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Berkeley, California

Cecilia Chiang
CECILIA CHIANG: AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews conducted by
Victor Geraci, PhD
in 2005-2006

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Madame Cecilia Chiang, owner of the Mandarin Restaurants
in Beverly Hills and San Francisco

CECILIA CHIANG (photo courtesy of Cecilia Chiang)

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Interview 1: August 4, 2005
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1-00:00:00

Geraci: I am Victor W. Geraci, food and wine historian from the University California, Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is August 4th, 2005, and seated with me is Cecilia Chiang, restaurateur and Chinese culinary expert. This interview is being conducted at Ms. Chiang's home in Belvedere, California. As we get into this interview, I would like for our first one or two interviews just to reconstruct your life and birth.

1-00:00:34

Chiang: I was born in 1920.

1-00:00:38

Geraci: 1920. Through your years—and today's interview I would like to get through the years of your life, just as you get in to Tokyo, you open your restaurant, just prior to your coming to America. And then in the next interview we'll pick up from there, and your coming to America, and the restaurants, and those type of things.

1-00:00:56

Chiang: Yes.

1-00:00:56

Geraci: One of the great quotes from your book, *The Mandarin Way*, is: "The way of life I have set out to recapture no longer exists." And I think that should be a theme for our interviews. Is that what you're describing, what we're talking about, is something that has been lost to the world, and you're trying to hold and preserve that for future generations.

1-00:01:26

Chiang: For future generations, right.

1-00:01:26

Geraci: So starting with that, I guess the best place to begin would be—let's start with your family and we'll talk about your mom, your dad, and the China that they lived in. So how about if we start there?

1-00:01:40

Chiang: Alright. I was born in Wuxi, a small town near Shanghai originally. When I was about five years old, my father decided to move to Beijing. At that time, Beijing was the old capital of China. And my father had one older brother, and two older sisters. So there were four of them. Four families—they decided to all move to Beijing. That's—those things are very unusual. We're from the South, move to Beijing—Beijing is the North.

1-00:02:23

Geraci: What made their decision to move to the North?

- 1-00:02:24
Chiang: The decision is, they want to do something for the country. They want to work for the government. At that time, they are very proud, and want to move to Beijing, and do something for China—that had just become Republic of China. And the Qing dynasty was finished. And so no more imperialism. So, they want to do something, and that's how they moved. The four families all moved to Beijing.
- 1-00:03:01
Geraci: What did your father do for a living?
- 1-00:03:03
Chiang: My father was an engineer—specialized in railway.
- 1-00:03:11
Geraci: Wow.
- 1-00:03:11
Chiang: And he was educated in France, so he spoke French.
- 1-00:03:20
Geraci: Ah, so he had his education—
- 1-00:03:23
Chiang: Uh huh.
- 1-00:03:23
Geraci: —in the Western—
- 1-00:03:24
Chiang: In the West, yes.
- 1-00:03:24
Geraci: —university system. So he spoke—
- 1-00:03:26
Chiang: And, so—my father got a lot of influence from his older brother. His older brother's mind was very open, very aggressive. And he was, during the revolution time—they tried—he was with Doctor Sun Yat Sen. All the revolutionaries together. So they're not very ordinary Chinese gentleman. [slight chuckle] They're very broad-minded.
- 1-00:04:05
Geraci: So it would be fair to say that they were part of the new modern Chinese class that was burgeoning at that point?
- 1-00:04:10
Chiang: I think so. Right. You can say that. And so my father was working for the railway, as an engineer. That time they called the Ping Han Tie Lung. That's the Ping Han Railway from Beijing to Han, that's in the Hubei Province.

1-00:04:31
Geraci: Right.

1-00:04:31
Chiang: And, as an engineer. And then my uncle was doing some education. And he had a lot of important jobs, also involved with the railway and universities.

1-00:04:52
Geraci: So they were from a well-educated—

1-00:04:53
Chiang: Yes, they are all from very well-educated families. And then my two aunts married two generals.

1-00:05:04
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:05:06
Chiang: [laughs] Quite different. In military.

1-00:05:08
Geraci: Right.

1-00:05:08
Chiang: One was in the airforce, and one was in the] army, a general. And so different, quite different—all have big families. My uncle has six children. My two aunts: one have eight, one have six. My family: my father had twelve. Same—always with my mother—same parents. Mostly—

1-00:05:40
Geraci: Isn't that somewhat unusual? I mean there was still the old tradition of concubines—

1-00:05:46
Chiang: Yes, yes.

1-00:05:46
Geraci: —of other wives.

1-00:05:48
Chiang: Yes, exactly.

1-00:05:49
Geraci: Was that a Western influence on your father?

1-00:05:51
Chiang: Somehow, just my father was quite different. [laughs] He believed just, you know, harmony in the family, just one wife.

1-00:06:02
Geraci: [laughs]

Chiang: [laughs] One wife. And, like my uncle—had a concubine later. Yeah, but my father never did. And we have nine girls, and three brothers. It's a big family but the number one child, and he died young. I think he died—I understand over a year—just one year old.

1-00:06:38

Geraci: Oh.

1-00:06:38

Chiang: Some very funny disease. He just died. And that was very sad. So immediately my mother had a second child. It was a daughter. Third child: a daughter. So they tried again. The fourth one is a boy finally. And then—

1-00:06:59

Geraci: And obviously boys are more revered within this—

1-00:07:02

Chiang: In those days of course it's very important, and you must have a son to carry on the family name.

1-00:07:10

Geraci: Right.

1-00:07:10

Chiang: And some even believed that son should carry on the father's career, you know. And—but my father was not that way. And—but, you know, my mother just insisted: "I want to have a son for you," you know. [laughs] So she did. So the number four child was a son.

1-00:07:35

Geraci: Now one of the things—explain to me, you refer to your brothers and sister by number.

1-00:07:40

Chiang: Yes, you got too many!

1-00:07:43

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:07:43

Chiang: Too many, and I remember all their names and everything. I mean, sometimes, you know, some other people get very confused. It's sort of difficult. Actually, my mother called us all by numbers. I'm number seven daughter.

1-00:08:02

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:08:02

Chiang: And then between six and seven had another son, so only three boys, all the others are girls. I have two younger sisters. One is number eight, and one is

number nine. Number nine also died very young. Six years old. I remember. That time I was very, very young. I don't quite—just one summer, I think it's not—no school, we are all home. When Ab Tsei Long, my number nine sister, baby sister, all of a sudden had a high temperature, very high temperature, and had seizures and died. They found out she had meningitis.

1-00:08:56

Geraci: Ah, meningitis.

1-00:08:56

Chiang: Yeah. So all the rest of us have lived a long time. Somehow my parents they both live until—my father lived ninety-seven, my mother ninety-four. I didn't know my mother died until I get in Beijing, and I find out my mother died. During Cultural Revolution. At that time they didn't have enough food. Every family, everybody is—everything, food, clothes, is on ration. My father got about a little bottle of milk per month.

1-00:09:46

Geraci: Hm.

1-00:09:46

Chiang: And cooking oil: two ounces a month. When I get there I just couldn't believe it. He looked like a skeleton. Only about eighty pounds.

1-00:10:01

Geraci: That's sad.

1-00:10:03

Chiang: Was just a—

1-00:10:04

Geraci: Let's—let's go back and do—tell me something about your father. Since we've started with him, let's describe what, you know, what did he look like, what does he—

1-00:10:11

Chiang: My father is—

1-00:10:12

Geraci: —as a person.

1-00:10:12

Chiang: My father is really quiet good looking, and very handsome. I have pictures here.

1-00:10:20

Geraci: It'd be great to see them.

1-00:10:20

Chiang: Yeah, and very good-looking, but is not very tall. I think he's about five seven, you know, like that. Nice and very slim, very trim. And he is a very

gentle person, his mind is really very modern, very sweet man. Like he loves to do work with his hands. He collects stamps, most unusual. Stamps. He had a book all different kinds. Wore glasses, with a little tweezer.

1-00:11:00

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:11:00

Chiang: Carefully pick up these stamps. Carefully, and put it on a stamp book. And ever since—I still remember I saw some triangle stamps, some really big ones, some—all kinds of stamps. But during Cultural Revolution all burned down.

1-00:11:21

Geraci: That's too bad.

1-00:11:21

Chiang: And also he loved to do Bonsai. Also, he shaped all these little plants. All different things. Different forms, looked like a big tree, and put a little figure under a little tree. And also, he grew the moss and put it—and all these things are very amazing: he can fix all the—the clocks. You know, in China, everywhere you go you have all kinds of clocks and he can fix all the clocks.

1-00:12:00

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:11:57

Chiang: And also the doorknobs. That's very unusual. People don't believe it, you know.

1-00:12:09

Geraci: But those were his hobbies then.

1-00:12:09

Chiang: Yes, his hobbies. He loved to do all that. Loved to do that. And also he trained the pigeons. He can whistle, the pigeon come back home.

1-00:12:21

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:12:23

Chiang: This is very unusual. Those days, you know, the old masters, they call, used to sit at home. They had so many servants, they do everything for you, right? But he refused; he liked to do all those things. He liked to fix the doors, and fix all these things. Pretty amazing. And also his mind is just like a young person's, you know. It's not traditional, not old fashioned, not narrow-minded—so open. You can talk to him about anything.

1-00:13:01

Geraci: Wasn't that somewhat unusual for a father's role?

