does that sound familiar to you?

Chinn: It does.

Teiser: It must have been very shocking to those of you who were here and stable.

Chinn: Oh, yes. When we had this Chinatown [police] squad, in those days the crime rate in Chinatown was the lowest of any community in San Francisco. That was a known fact.

Teiser: Was there anything the rest of you could do about it when it started to rise?

Chinn: I guess at my age I wouldn't try to—

Teiser: Did younger people from your group do anything?

Chinn: The younger people have all moved away. Our whole family lives down the peninsula now, so they don't have that problem. At least I don't think they have. They do in Sacramento and Stockton, though.

Teiser: The Richmond district now is so filled with Chinese people. Would people in your group have moved there, or are they mostly people who came later?

Chinn: Mostly people who came later. I think my group, because we grew up here and were educated over here, have all progressed further. Not to throw anything out, but most of our group would either live in Diamond Heights or down the peninsula, or even in Los Altos and places like that. And you know that a

great many of them live in Hillsborough now, whereas the Chinese never even lived in Burlingame before—no, not a single one. I understand the only ones who lived there were the Lee family, and they were allowed to buy a little lot near the freeway because the father of the Lee family worked for a wealthy Hillsborough person. But formerly, before 1940, there were no Chinese even in Burlingame.

Assimilation of Chinese-Americans

Teiser: Do you think that part of it is not only because those exclusionary acts were broken down, but because so many Chinese-Americans of your group have been so well educated and enterprising and efficient at advancing that they've just gone into the general population?

Chinn: Yes, I think so. That might have something to do with it. But to answer part of your last question, there were no exclusionary acts ever enacted to my knowledge. They were more just unwritten understandings between real estate people not to rent or sell to any Chinese. Sentiment changed after World War II so that it became possible to rent or buy almost anywhere.

Teiser: I think your own family, perhaps, has people who work not exclusively with other Chinese. Isn't that right?

Chinn: My grandson works at a computer company in Fremont, but everything is so technical I can't say what they do [laughs]. My granddaughter-in-law and my granddaughter both work at Kaiser in Redwood City. One grand-son-in-law is Italian; he is a chemist. I have another grandson-in-law who is Irish. But my granddaughter-in-law is Chinese, the one who married our grandson.

Teiser: Your own son, Walter, doesn't work for a Chinese firm, does he?

Chinn: No. He's always worked for an American firm—after he got started with Tom as an apprentice. He is now supervisor of the computer typesetting department at Omnicomp, a large American San Francisco firm.

Teiser: That's what I mean when I say that occupations seem to take people out into the larger community.

I am very grateful to you for giving this, with much perspective. Tom's interview is so very informative.

More on the Square and Circle Club

Support for Orphans

Chinn: Can I tell you a little more about the Square and Circle Club?

Teiser: Yes, please do.

Chinn: I have to go back to the beginning. You know, things were very simple in the beginning. To raise money in the beginning we did things like the rice bowl parties, and the community had fairs for which we would bake sesame cookies and bag them up and sell them at the fair. That's how we raised money, aside from the hope chests. They were just simple things.

In the very beginning, when Square and Circle raised money it was for the Chung Mei Home for boys. Do you remember the Chung Mei Home in El Cerrito and Berkeley? It was run by a Baptist minister named Charles Shepherd. Dr. Shepherd was very well known in his day. He ran the home for Chinese orphan and half-orphan boys. We raised money, and every month we sent a certain amount over to support one of the boys. He let us select the boy, but pretty soon he got to be known as the Square and Circle boy, so we had to stop that and just sent the money. Dr. Shepherd wrote a musical called "It Happened in Zandavia," and he had his boys play the male parts—some of the boys were older, like sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen; they were not all little ones—and he asked the Square and Circle girls to play the female parts. It turned out very nicely, and they made a lot of money for the home. We played at different churches. The climax of the whole thing was when we played at the War Memorial Auditorium in San Francisco's Civic Center, which is a big place, as you know. We made a lot of money there. That was one of the Square and Circle highlights.

Teiser: When was that?

Chinn: I think it was in the 1930s. We made all our own costumes. There was a staff at the home, and they helped make the costumes, too, but most of the Square and Circle girls' costumes were made by ourselves. We had dancing and singing

in the show. It was about a prince—you know, the usual thing. Zandavia was supposed to be an imaginary kingdom. We enjoyed that very much.

Teiser: Does the home still exist?

Chinn: No. Have you heard of the Ming Quong Home for Girls?

Teiser: Yes. That was on the Mills College campus, wasn't it?

Chinn: They started later, I think. I think it was near there, but now they're down the peninsula. I don't know if they are still there. I never had too much to do with them.

Teiser: Were there an extraordinary number of Chinese orphans?

Chinn: I don't know about Ming Quong Home. But at Chung Mei Home, I would say thirty or more boys, as a wild guess.

Teiser: Were there many, many Chinese orphans of any kind to be taken care of?

Chinn: I suppose so. Not everyone could go to Chung Mei; I don't know what their criteria were.

Teiser: Were there any other things that the Square and Circle Club did?

Chinn: Yes. Socially we would celebrate the club's anniversary every five years by having a dinner dance at one of the larger downtown hotels. One year, as a fun thing, we had a New Year's Eve dance at the Palace Hotel, and at the stroke of midnight one of the younger members appeared inside a large, glittering champagne glass (a la Lawrence Welk style).

