

BACHELORS PROJECT

INTERVIEW DATE: Nov. 9, 2010

INTERVIEWEE(s): Gilbert “Gil” Chu and Ed Wong (Note: Gilbert starts interview, Wong is identified on audio by deeper voice)

INTERVIEWER: Brad Lee

Preliminary interviews were done Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2010, with Ed Wong, age, and Gilbert “Gil” Chu, 85, at Wong’s home in Toronto. While the initial intent was to interview Wong, who arrived in Toronto in 1967, Chu had been invited to attend the meeting by Wong who thought he might offer more information because Chu had grown up in Toronto’s old Dundas Chinatown. The preliminary interviews focused mostly on Chu, but Wong provided some commentary and insight into the “bachelor society” at various times. Wong also has an interesting story, having been given up for adoption. His mother, who may still be alive, is Caucasian and his father was Chinese. Under freedom of information laws, Wong was able to track down his adoption papers in Comox, B.C. Through the adoption agency he was able to find out that his father passed away and that as recent as two years ago his mother was still alive. It was a closed adoption, so Wong has some items sent to him by his mother, but he still does not know her identity. Wong was adopted by another Chinese family in Olds, Alberta. He grew up in Olds, but he also spent lots of time on the West Coast and at age 13, in 1947, recalls a trip to Toronto and staying overnight in Chinatown, which is included in this interview.

Gilbert Chu was born Sept. 25, 1939 in Toronto, living with his parents and five elder sisters (his youngest sister is 7 years older than he is) on Hagerman Street in the Dundas Chinatown until the age of 3, and then moving with them to another house nearby at 25 Chestnut St. the family left Chinatown in 1948, four years after Chu’s father passed away, and took up residence at 17 Dundonald, moving again when the City purchased their property to construct the Wellesley subway station. In 1955, Chu’s mother passed away, and the family sold the Dundonald house a year later. Chu was then studying at university and moved to an apartment near Spadina and Dupont (Kendall Ave.) with two sisters and an uncle. Currently, he lives in Scarborough.

I followed the basic questions listed in “Interview Questions for Bachelor Study” document, beginning with Housing/Residential experience, then Working Life and Leisure. We jumped a head a little to contemplate questions on Relationships and the information I would seek in Interview 2, mostly to begin to build a level of comfort in talking about social/sexual relationships in Chinatown. I plan to revisit the Relationships portion of the interview guideline in separate second interviews with Wong and Chu. I found that with both Wong and Chu it was best to be honest about the intent of the study to focus on social/sexual relationships in the “bachelor society”; both men were receptive to this approach. Wong shared his own perceptions about this and the general sense that prostitutes frequented Chinatowns across Canada because they had a ready clientele that was honest and would not take advantage of them.

Chu began his story with his father Philip Yit Chu’s history. Philip had come to Canada

under missionary sponsorship from China. He was identified as a gifted student and the United Church of Canada, which then operated several Chinese missions, sponsored his education as a medical doctor in western medicine. Philip is believed to have been the first Chinese to graduate from University of Toronto's medical school in 1925. Part of his training involved stints at University of British Columbia and New York University (*Chu mentions that one of his two daughters did some research at Victoria College in Toronto and found some of her grandfather's writings in the school archives; a copy of this research might be available). After graduation, Philip is said to have served a couple years in Formosa (Taiwan) and likely mainland China under Chinese Nationalist generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. At some point, he met Lillian Chu (different Chinese character name) who would become his wife. Lillian was born in Vancouver, but had moved to China. The couple eventually moved to Vancouver, where all five daughters were born. Later they moved the family to Toronto, and Gilbert was born; his Chinese name apparently means something like "carrying on the work of his father." Philip Yit Chu practiced medicine in offices attached to the family's homes on Hagerman and Chestnut Streets. His clients were exclusively Chinese. Philip died in 1944 from Hodgkin's disease (lymphatic cancer). *(An obvious further path of inquiry would be to investigate Philip's clients through the memories of Gilbert, though it should be noted that his father passed away when he was just a youngster at 5. That said, Gilbert has mentioned that he still has two older sisters living in Toronto who would likely recall more about their father and Chinatown. Gilbert has offered to set up meetings with his sisters. Philip is also believed to have written an autobiography.)*

Chinatown during the war years – Gilbert's childhood – had its main intersection and centre of commerce at Dundas and Elizabeth Sts. It was surrounded by residential streets and roughly bounded by Bay St. to the east, Queen St. to the south, University Ave. to the west and Gerrard St. to the north. Gilbert mentions a few key buildings in the community, including the restaurants running south along Elizabeth to Queen, the lumberyard on Chestnut, the Kuomintang (KMT) building on Hagerman (?) with an office belonging to the local Chinese-language daily Tsinhua (Xinhua, SP?), Sincere Trading Co. and a couple non-Chinese businesses, like Ackerman's grocery. He has no recollection of the Continental being the name of a hotel/bar/lounge at the time. However, he does recall a hotel called the New World Hotel, which had a similar setup and location. Throughout the interview, both interviewees, make comments about how Chinatown changed, eventually giving way to the new City Hall and spreading west to what is now the Spadina Chinatown.