1-00:13:04
Chiang:

Very unusual, very unusual. First thing in China—especially daughters, they are not that close to the father. And also, a big family, like usually they have a distance. Because we were brought up by nannies—each child has one nanny. I think only my mother said about the three oldest—the two older sisters and one brother—is breastfeeding. All the others are brought up by nannies. Wet nurse, we had. So you don't get to see your mother really that much and that close.

1-00:13:47
Geraci:

So there's a distance between parents and the children?

1-00:13:49
Chiang:

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Because you don't get a chance to see them. Another thing, such a big house. You know, everybody had their own nannies, their own rooms, so you really don't get to—and she was always busy. Busy taking care of the household, buying food, managing the money—what are we going to have for dinner? What we are going to have—

1-00:14:09
Geraci:

[laughs]

1-00:14:06
Chiang:

—for the special occasion, you know? She did more, you know, and she directed the servants, the cooks, doing this, doing that, you know. So she was a very busy lady.

1-00:14:23
Geraci:

Sounds like your father's a man that enjoyed his leisure.

1-00:14:25
Chiang:

Very much so. I think he retired not a year after fifties. He was retired quite, quite young.

1-00:14:37
Geraci:

Quite well, considering he lived to be ninety-seven, he had a long retirement.

1-00:14:41
Chiang:

Yeah, yeah. But he had such a good life, wonderful life, and also I think he was very happy with all the children here. Always very proud of the kids, you know. And also he was very happy with my mother because my mother was very capable and quite smart, and also tried to make all the good food [laughs] to please him, because he loved to eat, enjoyed good food.

1-00:15:14
Geraci:

Well let's talk about a little bit about your mother then. What was her family, where did she come from?

1-00:15:18
Chiang:

Her family is totally different. Like my father's family, the background is all involved with education, with the schools. My grandfather, my father's father,

also is a teacher in the school. But I don't know the school at all, but it's a military school somehow. He taught Chinese literature. And different background, and always talk about education is very important. Education is the most important thing. It is a good investment, that's what I heard from my father said that to all—to us. But my mother's side is business family. They own flour mills and textile factories. And make the flour, [background noise] and also have—they are business family [background noise]. And quite different the way that my father's family [sound of water pouring] so [clanging noise] she was from a very nice, wealthy family. And they also have quite a few, I think, sister and brother—five or six. My mother didn't talk too much about them because she wasn't very proud of their—her family. They were all addicted to opium, they all died quite young.

1-00:17:04

Geraci:

Which was not that uncommon, was it, with some of the wealthy families?

1-00:17:06

Chiang:

Very common.

1-00:17:09

Geraci:

Right.

1-00:17:08

Chiang:

Yeah, in those days—very common. All these—a lot of wealthy people smoke opium. Almost—they say it's not legal, as you know. But everybody was doing it. You can always get the opium, buy the opium, and you have to make—so her parents they both died quite, quite young. She told us when she was fifteen—and she was a short, very short woman—not the—she's about five feet—

1-00:17:51

Geraci:

[chuckles]

1-00:17:48

Chiang:

Is small. But later—she was a little bit chubby, and she had bounded feet.

1-00:18:00

Geraci:

Oh.

1-00:17:57

Chiang:

They bound them so that she cannot move around very fast. And she told us, she said, you know, when I was fifteen my parents died, sister, brother- they died. She has to take over the family. She has to manage all this properties, everything for her. She says that then find out just not much money left because they spent all the money for opium. Very costly, in those days, they have to use gold to buy opium.

1-00:18:45

Geraci:

Hm.

1-00:18:42
Chiang: And so somehow she managed. She managed, took over the household, and took care of things. And not only that, she said, “I have to send all these servants away because we cannot afford it. I found out that we didn’t have that kind of money. I have to get on the stove—I was too short.”

1-00:19:10
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:19:07
Chiang: She said, “I have to get on a little stool, start to cooking—to cook.”

1-00:19:17
Geraci: Which—but this very unusual for a woman of wealth.

1-00:19:20
Chiang: Yes, yes. And for that age—fifteen, that’s very young. Not like now you think, “oh, fifteen. You can do a lot of things. Nine years old you can play computer games and do all kinds of things.”

1-00:19:33
Geraci: Right.

1-00:19:34
Chiang: But those days, they never leave their town ever since they were born. They were just in that little town. Never go, you know, gone anywhere. So she said: “I have to get up and take care of the household.” Started, you know, budget—how much—we cannot spend like the way we used to, you know. Ever—so this is pretty amazing.

1-00:19:58
Geraci: Now, did she have brothers?

1-00:19:59
Chiang: We never met. They all died, died young. We never—only have some distant cousins I’ve met and called “uncle.” Not—not too many. And I think I met one nephew, but I don’t even know how they are related.

1-00:20:25
Geraci: How they were related.

1-00:20:26
Chiang: Yeah, you related.

1-00:20:24
Geraci: So you were somewhat separated from your mother’s family?

1-00:20:26
Chiang: No, we don’t—we don’t—she’s never—she didn’t talk too much about them. She’s not, as I said, she feel, like, not very proud of them.

1-00:20:37

Geraci: Not very proud.

1-00:20:39

Chiang: Yeah, because, you know, from wealthy family and got this bad habit of smoking opium and everything, and probably didn't get too much education. So she didn't really talk too much about it. Another thing, my older sister maybe closer to my mother. That time they had only two, three—

1-00:21:02

Geraci: Right.

1-00:20:59

Chiang: —children. When we are [laughs] another girl, another girl—

1-00:21:07

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:21:10

Chiang: —she was a little bit disappointed, you know, because in the old days, another thing is, for you to have so many girls when you give away, you have to—for you get married, you have to have—how you call it? Dowry.

1-00:21:26

Geraci: A dowry.

1-00:21:23

Chiang: A dowry, to give them all kinds of things. So that cost a lot of money.

1-00:21:34

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:21:31

Chiang: [laughs] That's what she used to say.

1-00:21:39

Geraci: It sounds then that possibly that you learned some of your business sense—in the sense of running something—motivation—from your mother, then. She sounds like a very—she's an organizer.

1-00:21:52

Chiang: Yes, yes. She is also—she foresees things, you know. A lot of things she foresees. I remember very well when I got in the university, because when we were kids, when we get up, we never make up our beds, we never do anything. Just get up, dress and the breakfast is ready on the table. The cook already get everything, you know.

1-00:22:18

Geraci: Right.

- 1-00:22:15
Chiang: So the nanny help you. The nanny grown up with us, and when we were quite like teenagers, they left. They had been with us for many, many years. So never did anything. All very sudden, my mother said—tell the servants, “Don’t make the bed for them anymore. Now they are big girls. They grown up. They have to make their own.” “Why, mama, why?”
- 1-00:22:53
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:22:50
Chiang: “We don’t understand,” they said. She said—I remember very well—“now you are so lucky, you have servants, you have cooks, waiting on you. I hope your life like this forever, but it won’t happen that way.” That’s what she said. “Maybe we have a war, you have to—we have to run, go somewhere. You have to learn the basic ethics, making bed, polish your own shoes.” Because those days, when go to school, we all have to wear uniform. Black shoes—have to keep your black leather shoes shiny and clean, you know.
- 1-00:23:34
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:23:35
Chiang: So this is basic kind of things you have to let the girls know how to do it. I—I remember that very well. I think all that is very important.
- 1-00:23:50
Geraci: But that came from her own experience in her own life.
- 1-00:23:52
Chiang: Yes.
- 1-00:23:53
Geraci: She wanted her kids to be able to withstand hardship.
- 1-00:23:57
Chiang: Uh huh, uh huh.
- 1-00:23:57
Geraci: Which—and which—it’s seems that many of the—how about the other families that were around you that were wealthy? Did their parents do the same with them, or...
- 1-00:24:06
Chiang: See, like my—my aunts, the two families, you know, my two aunts, their family, their kids not like our kids, like my family. Mine is same family as you, and same family—see all our families—for instance, I—we keep everything—pretty much—in order since, you know.
- 1-00:24:32
Geraci: Uh huh.

1-00:24:29

Chiang:

I always—people, some of my friends, all the friends from China and some cousins come in here, and say, “Oh,” they say, “Oh, number seven,” you know, “sister, you keep your house so nice and clean. You must have live-in servants.” I say, “That’s me.”

1-00:24:53

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-00:24:50

Chiang:

I say, “Yes, I have one.” They say, “Oh, you are lucky.” I say, “That’s me.” I think that’s also my mother’s influence. Everything in order, keeping clean, and like something, I think that’s a very good habit. My mother always—takes you a few minutes where you put—when you pick up the things, you put them right back there, so you remember. When you need it, you can just go there and get it. Maybe it takes you a few minutes. In the long run, saves you a lot of times. [laughs]

1-00:25:26

Geraci:

But your mom knew hardship. She knew—

1-00:25:30

Chiang:

Yeah, yeah.

1-00:25:32

Geraci:

Was your mom foreign educated also? Or was—

1-00:25:34

Chiang:

No, no. My mother never even—I think maybe grammar school. Later, in old days, they don’t allow to go to the school, especially with bound feet. They had a tutor come to the house to teach.

1-00:25:53

Geraci:

Right.

1-00:25:50

Chiang:

You cannot walk very well. So they always have a tutor come to the house, teach them. Math, and, you know, all the basic things. Of course, not like here.

1-00:26:06

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-00:26:03

Chiang:

All kinds of, you know.