Teiser: As I listen to you, it occurs to me that your generation and your group were preserving what we call now old American virtues.

Chinn: Thank you. There were seven of us founders. Two passed away many years ago, and one of the five of us passed away last year; so there are four of us left, and we're all still members. We try to keep the young ones—we have over a hundred members now—attuned to our original concept of service to the community. We still do as much service work as we can.

Club Membership

Teiser: What kind of younger members are they?

Chinn: They're from all walks of life. We have nurses, housewives, social workers, pharmacists. Many are retired now; as the club grew older and the members grew older, they retired. But we try to get in young ones—insurance clerks, people who work in banks. The women who are now in their fifties joined when they were in their twenties. Then as they marry and have a family they don't have the time, because we have meetings every month and you are expected to do certain things, naturally. So they resign, but after their families are raised they come back. We've had quite a number like that— about ten or more of these women whose families have grown and they come back.

Teiser: Do you have third generation people becoming members?

Chinn: We've had one founder whose daughter was a member. She started raising her family and resigned, but I think in time she will come back. In my own case we only have the one son, but my daughter-in-law joined. Because she lived down the peninsula it became a little difficult, but she stayed about eight years, until her grandchildren arrived, and she devotes her time to them.

Teiser: Is your membership mostly drawn from the San Francisco community as a whole?

Chinn: As a whole. But we have quite a number from the East Bay who come over for meetings. We have several who have moved away, but they keep up their membership—people who moved to Seattle and Washington, D. C. They became non-resident members.

Teiser: Do you think it will continue being a vigorous group as Chinese become further dispersed?

Chinn: The way it looks now, it will. But about eight years ago there was a very low morale, and nobody wanted to be an officer because you had to go to a board meeting once a month, to regular meetings once a month, and on top of that you had to volunteer; and on top of that, whenever there is a fund-raising project, you have a quota to make.

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Teiser: So club membership is a responsibility?

Chinn: It is. This year, for example, in April we're having a fashion show at the St. Francis Hotel by the Japanese designer Obiko. Tickets are $50 a person, and we have raffles at $2 each. Each member has to be responsible for at least $200. It's not easy to sell fashion show tickets at $50, so you have to supplement with raffle tickets. If you don't make your quota, you are expected to supplement it.

Going back to eight years ago when the morale was really low, gradually it just built up again. Now we have a very good group, but we were worried for a while there, for a period of three or four years. Morale was very low. We don't know the reason for it; it just got that way.

Then we keep saying, "If we're a service club, why don't we do more service instead of just raising money?" But it seems like everybody else wants money, as a rule. We get all kinds of letters for money, some of them from other nonprofit service groups.

Teiser: I suppose getting service is harder and harder as people have more trying jobs. Although I guess you've managed to give service and hold down a responsible job, too.

Chinn: It depends. Like this one for the American Red Cross is simple—just going there to help with the tables for sign-up. Another thing we do is have Christmas parties—well, they're not really parties—for elderly and low-income people who live in the housing projects. A lot of them are homebound, and we make refreshments for them. First we started with one project out on Bay Street, and then there were two, and now there are three. There's one out on California a little bit past Van Ness. So every year we do three Christmas refreshments for the housing projects. I don't know if they really call them housing projects, but they are people who need something like that. They're not like some of these great big projects you see.

Most of the members of Square and Circle have been members for twenty or thirty years.

Unique Aspects of the Club

Teiser: I think Tom would like to add something.

Chinn: I wanted to sit in because I'm learning a lot of new things that she has never thought worthwhile mentioning to me, so it's been an interesting session for me, too.

I do think so much of her Square and Circle Club, and I think she has omitted telling you about some things, perhaps because she has felt it unimportant, but I think it's unique. I think it's a miracle that the club, since it's inception, has held monthly meetings for over sixty years—every since 1924—and there's no vacation period. Generally, if you can't attend meetings you have to write an excuse, just like a pupil at school. Formerly they used to fine members who were absent.

Chinn: Yes, fifty cents without an excuse, and if you are late you are fined twenty-five cents.

Chinn: Those are unusual things that I think have welded the club into a unique organization that has existed and actively had fundraisers every year since its inception—except maybe once or twice during the war years, but I don't think even that was an excuse.

Chinn: [To Mr. Chinn] And you always used to say that you feel it is the oldest continuously existing Chinese women's service club in the United States.

Chinn: I'll match that up with almost anyone, except maybe the Daughters of the American Revolution group, but I'm not sure they meet every month.

Chinn: We don't know if they are considered a service group.

Chinn: No, they are not a service group. Imagine anyone being a member and subjecting herself to having to make quotas in fund raising and having to volunteer their services for service projects.

Teiser: I'm full of admiration for both of you. I'm tremendously grateful to have all this on the record.

Transcriber and Final Typist: Judy Smith

Tape Guide

Index—Thomas W. and Daisy Lorraine Chinn

Note to Index:

Some Chinese names are alphabetized by what American usage calls last names, others, following Chinese usage, by first or family names, according to the individual's known custom: i.e., *Sun-Yat Sen* but *Wong, Henry Kwok*.

Ruth Teiser

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