Gilbert relates to the various schools he attended as a way of charting his personal history. He began at Hester Howe School, at Gerrard and Elizabeth, then went to Wellesley Public School (currently Sutton Place hotel), finally going to Jarvis Collegiate (Jarvis and Wellesley). He later attended University of Toronto, beginning in dentistry. *(After the interview, during lunch, Gilbert detailed his work history, saying that he went to teacher's college and tried being a high school teacher for a year, but didn't like it and then tried his hand at accounting, also giving that up, before getting into the nascent field of computer technology, where he stayed until retirement).*

Gilbert lived in Chinatown until the age of 12. He recalls that his school (Hester Howe)

was mixed race, although he estimates 50 per cent were Chinese. His best friend at the time was a Chinese girl, five years older than himself, but he also says he had various other friends, both Chinese and non-Chinese. He doesn't say too much about his family life, but indicates that his father worked hard and talks about some community gatherings at the local KMT hall. I asked him if he knew of any Chinese bachelors who might have lived at the KMT building, but he did not recall. The KMT, apart from the clan associations, was a focal point of community life and often provided accommodation for the old bachelors. At one point, I asked him about the war and he said: "I was aware there was a war on." However, he didn't truly understand what that meant at the time, other than that his parents would often dress him up in various children's military uniforms, either for the army, air force or navy.

After his father died, Gilbert says the family got by because his father had the foresight to purchase a good life insurance policy. At the family's Dundonald home, Gilbert says they had two Chinese bachelors, both engineers, who rented rooms. There is some discussion at this point in the interview about their situation, though it's mostly speculation. These bachelors likely traveled to Ontario, where discrimination was less than in B.C. Wong comments: "A lot of Chinese that came out here could work, but they could never be the boss. That was always a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant." Gilbert identifies both bachelors by name, but also says they have since passed away. By this time, Gilbert was attending Wellesley Public School. His circle of friends was growing; his school marks were good enough that he skipped several grades, before having to make a "big adjustment" when he was admitted to Jarvis Collegiate, which combined students from Rosedale to Cabbagetown. His marks plummeted but he got through. Throughout his public education, Gilbert also continued to go to the Chinese school, where he maintained his spoken Chinese skills, but now admits that he cannot read Chinese. By this time, most of his sisters were either finishing at Jarvis Collegiate or had gone off to work in various secretarial jobs.

Starting at Jarvis at the age of 13 or 14, proved challenging. Gilbert reflects on his personal focus on getting good marks at school. But he also talks about socializing with his classmates through activities around the church. Ice hockey and football were favourite activities. During winter, and playing on outdoor rinks, he recalls playing and learning from the likes of Howie Meeker, Father David Bauer, et al. At 16 years old, he starts in dentistry at University of Toronto.

Gradually, Gilbert's life moves away from Chinatown, though he still visits favourite restaurants. Somewhere on Hagerman St. Gilbert mentions the existence of "Fosters Place" which was a known gambling den, where the old men of Chinatown used to gather. Both interviewees talk about hearing about police raids there, but have no direct experience. At one point in the conversation, they talk about various places where people, Chinese or non-Chinese, favoured and frequented.

The rest of the interview focuses on Gilbert's university life. He mentions that was involved in and served as president of the Chinese Varsity Club, which was then predominantly Chinese Canadian students. They also did a lot of activities with the Chinese Overseas Students Association, who were mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Further socialization occurred through the various Chinese church congregations, United

and Presbyterian. However, both interviewees also mentioned an annual summer camp that brought together Chinese from Detroit, Michigan, southern Ontario and eastern Canada. *These organizations and particular time periods might be worth examining.*

1:40:57 to 1:45:45

Discussion of Continental/New World Restaurant and area and intersection between Chinese and non-Chinese communities.

1:46:00

Ed Wong: “That’s what I told you before, because all these men had some money, because they worked at something. And then they could buy a prostitute. But unlike a lot of whites, they didn’t hassle the prostitutes. They went in for the sex, then bugged off. So the prostitutes felt safe in Chinatown. You see that in Vancouver, you see that in Calgary. When I was a kid growing up, the prostitutes hung out in Chinatown. You know, we thought that was kind of funny when we were younger, you know, who are these women? All dressed up, with their skirts hiked up to their crotch almost, you know.”

BL: Why do you think there was this relationship between the prostitutes and these single, bachelor men ... ?

... relationships ... (Ed and Gilbert comment)

Ed Wong: “Look at me, that’s what happened to my parents ...