1-00:26:08

Geraci:

It seems then that your mom was probably more traditional than your father. Do you think?

1-00:26:13

Chiang:

Yes, you know, yes. More old-fashioned, less “put this way.” Like the girls, “you cannot do this, you cannot do that.” [laughs]

1-00:26:23

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-00:26:20

Chiang:

When I wanted a bicycle—learn how to bicycle—you know, my mother said, “Why you going to bicycle? That’s a boy’s—belong to boys, the bicycle. You don’t—how you get on the bicycle in Chan Zahn?” When we were kids we wore nothing but, you know, this Chinese robe, cheongsam, you know, that is Chinese dress. So how you can you get on the bicycle was sometimes—I did it.

1-00:26:53

Geraci:

[laughs] That’s great.

1-00:26:53

Chiang:

[laughs] And so, when I was in high school I started bicycling, so from high school I started bicycling to school. And also, college, it’s a long way to bicycle. The university takes about forty-five minutes-one hour on bicycle.

1-00:27:19

Geraci:

That’s a good ride. [laughs]

1-00:27:21

Chiang:

Yeah, and summer, winter, whatever, you know.

1-00:27:29

Geraci:

Now, in your mom’s organization that you were talking about, that’s she’s so good at, let’s talk a little bit about your mom in organizing the household. What about food? I mean—

1-00:27:41

Chiang:

The food—she also loved food. She loved good food. You can see that because of her size.

1-00:27:50

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-00:27:49

Chiang:

She loved to eat, but loved to eat and knew how to eat: quite different. And, I think she—first thing, she loved to eat. Second thing, she really know how to eat. See, like for meals, she—every meal she always have the variety, very balanced, at least couple vegetable dishes, and then like a—some, some meat dishes, and fish, seafood. Always balanced, always, because she loved soup, so every meal we had a big pot of good soup, either made of chicken or sometimes pork soup. Because of her religion—she’s a very religious Buddhist. So the Buddhists don’t eat beef. And so a lot of vegetable and

seafood. And she always just think about that. She managed even to get the rickshaw: “Let’s go to the market, I want to see something fresh!”

1-00:29:11

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:29:08

Chiang: “What’s new on the market?” She doesn’t—she didn’t believe the cook, you know, said sometimes, “You are lazy, you just go a little further down, you can find this and that!” [laughs]

1-00:29:26

Geraci: So your mom—was your—your mom was a practicing Buddhist, then?

1-00:29:29

Chiang: Yes, yes.

1-00:29:30

Geraci: How about your father?

1-00:29:31

Chiang: My father pretty much followed her religion too. [laughs]

1-00:29:37

Geraci: Oh. [laughs]

1-00:29:38

Chiang: They two get along well, really get along well. All these years I’ve been with them, I’ve never heard them raise their voices at each other. That’s pretty amazing. Now—now I think about it, because I’m—for my age now, sometimes you get mad, you know, and you raise your voice. They never—they never did. That’s pretty amazing.

1-00:30:05

Geraci: That is amazing.

1-00:30:05

Chiang: All the years, I never remember hearing them shouting. And, also, they never spanked us—never spank—either of them, never spanked us. I don’t ever remember my mother or my father touched us, beat us up. Never, never. Always talk. And, also, among all the sisters and brother, this is—you know, everybody different, all the kids are different. You know, sometimes—now I have two children, they are different, right? Twelve, you can imagine! And, we don’t—we didn’t fight in the family. My mother always said: “If you pick the fight with your sister or brother and I find out whose fault—you get punished.” You know what is punishment? Skip the meal.

1-00:31:03

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:31:06

Chiang:

To us—because, you know, dinner is very important because it's so good, also.

1-00:31:12

Geraci:

Right. Now, what was the role of your nannies in this? I mean, how, do they punish you, or...

1-00:31:22

Chiang:

No, the—all this—the nannies are not educated people. They are peasants. They just waited on us, when we were small they would feed us, dress us, bathe us, and play with us.

1-00:31:30

Geraci:

Right.

1-00:31:32

Chiang:

Most of the nannies were farmer's wives—after they had babies, they cannot afford it, to stay home, so they come to the city. They come to the city looking for a job, and then they found job. They give their babies to their family. Mostly they live with the husband's family in the countryside. They don't cost them anything. So, you know, they don't have to pay a nanny or something like that. And so they just—the family just helps the—the older folks help them out. But then they come to the city. They feeding you—your babies for not only salary, and also the place to stay- everything, you have to give them a wardrobe—four season clothes, you have to provide everything, and give special food so they can produce milk to feed you. And also, live in your home—let them go back once a year. [laughs]

1-00:32:39

Geraci:

Oh my goodness.

1-00:32:39

Chiang:

Sometimes they don't even want to go back, because our home is more comfortable than theirs. Or if they have a boy, they say they would like to go back to see their son. Later they just become like your family member.

1-00:32:54

Geraci:

I would say, it's almost like they're a mother and a father—or a mother, also.

1-00:32:58

Chiang:

Yes, yes, yes, very much so. See, my number three sister's nanny, all her life, she spent with my number three sister. After she finish taking care of my number three sister, my mother said, "You can go home now." She didn't want to. She said no, because if she goes to the village, there is no food, no—you know. And lived with us, and we provided everything. She, after my number three sister got married, she offer—volunteer—she said, "I want to go with Miss number three, you know, I like to wait on her children." So she did. She died at the age of ninety four. She's nanny.

- 1-00:33:55
Geraci: Still in the service.
- 1-00:33:55
Chiang: Yeah, still servant. She just loved them so much.
- 1-00:33:59
Geraci: That's amazing.
- 1-00:33:59
Chiang: Very loyal. It's amazing. She didn't want leave. She died at age 94 at my sister's home.
- 1-00:34:10
Geraci: So it sounds like there is—there's a lot of—I mean, there's a lot of love going on within this family unit.
- 1-00:34:17
Chiang: Uh huh, uh huh, yeah.
- 1-00:34:17
Geraci: What was it like to live—what was it like to live in your home? I mean, what were the relationships between—I have to admit, twelve children, all these nannies, the other servants.
- 1-00:34:31
Chiang: Yeah.
- 1-00:34:31
Geraci: This household is like a little city.
- 1-00:34:34
Chiang: Yeah, it's just like a little city. Exactly. We have a big house, seven rows of rooms. We Chinese they call this *si he yuan*, you've probably heard about it. Between the buildings they have courtyards. It is a typical Chinese home in Beijing. You know, pretty—very formal, the Chinese, the home. Just one row, and in between in the houses they have a courtyard.
- 1-00:34:58
Geraci: Okay.
- 1-00:34:59
Chiang: Their courtyard floor is all bricks and with pots of flowers. So we have—my father had another hobby, he loved birds. So we have so many different kinds of birds, and my father started to whistle to them and then all these birds sing in the mornings—singing.
- 1-00:35:32
Geraci: [laughs]

- 1-00:35:29
Chiang: I don't know the English name. One kind of bird in China they call *bei yu nya*, called "white jade bird." Pretty white, pale yellow color. In the morning "ti ti ti ti" they just sing.
- 1-00:35:48
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:35:45
Chiang: My father started whistle at them, they started to sing. We have all these beautiful cages, you know, of the birds. And some—in the old days, the life in China, I mean especially in Beijing, it's quite different. It's very—and full—lot of culture, I must say that. Like in the morning, my father take a couple bird cages with the bird, go to the tea house. You know, they just show off, "my bird can sing." [laughs]
- 1-00:36:33
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:36:34
Chiang: And also the bird cages—all antique. Even a little—a little jar for the bird, put the millets in, put the water in, can be a Qing dynasty piece of china, you know.
- 1-00:36:49
Geraci: My goodness.
- 1-00:36:50
Chiang: That was my father's hobby—loved animals. We have—one time, we have seven cats, about four dogs, and a dozen of birds.
- 1-00:37:05
Geraci: [laughs] And twelve kids—it must have been a noisy household.
- 1-00:37:05
Chiang: Yes, yes. Very busy. Very busy. You know, everybody doing their own things, and then the kids playing around in the courtyard. The kind of game we played are quite different, it's very skillful. For instance, we have one—I don't see it here—it's made of bamboo, tub shape, so you have two little—little stick, and you play with a string. Then you—and this bamboo make a song. In China we call it Kong Zheng. I don't see that here in the U. S. —you know, all that—everybody just play on it, then you can throw up high in the air, and catch, and then play. You know, they give each other a little competition. And then we also played chess. It's a game of wisdom—challenging.
- 1-00:38:02
Geraci: A good mind game.

- 1-00:38:02
Chiang: Challenge, you know, the wisdom. All kinds of games. And also, we have old coins, tied up together with a little feather and you kick by foot in the air. We call it *Kien Zhi*..
- 1-00:38:15
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:38:15
Chiang: And all kinds of—you can do very fancy, kick and catch. All these kinds of things. Not like here, you know, computer, TV. [laughs] Totally different.
- 1-00:38:29
Geraci: So the brothers and sisters have a lot of interaction.
- 1-00:38:32
Chiang: Yeah, yeah. Some—because Beijing is very seasonal—four season, really—like summertime we rode a boat, we have a lake. Like going to Summer Place, going to Bei Hei. Row the boat—the boats. And then wintertime, ice skating. We all ice skating, the whole family. So my father said, “I have a couple great regrets”—talk to my brothers. Said, “Papa, what—what’s your big regret.” “You know, I never knew how to ice skate.”
- 1-00:39:12
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:39:14
Chiang: So my brother and some first cousins say, “You’d really like to try? We can help you.” I remember those days, he was really close to sixties, quite old. And that’s very funny, with all these Chinese cheongsam, you know, the Chinese gown, he goes ice skating. So my brothers and also the cousins helped him out.
- 1-00:39:42
Geraci: [laughs] Holding on to help.
- 1-00:39:43
Chiang: Holding on. He said, “Now I know, if I don’t try—I saw you guys, you know, ice skating everywhere. Seems like a lot of fun is so easy! Now I get out, my legs are shaking. But at least,” he said, “I tried.”
- 1-00:40:02
Geraci: Now, let’s talk a little bit about your brothers and sisters. How were you all educated? Knowing that your father had such a high expectation of education—
- 1-00:40:18
Chiang: Uh huh.
- 1-00:40:15
Geraci: —and was well educated—

1-00:40:18
Chiang: Uh huh. All my brothers, they are all at the—graduates from universities—famous universities.

1-00:40:31
Geraci: Did they—did any of them leave China to go to university, or...

1-00:40:35
Chiang: They were all in China, all in Beijing. Beijing has the most famous universities, just like—Tsinghua University, Beijing University.

1-00:40:40
Geraci: So they were all—

1-00:40:37
Chiang: —just like Boston, you know.

1-00:40:41
Geraci: But they didn't do what your father had done. He had gone to France.

1-00:40:44
Chiang: No, no, no.

1-00:40:41
Geraci: Okay.

1-00:40:44
Chiang: Didn't get a chance. But my younger brother, after he graduated from Yan Jing University, and—so that's just during the Japanese invasion time—and he lied about his age; he joined the air force, and then he got killed in airplane crash. That was really sad. [pause] My parents [difficulty speaking] didn't know he died—

1-00:41:22
Geraci: That's hard.

1-00:41:23
Chiang: —until I saw them, I told them.

1-00:41:28
Geraci: That's always—

1-00:41:32
Chiang: Forty years later, I told. [background noise, chair creaking]

1-00:41:33
Geraci: But that long?

1-00:41:37
Chiang: Uh huh. Because he died during the—I think it's a—he was killed in 1960. He was killed, and then I went back—I went back in 1974. And by that time I told them about—they kept asking, where is my brother.

1-00:42:08

Geraci: But that was one of the problems during the Cultural Revolution—

1-00:42:11

Chiang: Yes, yes.

1-00:42:10

Geraci: —people—families lost track of—

1-00:42:13

Chiang: Uh huh. Lost track, during the Japanese War, too. During the World War II, because you cannot—the mail cannot go through. They confiscated it, the Japanese.

1-00:42:21

Geraci: Right.

1-00:42:24

Chiang: Yeah, so they didn't know.

1-00:42:28

Geraci: Well, now, one thing—

1-00:42:30

Chiang: And this is also very unusual, like our family, you know, and we have only—because the number one son died—the first son died about—about one year old, and then only two sons left. And then this little brother, between number six and number seven, and he decided to join the air force. And those days, when you joined air force—all the kids are drop-outs from school. They have no—no other choice—but he was graduated from university, not only that, but he was teaching as an assistant professor. And then he lied his age, because he's too old to join the air force.

1-00:43:28

Geraci: Right.

1-00:43:27

Chiang: You know, to join the air force. He lied about his age, just to join the—but that time because they afraid—that time was KMT Party, Chiang Kai-Shek's government—they were afraid if you are not a KMT Party member—you have to have a very clean background. They afraid you betray your country. Not only that, you have at least two or three senators rank guarantee your background, guarantee you are clean, so you can join the air force. So we have a lot of relatives, they have very high rank, you know. I told you about my aunt's- uncle.

1-00:44:12

Geraci: Right.

- 1-00:44:12
Chiang: They all generals, so they guarantee—and a couple senators—guarantee, said, “He’s clean. He will never fly Chiang Kai-Shek’s plane to Japan—to Japan,” you know, something like that. And so he joined the air force.
- 1-00:44:34
Geraci: What about your education?
- 1-00:44:37
Chiang: I was all—I went from grammar school to high school and university—all private schools.
- 1-00:44:47
Geraci: Okay, what about grammar school, what type of grammar school did you go to?
- 1-00:44:51
Chiang: In China all the private schools are usually owned by Christian churches. So my high school and grammar school were the same church. They call it the—I don’t know the English name. It’s just—they have masters some different church. And they call it the *Mei Yi Mei Wei*. I don’t know the English name.
- 1-00:45:25
Geraci: Okay.
- 1-00:45:26
Chiang: Yeah.
- 1-00:45:28
Geraci: So, I mean, you were going to—
- 1-00:45:30
Chiang: Yeah.
- 1-00:45:30
Geraci: —a Christian-led churches then. I mean, was that common?
- 1-00:45:33
Chiang: Not common, not very common. We had public schools but not enough because the population comparable to the public schools, the percentage is too many people for not enough schools. Now they have the same problem, even worse. Private school tuition is quite expensive but public school is free.
- 1-00:45:56
Geraci: So, I mean, that shows something on the part of your parents being modern. I mean, this is Western influenced education.
- 1-00:45:59
Chiang: Yes, yes, yes, that’s right. And my father—my mother said, “Oh, after high school,”- I said, “I didn’t go to high school, you know, I know a lot of things,” like that. My father said, “Oh no, no, no. This is not your generation, they

must go to university. No matter if they are girls or boys, they must get a good education.” So we all went to university. I remember—I went to Catholic university in Beijing. That’s also belonged to the Catholic Church.

1-00:46:37

Geraci: Right.

1-00:46:37

Chiang: Now they still have this university. They moved to Taipei. They still continue.

1-00:46:47

Geraci: So I take it then—did you learn English?

1-00:46:50

Chiang: We learned at that time, it just happened, it’s Japanese occupation. So the second language is Japanese.

1-00:46:59

Geraci: Okay.

1-00:46:59

Chiang: Yeah, but you can learn a little English but the—but that’s not the must, the must is Japanese.

1-00:47:09

Geraci: So the Japanese enforced then that you had to—

1-00:47:11

Chiang: Yes, enforced education, right, right.

1-00:47:14

Geraci: That’s interesting.

1-00:47:15

Chiang: And so I had very good—very good education. I majored in the university in Chinese. So English, really, is not easy to learn, especially [laughs] when you came to the—after I came to this country, you have to do a business, raise two kids, and also study some English.

1-00:47:43

Geraci: That’s difficult.

1-00:47:43

Chiang: Yes, is difficult. Not that easy.

1-00:47:47

Geraci: So your [ringing phone]—your degree was in Chinese. What did you study at the university? [ringing phone].

1-00:47:53

Chiang: Chinese—

1-00:47:56
Geraci: Okay.

1-00:47:56
Chiang: —literature.

1-00:47:57
Geraci: Literature—ah. [ringing phone]

1-00:48:00
Chiang: And also I [ringing phone]—I also pick up what they call psychology.

1-00:48:06
Geraci: Okay.

1-00:48:06
Chiang: —as the second [ringing phone] subject.

1-00:48:10
Geraci: So—[ringing phone]

1-00:48:12
Chiang: So [ringing phone] nothing to do with business.

1-00:48:14
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:48:17
Chiang: [laughs] [ringing phone.]

1-00:48:18
Geraci: Well literature [ringing phone] does in some ways. I mean, a lot of literature deals with food—

1-00:48:20
Chiang: But literature [answering machine picks up the phone call] [pause] [noise]

1-00:48:34
Geraci: Restarting interview after phone call interruption. Okay, [noise] during the interruption there, you just made a very interesting statement to me about eating habit [noise], about what your mother and father’s philosophy was about how much to eat.

1-00:48:47
Chiang: That’s right, and they always mentioned, they said—good food, of course, is very important to us in our family—said, “good food, you don’t need a lot, you eat about 70 percent [laughs] to eat not 100 percent.”

1-00:49:08
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:49:08
Chiang: This way you always think about next time I can have [laughs]—next time.

1-00:49:15

Geraci: That's a very good philosophy.

1-00:49:16

Chiang: Yeah.

1-00:49:16

Geraci: What role did food play in your family as you were growing up?

1-00:49:24

Chiang: In our family, somehow, because we have a lot of children, and financially, you know, we are just fine, and so we really—since I remember we were kids—we never had junk food. We ate well. We ate seasoned fresh vegetables, fruits, and seafood.

1-00:49:45

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:49:45

Chiang: And we always—first thing is, remember, in old days we don't have a refrigerator. So the cook goes to the market every morning. Not only one time- two times. They went out to the market two times. Because first in the slaughter house probably open five o'clock AM, and eight o'clock in the market the meat is there. We don't believe—Chinese, we don't believe in aged meat. Fresh. Chicken with blood. I remember the live fish jumping in the basket—

1-00:50:34

Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:50:34

Chiang: —they—all this meat, after they cut the—you want certain cuts, and the chicken they kill for you. You can see all this vivid red blood, and they wrap no paper, they use newspaper, wrap it up. And then no plastic bag, of course, just with some—put it in the basket, you know, and wrap up with the newspapers. And mostly seafood and fish, and the chicken- that's in the morning, the market, you try to get as early as possible, so you get real fresh one. Then, afternoon, later, you go to the market for vegetables. So you go there probably two times. And, then, my mother tried to arrange the menu, everyday a little bit different. Basic, I think, at least two vegetables, because she is a Buddhist, eat a lot of vegetables, like To-fu, also, and the many, many ways to prepare—to prepare the To-fu. Many, many ways. And also my mother ate when new moon, the whole day vegetables. Each month on the first, Chinese calendar, the day of the full moon, that day my mother ate only vegetables. The kids you can have everything, you don't have to follow her. But she just have her own few dishes, all vegetables. She said, "We have to do that, and give all these—the fish—the fish and chicken, everything, give them a little break."

1-00:52:33
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:52:35
Chiang: So you don't kill them, you don't eat them. So twice a month, full moon and new moon.

1-00:52:41
Geraci: Did your father follow that?

1-00:52:43
Chiang: Pretty much. My father was most agreeable [laughs] with—

1-00:52:50
Geraci: [laughs]—with your mom. If your mom said it was okay with him. Okay.

1-00:52:54
Chiang: Yeah, yeah. And then the Chinese calendar, the month of June, our whole family ate nothing but vegetables. That's supposed to clean up your body, no meat, no chicken, no seafood, they are too rich.

1-00:53:13
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:53:13
Chiang: After a few days of eating vegetables, [laughs] we want some meat. Because—and she said, “Give your body a little break. Summer is very hot, and there's no air conditioning, and you are supposed to eat something very, very light and easy to digest.” Now I think about it, that's why it makes sense that they both have such a long lives, my parents. I think a lot of things, what they did really makes sense. You know, my mother has twelve children. Never had any vitamin pills. Never had any, anything for the bone, no calcium, no calcium pills, no vitamin C—nothing. You know, what make my parents so healthy—I think it was just the food.

1-00:54:09
Geraci: And, and-

1-00:54:09
Chiang: Does that make sense to you?

1-00:54:09
Geraci: Absolute sense.

1-00:54:11
Chiang: Just food. Because they didn't have antibiotics, nothing. They have never been sick. I don't remember they really got sick—no operation, no injury. And all our family, no high blood pressure. No cholesterol problem, and also no cancer. This is amazing. Just think about that, now. You know, sometimes I say, “This is really quite amazing.”

- 1-00:54:40
Geraci: But they were eating whole, natural foods.
- 1-00:54:44
Chiang: All natural foods.
- 1-00:54:43
Geraci: One thing that fascinated me that you were just talking about, is that the chef went out twice a day—
- 1-00:54:50
Chiang: Twice a day.
- 1-00:54:50
Geraci: —and then from that your mom designed the meals daily, and then gave him his instructions—
- 1-00:54:56
Chiang: Yes, yeah. Uh huh.
- 1-00:54:58
Geraci: —on what to cook.
- 1-00:54:58
Chiang: And what to cook. She made the menu. Lunch is light and simple. Children were all in school. Dinner had more dishes with soup, desserts. Weekends we went to restaurant to eat.
- 1-00:55:03
Geraci: Isn't that what fine restaurants are trying to do today? Is go out and go out and buy their fresh—
- 1-00:55:08
Chiang: —fresh, yes. Try to buy fresh sea food, fowl, and seasonal vegetables.
- 1-00:55:09
Geraci: —ingredients.
- 1-00:55:11
Chiang: Uh huh.
- 1-00:55:11
Geraci: And then design their menu for that evening.
- 1-00:55:13
Chiang: And also, sometime she said, “Oh, I am tired of eating the same dish. I guess you kids get tired too. Let me go out and try a new restaurant.” You know, so you get on the rickshaw and eat out.
- 1-00:55:27
Geraci: [laughs]

1-00:55:28

Chiang:

And [background noise from airplane passing over head], so pick up certain, pick up certain things. And make some, certain combinations. And then winter comes, and that's really hard because we get snowed-in. And all the market—no market, you know, everybody gets snowed-in. And so every—before the winter arrive, she just think about, “We have to do something about this winter.” So we buy whole pig. The butcher will cut the way she wanted, the way she want how to cut it and everything, including head, and the tails, everything, you know. And she marinated it, she then, she wind dried them, and then she made sausage. It's amazing! We make our own sausage.

1-00:56:26

Geraci:

Yeah.

1-00:56:26

Chiang:

Sausage, and then wind-dried chicken, wind-dried duck, and also wind-dried fish. [laughs]

1-00:56:42

Geraci:

Now—

1-00:56:42

Chiang:

Winter in Beijing is very cold, a lot of snow, so no fresh vegetables. In fall she wind-dried, the vegetables. Because maybe a couple days you get snow, you cannot go out to get anything. And also no fresh vegetables, in China in wintertime, no vegetables at all. Only thing available is Napa cabbage. You know the Napa cabbage? You can keep a long time.

1-00:57:07

Geraci:

Yeah, Napa cabbage.

1-00:57:08

Chiang:

They last a long time. Sometimes you can get some of that. Oh, another thing we get is turnips, now they called daikon. She dried that too. She dried that and then sliced it, and pickled, and also pickle all the mustard greens. It will last a couple of months.

1-00:57:27

Geraci:

What did your mom learn all—because I take it your mom would instruct the chef or the cooks on how to do this and what to do.

1-00:57:32

Chiang:

She learned from restaurants and from friends and cookbooks. She loved to try new things.

1-00:57:36

Geraci:

Where did your mom learn this?

1-00:57:36

Chiang:

Learned at—it's pretty amazing, I never thought about that. [laughs] But she did all that, uh huh.

- 1-00:57:48
Geraci: Because—
- 1-00:57:48
Chiang: Dried all the vegetables and meat and fish and made sausages.
- 1-00:57:49
Geraci: Now as children did you participate in any of this? Or you're just observing?
- 1-00:57:54
Chiang: We're not allowed to get in the kitchen. And, also, another thing she can do: buy a whole fish, whole fish, and then she cut it up, and salt it, and then, she marinate it, and then soak in the oil. You know, the jar is about this big, the big jar. And the wintertime, so—can—when the winter is so cold, and so she take one piece out to steam it, with a little ginger, wine, with whatever, put it in. She also pan fried the fish.
- 1-00:58:40
Geraci: How did you learn about this from your mom then?
- 1-00:58:43
Chiang: I remember, actually—the taste of food, the look of the food, when I can't have it, I thought some day I'll try to cook it myself.
- 1-00:58:46
Geraci: Just through observation?
- 1-00:58:48
Chiang: Yes. Yes. And I never cooked in my whole life until I came to this country.
- 1-00:58:56
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-00:58:56
Chiang: Never cooked. I didn't even know how to cut a piece of meat, how to cook the fish. I just, you know—what I saw before, like it was in Japan, I did go to the kitchen, watched the chefs eating and cooking, so I think I learned some from them.
- 1-00:59:18
Geraci: Just observing.
- 1-00:59:18
Chiang: By observing, right. But I never really cooked until I came to the U. S. Then I had to cook for my children.
- 1-00:59:22
Geraci: But you know what you like and you like good food.
- 1-00:59:25
Chiang: Yes.

- 1-00:59:25
Geraci: Is that fair to say?
- 1-00:59:25
Chiang: But I think that I am very lucky, I have a very good palette. I just know this food taste not right sometimes, you know. I just taste it, “this is not the right flavor.” And also, by looking at the food you know if this is fresh or not fresh—you know right away.
- 1-00:59:47
Geraci: How about your father and food? Did he—I mean, it’s obvious that your mom is very much into fresh ingredients—
- 1-00:59:55
Chiang: Yes, very much the sauce. He knew food. He also knew how to eat it.
- 1-00:59:55
Geraci: —she very much enjoys her seasonal foods—
- 1-01:00:01
Chiang: Yes.
- 1-01:00:01
Geraci: I imagine the menu changed—well, not imagined—the menu changed depending on the season. Your mom is very attuned to running a good food household.
- 1-01:00:12
Chiang: Yes.
- 1-01:00:12
Geraci: How about your dad? How does he—
- 1-01:00:13
Chiang: But my father is a good supporter and also knew food. He would often tell us my mother is a wonderful cook. It made her happy. And another thing is, my father—because of the foreign education, everything—every meal he drank two or three glasses of wine. Very unusual, too. Chinese custom, you drink wine with small dishes, never drink with empty stomach.
- 1-01:00:39
Geraci: Grape wines or Chinese wines?
- 1-01:00:41
Chiang: Both Chinese wines and grape wines. Sometimes Chinese wines, sometimes a little cognac. And he marinate the cognac with all the fresh fruits and the flowers, my father. It’s a—you know, in China we have all kinds of flowers you can eat.
- 1-01:01:04
Geraci: Right.

1-01:01:04

Chiang:

Yeah. And so he marinate all that and so give you the special flavor, just like sometimes you put a ginseng in, you know—ginseng roots and something, like—but he just drank one or two little glasses, the Chinese little wine glass. Every meal, lunch and dinner. And before all the kids sit down, he was the first one at the dinner table, because the father is the big boss, you know—after he finished wine, kids will go to the table to eat.

1-01:01:39

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-01:01:39

Chiang:

—in our traditional family. So it's—he just sat there and all these little, small dishes, that in China we call *Jia Cai*. “Cai” means “dish.” Some little dish, plate is good for the wine. Always four, five little dishes my mother prepared. And so he was there, sitting. All the kids were watching around.

1-01:02:06

Geraci:

[laughs]

1-01:02:06

Chiang:

When we were little we would often ask my father, “What are you eating, papa? What are you eating?” You know, sometimes he used the chopsticks, give us a little taste. [laughs]

1-01:02:19

Geraci:

It sounds like your father was very playful.

1-01:02:21

Chiang:

Yeah.

1-01:02:23

Geraci:

-that he enjoyed his children.

1-01:02:25

Chiang:

Yes, he loved us. But we are all afraid of Mother, because my father is gentler and also you can talk to him. Sometimes my mother just give orders. “This is the way [laughs] I want it,” you know, like that. But in the long run I think it's good for us. So make us better people and learned how to get along with people, making good friends.

1-01:02:53

Geraci:

It gave you discipline.

1-01:02:55

Chiang:

Discipline, makes a better person, like she told us a lot of things. Now I still remember she said, if you are going somewhere as a guest, how to be a good guest so people will invite you again—all these things I still remember.

- 1-01:03:13
Geraci: Sounds like your mom was quite a hostess, that she enjoyed people in her home—
- 1-01:03:19
Chiang: Yes. Very much. We always have company at home.
- 1-01:03:19
Geraci: —and in—
- 1-01:03:21
Chiang: Yes, she was like my father. Every time she cooked, you know, the dinner or like little Jui Cai, my father just love it, my father always said such nice things about my mother, for instance. “Oh, you know, this dish is delicious. I think you did a great job.” Usually the Chinese husbands never say that—never compliment his wife. This is a very Western way.
- 1-01:03:46
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:03:46
Chiang: Even now some Chinese family—for instance, you go visit some Chinese friends sometimes, or I said, “You know, your wife really is a very good cook.” Husband will answer not at all. And sometimes American friends went to a Chinese home for dinner and said, “Oh, your wife not only a good cook, also beautiful woman.” [laughs] Both the husbands say, “No, she’s ugly.”
- 1-01:04:22
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:04:22
Chiang: This is the Chinese way. This what you call “modest.”
- 1-01:04:26
Geraci: Right.
- 1-01:04:26
Chiang: And say, “She’s a good cook”—“No, she’s a lousy cook.”
- 1-01:04:33
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:04:33
Chiang: But being the Chinese woman—or a wife—you just accept that because that’s the way Chinese husbands act. Usually they do that, they say such horrible things about their wives. We understand and accept it. But my father is exceptional, now I think about my father, he always say, “Oh, she’s a very good cook.”
- 1-01:04:56
Geraci: Sounds that maybe that’s part of the reason they got along so well. [laughs]

1-01:04:58

Chiang:

I think so—I never saw them fight or argue. The kids are really not close to my mother. She is very strict. She's the one that always set the rules, you know. But now I think about her, and it was very good for us actually. We learned a lot of things from her. My father was always nice to talk to, especially during the war—the Japanese occupation time—only three daughters left—number five—seven—and eight—three sisters: number five, number seven, and number eight. So that time we got a chance to talk to my father because all the other kids—

1-01:05:56

Geraci:

Were gone.

1-01:05:56

Chiang:

—some married, they all went to Chongqing and Yunan. And my brother—and I think that my younger brother is my father's favorite, favorite because they just like brothers. In China this impossible. Impossible. Usually, the son and the father, has such a big gap, their relationship is very formal. The old days, when the father talked to the son and said, "Stand up there, straight and listen."

1-01:06:34

Geraci:

—So there was a—

1-01:06:35

Chiang:

But not our family.

1-01:06:38

Geraci:

That's very different. You didn't have the—

1-01:06:39

Chiang:

—Very different.

1-01:06:39

Geraci:

—the formal.

1-01:06:41

Chiang:

Uh huh. No formality. Like in our family, like my younger brother and father, they were very close. They can talk and discuss everything. My father was a very eager, open-minded person.

1-01:06:53

Geraci:

How about when your family did things outside your home?

1-01:06:55

Chiang:

A little formal and well behaved.

1-01:06:57

Geraci:

Was it more formal?

- 1-01:06:57
Chiang: When you are going out that's a little bit more formal because that's the society.
- 1-01:07:06
Geraci: Right.
- 1-01:07:06
Chiang: It's not because my father wanted to be formal, that's just the way society is. See like the kids when you are going out, even visiting uncle's and aunt's house for dinner, you cannot reach the food by yourself. It means it's not polite. They help you get the food. You have to be patient. And everything you have to wait for. The older generation they serve themselves. Children cannot talk at the dinner table either. You just have to listen to older generation's conversation, but we learn a lot.
- 1-01:07:43
Geraci: That must be difficult. [laughs]
- 1-01:07:45
Chiang: Yes, but I get to used to that.
- 1-01:07:50
Geraci: One thing that you made as a comment, now that we're talking a little bit about food—
- 1-01:08:00
Chiang: Uh huh.
- 1-01:08:00
Geraci: —in your book and I think is really interesting is that Chinese gourmets seldom cook and they learn by watching and eating.
- 1-01:08:08
Chiang: Yes, I think so.
- 1-01:08:10
Geraci: Is that how you learned about food?
- 1-01:08:11
Chiang: That's what I think exactly what I did. It's the first thing I want to tell you about. In China when I was young, I never see a recipe book in my whole life. [laughs]
- 1-01:08:25
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:08:25
Chiang: I mean during my time in China.
- 1-01:08:29
Geraci: So how are—

1-01:08:29

Chiang: No, no recipes. No—

1-01:08:33

Geraci: Is it—

1-01:08:33

Chiang: In old days, most chefs don't have any education, they have tutors teach them how to cook, first learn how to choose the ingredients, how to wash vegetables, how to kill a fish, etc. It takes many years to become a chef. They can't write recipes. They remember all the dishes, sometimes they create new ones.

1-01:09:00

Geraci: Down.

1-01:09:00

Chiang: To show them? Right? First all the young cooks learn by watching tutor cooking. And then later they try to do it themselves, most of these tutors—are the famous chefs, they learn how to cook when they are very young about teenager?

1-01:09:23

Geraci: Chef.

1-01:09:23

Chiang: And they want to be a head chef.

1-01:09:29

Geraci: So they would have to apprentice then.

1-01:09:32

Chiang: Yes, not only that—it is very formal. I have a chef here in Mandarin—he died six years ago—he's very talented, and he told me how he became a chef. When he was twelve years old, he came from Hong Kong, and he went to a restaurant with his parents. He loved the food so much, he insists when he grows up, he want to be a chef. He went to get somebody to introduce that chef and met him. And he kneeled down, he kow-towed, he begged this chef, and said, "Do you want to accept me as your student?" The chef said, "How do I know if you are talented or not? I don't want to be wasting my time to teach you." So finally he said, "Please show me the basic cooking. I'll try and then you see I'm qualified or not." Later the tutor said, "Oh, you are very good for your age." So he kneeled down again, said thank you to the tutor, and also had to give a very nice present to the tutor to thank him for accepting that he become an apprentice.

1-01:10:54

Geraci: Wow.

- 1-01:10:54
Chiang: It is very formal. I think in Europe still doing the same way.
- 1-01:10:57
Geraci: Right.
- 1-01:10:58
Chiang: Pretty much same way, yeah.
- 1-01:10:59
Geraci: But it's fascinating to me that there are no cookbooks.
- 1-01:11:02
Chiang: No cookbooks. No menus. When you go to a restaurant, waiters will tell you what they have. Today's famous restaurants have handwritten menus. In China in the old days, the knives were called san bao dao—three knives—it means knives for sailors, barbers, cooks—they all use different knives. Barbers are considered low class.
- 1-01:11:26
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:11:26
Chiang: Barber shop. In the old days, yes you know it's a—another one is tailor. Another is cook. Three different kinds of knives. Very low class. Nobody really think you're a great chef. But now the situation is quite different.
- 1-01:11:51
Geraci: Right.
- 1-01:11:51
Chiang: So nobody want to be a chef or something—it takes many years training—unless you want to make money—that's the whole thing.
- 1-01:12:07
Geraci: [laughs]
- 1-01:12:07
Chiang: Tailor—cooks—barbers—people really look down at them. But now it's changing—changing for the better. When I first came to the U. S. in late fifties, many store and restaurant owners were former coolies.
- 1-01:12:31
Geraci: Right.
- 1-01:12:31
Chiang: After the railways were completed, they started to open restaurants, barber shops, and laundry. That's how they started.
- 1-01:12:43
Geraci: That's how they started.

1-01:12:43
Chiang:

Yes.

1-01:12:47
Geraci:

We're ending the end—nearing the end of this tape—

1-01:12:50
Chiang:

Yes.

1-01:12:50
Geraci:

So I think we'll stop here for one second, okay?

1-01:12:52
Chiang:

Uh huh.

1-01:12:52
Geraci:

Thank you very much.

Interview #2: September 29, 2005

Begin Audio File Chiang, Cecilia 02 09-29-05.wav

2-00:00:00

Geraci:

I am Victor W. Geraci, food and wine historian from the UC Berkeley Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is Thursday, September 29, 2005. And seated with me is Cecilia Chiang. This is interview number 2, and is being recorded in Ms. Chiang's Belvedere, California home. And our conversation we had just prior to starting the interview, we talked about in our last interview about your birth, your homeland, culture, your mother and father. I almost got the feeling that the theme of that interview was family as the caretaker of knowledge. You looked back on the experiences with your mom as something that really gave you knowledge for food, and for life. I mean, you talked about how she trained you for these things. Well, what I'd like to do today is pick up where we left off in the last interview in that your journey, first of all, to Free China as the Japanese arrived and then take us up to just about 1957 or 1958 when you came to America. And the theme for today that I'll kind of be focusing questions on will be cooking as this convergence of your opportunity and your knowledge that come together all at once. And what we'll see I think is a Tokyo experience. So, let's begin there and let's first of all start retalking about a little bit about your journey out of China. I mean what was it—

2-00:01:43

Chiang:

You mean about, from Shanghai?

2-00:01:46

Geraci:

Shanghai, yes.

2-00:01:47

Chiang:

From Shanghai to Tokyo?

2-00:01:50

Geraci:

No, in 1937 is the Japanese occupation-

2-00:01:54

Chiang:

That's the Japanese invasion, right. And, I left China with my sister. At that time our home is was in Beijing, so we left Beijing, and I remember it was a very cold winter day. All the ground was covered with snow and ice, and we took two little rickshaws, a sacrifice for my parents, and we left for the train station, and then we get on the train. From Beijing we arrived at Xuzhou. That's the borderline between the Jiangsu and Hebei Province. But anyway, then from there because there was no more train, it stopped. So then we have to travel on our own. We cannot carry any maps because of the Japanese searches at every stop we have. So we have to dress like peasants, and very cold, so we just have layers and layers of these quilted winter clothes. Because you dress like peasants, you cannot have a coat or anything. You know, just

the Chinese quilted long robe. And inside, some of it is fur-lined, and with a scarf on the head.

2-00:03:35

Geraci: A scarf.

2-00:03:36

Chiang: And with, as you know, the cotton, white and blue cotton, covers your face, you know, and of course, no makeup, nothing. In those days, when we were in college, no makeup at all. So we just left. Just from village to village, we have to ask what's the next village, what the next place is going to be. Sometimes, we have to travel only in the nighttime because daytime there is too much Japanese airplane bombing. So we try to avoid that. So daytime we find a little inn, a little barn, whatever we can get in. Just to sleep and rest. And then in the nighttime we start to walk.

2-00:04:31

Geraci: How old were you and your sister?

2-00:04:34

Chiang: At that time I was twenty.

2-00:04:36

Geraci: How old was your sister?

2-00:04:38

Chiang: My sister was- she was number 5 sister, so she is 8 years, 8 years older than me.

2-00:04:37

Geraci: Okay. How did your parents feel, I mean, turning these two daughters in their twenties out to make this journey?

2-00:04:36

Chiang: My mother was very much against it, because, they said, we never actually left. We never left the home, you know, and all of a sudden we started to go somewhere they don't even know. And we had never been there, we don't know. In those days, when you think about Sichuan you know, that's far away, that's like a foreign land.

2-00:05:25

Geraci: And especially for you who never traveled—

2-00:05:26

Chiang: Never, never traveled. Never traveled. Never out of Beijing. The farthest we went is Tianjin, only 2 hours by train. That's about it. I had never been to Shanghai either. Only Tianjin, that's the only place we could visit. Besides that, we had never been anywhere.

2-00:05:49

Geraci: Were you afraid? I mean, this is an occupation by Japan. The Japanese and Chinese—this is not an easy relationship. [chuckles]

2-00:06:00

Chiang: We are enemies.

2-00:06:04

Geraci: Yeah, right.

2-00:06:05

Chiang: Well, then, I think when I was young, somehow, I have no fear. I have no fear at all—it's a funny thing. Try to save. At that time, we had no food. That's the biggest problem we had. And everything is on rations. Very small rations. So we tried to save the coal for my parents. So that's another way we live, another thing [unintelligible]. At that time, it was really tough, especially being a student. The Japanese treated students really badly.

2-00:06:50

Geraci: So the Japanese were treating the Chinese poorly? I mean, this is—

2-00:06:25

Chiang: Yes, very, very bad. Like, they came to our house, ransacked the whole house, and check out, see what you have, they just take away.

2-00:07:09

Geraci: Were there people disappearing, or—

2-00:07:13

Chiang: Also, in my college, the students just disappeared. Just disappeared. I think the professors knew exactly where they went, or they got arrested, whatever. They never came back to the class.

2-00:07:32

Geraci: Were there other kids your age or young people your age leaving?

2-00:07:38

Chiang: Quite a few. On the road. So we met a lot of young people, but we knew they were students. They didn't dare to say much of anything, and we didn't dare to say much of anything. So, "Where are you going?" "Oh, we're going to visit some relatives, the next village." That's all we can say. We can never say that, "Oh, we want to go to Free China. We want to go to Chongqing." We cannot say that.

2-00:08:09

Geraci: Because you were afraid?

2-00:08:12

Chiang: At that time, we were really afraid. Because the Japanese, they would just kill you, you know, they use those bayonets. We saw that, we saw that. I mean, so

we just had to keep very, very quiet, say nothing, and just keep walking, keep walking. After about five months finally, we got in to Chongqing.

2-00:08:36

Geraci: Five months.

2-00:08:40

Chiang: Five months, walking. Once in awhile we got transportation. The transportation was the army trucks. And once in a while they saw the students, we were walking on the road, they said, "You'd like to get a free ride?" So we got on. In China, the road is very bumpy, so sometimes you really jump. And then, also, the wire, electric wire, is so low, we saw someone cut their hair. But anyway, just before we crossed the border to Free China, we got robbed by Japanese soldiers. We lost everything. Not even a toothbrush, nothing.

2-00:09:39

Geraci: How had you paid for, I mean, did you have money with you that you had taken?

2-00:09:45

Chiang: My mother sewed a lot of these gold pieces. One ounce, the little gold pieces, under a garment, inside. So whenever we go, if we need to buy food, so we take one of these little piece, go off, and converted it in the local money, and buy some food. Because at that time, very complicated, the situation. Each place you visit, they have their own currency. So you cannot, like here, before you go to Japan, I can change Yen or something. Over there, everyday different, they have different currency.

2-00:10:36

Geraci: So it's like traveling in different countries?

2-00:10:38

Chiang: Yeah, just like traveling in different countries. And also, of course, the inflation of the Chinese money. And, anyway, we had a difficult time. But my father was very clever. He was the one who thought about, "You cannot take money." Because when you go to another city, this money is no good, you cannot use it. They have another, they're local, these currencies, so my father said, "Best thing is to get little pieces of gold." So he went out and bought these little pieces of gold. This way, we sewed in, my mother, sewed inside of our dress, and didn't let the servants know, hide it, you know. So everywhere we go, no matter how hot it is, we always wore this heavy robe, because the monies are there, you know. And so we managed, but we ate very, very simply. All the way, we ate just mostly noodles and bread. Some places, we don't even have rice.

2-00:12:00

Geraci: I'd say, because the rest of the country- the Japanese are taking all the supplies.

2-00:12:05

Chiang:

They took everything. We went to another place, near Shaan Xi. It's a high mountain. They call Qingling. And, I saw a lot of people walking on the village, on a road, this big. Wide. I don't know. I said, just curious, all the people look so funny, with the big heavy necks. So anyway we were so tired. And early afternoon, we didn't have anything. So we went to a little inn. Very, very small, just you know, a bench, a couple benches, and didn't even have tables. We stopped by there. So my sister said, number 7 sister, "I'm really hungry. How much money we have? Can we, today, have maybe one egg, and maybe a little noodle, something like that?" I said, "Let's see what we have." So this a young man, came over, we said, "We'd really like to have two boiling eggs, one for her, one for me." He said, "Boiling eggs? Are you kidding? Couple days, this chicken just had two eggs. We already sold the chicken. No more eggs." "How about some noodles?" "No noodles." "Rice?" "No Rice." "What do you have then?" "We have some wheat flour." "How are we going to eat it?" He said, "Well, we can put some hot water and mix it, just like a paste.

2-00:13:56

Geraci:

Oh.

2-00:13:56

Chiang:

So we said, "Can you give us either a little salt, or some sugar?" He said, "Are you kidding? Salt?"

Geraci:

So they didn't even have the bare necessities.

2-00:14:16

Chiang:

And also, it's so high, they have to carry everything by hand and walk up to the hill. And so, finally what we had, just some hot water with, like a paste. So fill up the stomach.

2-00:14:35

Geraci:

Still back to where you made the statement that you weren't afraid. This is two young women traveling in the midst of a war in wild countryside. Just for your physical safety, I mean—

2-00:14:53

Chiang:

Yeah, but I think at that time, somehow, we were really quite innocent. A lot of things, very naïve, but in China not too many—when we were kids, not too many criminals, like now these days, like rape cases.

2-00:15:14

Geraci:

Right.

2-00:15:14

Chiang:

And robbery or something, not too many. Maybe they had-

2-00:15:20

Geraci:

And you just didn't know. [laughs]

2-00:15:22

Chiang: Maybe we just didn't know at that time. You know, and we, [phone ringing] just didn't occur that, I mean, we just didn't think much about that, at all. I think it's innocence, also, we were quite naïve I must say, for a lot of things. Because we were so sheltered and lived with family, everything, you know, my parents take care of us, and older sisters, brothers.

2-00:15:53

Geraci: And your nannies.

2-00:15:56

Chiang: And the nannies, you know, so never thought about that. A lot of evil things. [laughing] Always think about the—

2-00:16:05

Geraci: So this was a journey—

2-00:16:10

Chiang: That's 1937, 1942. The Japanese invade China in 1937. [answering machine]

2-00:16:18

Geraci: So you were, okay, let's continue then. After 5 months, you finally get –

2-00:16:28

Chiang: After 5 months, this is something really unbelievable. One thing is, maybe the whole trip, maybe we had about two baths. Just bathed maybe two times, just start and beginning. Later you could feel it. Never washed the hair. The hair is all caked, because the dust, the wind, and everything. We crossed the- when we crossed Hebei, Henan, and Yellow River, that's a very, very poor country. They don't have anything. And we go through some of the places, and the land – they don't grow anything. So all very poor country. And so we somehow managed to cross it – but because of you didn't have bath, you didn't have water, so we got fleas all over. We got fleas in the hair, and the dust was very funny: white-colored. Because, then in the body it's the black color, of the fleas. Around all the edge of your clothes, because we have winter clothes—

2-00:17:54

Geraci: Right.

2-00:17:52

Chiang: They were all hiding under there. So when we first discovered we got fleas, you know, so we just started, I remember, just use the finger, kill them, kill them. Then later – too many! You cannot kill anymore, you can use- you scratch, you know, and later you get used to it. So the hair, you cannot comb anymore. What we got in Free China, crossed the border, and we got in there, and the weather is May, it's quite warm already. And so, we registered in- they called in a student hostel. So we just registered. And, first thing, they just look at us, because we still have winter clothes on. And then, they can see the hair is all caked and the skin all peeled.

2-00:19:01

Geraci: Right, from the cold.

2-00:19:04

Chiang: Because the cold, and dust, and everything. Ugh, peeling, everything. So we registered, we said, "Just give us some water first." And then they said, "We'll find you a place to stay and also, you need to clean up everything."
[unintelligible] And then a miracle happened. I got a little letter, a little letter, two soldiers delivered this letter to me. My name, my Chinese name, Sun Yun. I said, "How strange." I'd never been in this place, this just a little borderline, Free China. How come I get a letter? And my name is correct. So I opened it up. It said, "Welcome to Free China". And they said: Are you Sun in the Academy, the school, my high school? And which year? And this is your schoolmate, Qize Lin, Chinese name? It's my schoolmate, classmate, same class! Can you believe it? Because when we registered this name, and then her husband was a general. She was married at that time already. She was one of the old, older students, you know, class, so she already got married. And her husband is a general, and controlled the whole border of the city, what a coincidence. So it said, "Please come to my house. I am really looking forward to seeing you." Can you believe it?

2-00:21:02

Geraci: That is a miracle.

2-00:21:06

Chiang: It's a miracle. So I told these, I told these two, the soldiers, I think this is her husband's aide. So I said, "I'm sorry. Thank you so much. Will you please tell the Madame, we cannot go right now, because our condition is very bad. And we really need to clean up, you know, so we can visit her. But right now we really cannot", because we got robbed.

2-00:21:38

Geraci: You had nothing.

2-00:21:40

Chiang: Nothing. I almost got killed. And because the Japanese soldiers, when they took all of our luggage, I run after them. I said- because in school at that time we learned some Japanese. So I used bad words, cursing the Japanese soldier. And so, then he stopped. He was on the horse. He was on a horse. So he jumped down, and tried to kill me. So my sister said, "Number 7 sister! Are you stupid? Why do you want to chase them for? They have guns?" So finally I realized, I said, "That's right." So I stopped. And they jumped up and took our luggage, run away.

2-00:22:37

Geraci: You're lucky you're alive.

2-00:22:39

Chiang: Uh huh, yeah. And so I didn't go, and so after a half hour these two aides drove a jeep over. Drove a jeep over again, with another letter. She insisted .

She said, “No matter how, how dirty you are”—exactly the words she used—“I know, you probably, it’s a long trip, you are dirty and stink, but I really want to see you. Just come over to my house with my aides, and we’ll take care of you. Insists. So finally we went. So we jump on the Jeep, and went to my schoolmate’s house. During the war, very nothing, you know, just very plain. Just concrete, but it’s a house. A couple sofas, some chairs. So she looked at us, she cried. We cried. And so she said, anyway, “First thing, let’s clean you up”. I said, you know, “We had better not walk in your room, because we are full of fleas in the hair and also in the garment, everything.” She said, “Don’t worry about it, we’ll take care of you.” They used gasoline, gasoline to clean all the hair, then used soap to wash it. Then the clothes, throw everything away, but we still had a couple of pieces of gold left, so we took it out. And so she gave us a room with 2 beds, so my sister and I, we stayed there. That night, we met some more generals, and one of the gentlemen is General Zhao. He’s very tall, very tall, with uniform and boots, looked very elegant. And he is in charge of Yellow River, because Yellow River every year, always broke the bank and flooded, every year. This had happened so many years. So he was in charge of that, tried to do something, rebuild the bank, and then all this. So he was the head, he was a very nice person. So he said, looked at us, he said- so my schoolmate told them, you know, “They are guest, we are from very nice family, everything.” So he was very impressed. He said, you know “We need more of these young citizens like you two girls, who love the country, and everything. So he said, “Is there anything I can do? I can help you, I will do it. Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?”

So we said, “We want to find my two older sisters.” They were in Yun Nan and some in Chongqing, and also I have a brother at that time. He joined the air force. He was a graduate from university, but he loved the country so much so that he joined the air force. And so I just- we were looking for family. So they helped us. They helped us get the train and some by bus. So we got into Chongqing. And also, my schoolmate, not only that, also gave us some money – loaned us some money – they said, “You need it”. We said “We still have some gold pieces, but can you convert it?” They said, “No, you need it, just for in case you don’t know, you have a long way to go. So another friend [unintelligible] we got in Chongqing. In the meantime, later, also we stopped in Xian, now a famous city now, because Xian is General Zhao’s home. So we stayed at their house and met his wife and stayed there for a couple of weeks. They said, “You really need to take a break, and do some resting, I want to introduce you to my wife and my brother.” And that street – do you know, have you heard about that Zhang Xuelian, the young Marshall, he kidnapped Chiang Kai-Shek?

2-00:28:35
Geraci:

Yes.

2-00:28:35

Chiang:

At that time he was also living in the same street as General Zhao. So that's a very famous street. So anyway, so during that time, really, then we gained a little weight back, and also they have a cook. You know that Xi An is in Shaan Xi Province. Most of the food over there, because of the religion, they have only lamb and beef. And they have a lot of Moslems down there, and also a lot of pasta. All kinds. And they have one pasta, that's the first time I saw that, they have a cook at home. He put a piece of dough on the shoulder, they just – here is a big pot of the soup, he just shaved it, using a piece of metal, just ch-ch-ch-ch-ch, shave in the pot.

2-00:29:51

Geraci:

In the pot.

2-00:29:53

Chiang:

Uh huh. And all kinds of noodles. And then use two fingers, making a, like they call– over there they call them cat's ear, very much like Italian [pasta], like a shell.

2-00:30:08

Geraci:

Like the pasta shells.

2-00:30:11

Chiang:

And then they chose all kinds. So it was really interesting. Because our family is from Shanghai—we have some pasta at home, but very simple – just noodles, or wonton, not like this, fancy. I was really thrilled when I saw the cook doing that, everyday different, different lunch. Always pasta. All kinds, different forms, different sauce. Some in the soup, some are dry. So I always watched him to do that. So that's another experience.

2-00:30:53

Geraci:

But, isn't it amazing that amidst all this – this is a tragedy going on in your life-

2-00:30:59

Chiang:

Yes, yes.

2-00:30:59

Geraci:

– but even in that, you were thinking about the importance of food. Just from the look in your eye, the passion. This was a whole new experience.

2-00:31:08

Chiang:

Whole new –

2-00:31:09

Geraci:

In the midst of all this stuff that was going on.

2-00:31:13

Chiang:

I heard about – so when we were kids, we heard about, this is what they call, Dao Xiao Mian . You use a knife —dao is a knife, it's shaved, mian, you know. This is what the Chinese call Dao Xiao Mian. I heard of another one

called Tie Bo Yu, just use a little, little, even chopstick or a little stick, to make dough in a bowl, just also, all just like little fish, little fish shaped in the soup. I heard about this when I was young, then I really saw it with my own eyes, I cannot believe it. Really looked like a little fish, a little fish. And they have all different kinds of sauce. Some sauce spicy, a little bit spicy, some sauce with vinegar, some meat sauce, and some you can make in the soup. Quite fascinating. And also they have the noodles about this wide, flat. Everything you can buy. I still remember how he wrapped it up, and used a knife to cut it.

2-00:32:24

Geraci: To cut it-

2-00:32:25

Chiang: And then, he just put it out, and then just one little white strip.

2-00:32:32

Geraci: But they were even dried noodles?

2-00:32:34

Chiang: No, all fresh.

2-00:32:35

Geraci: All fresh noodles.

2-00:32:36

Chiang: All fresh noodles. That's the amazing part of it, and they make the dough. And so it's really quite interesting, you know, so I say, I really learned a lot of things. And also, in Xian it's famous –they use a big pot, and they use a lamb bone. But over there, actually in China, it's called mutton. Mostly it is mutton. Very lamby, and a lot of fat. But because the country is so poor, and the winter is so cold, they need all this fat, this oil makes this strong, keeps them warm. But they never throw away this soup. They brag, this is hundred years old, fifty years old sauce. They just added the lamb, then they re-cook it, added the bone, added the lamb, add the fat. This is a big pot. And this just keeps going, all the rest are just kept going. Then they have a piece this thick. They have a big knife. They usually said, "How many ounces do you need?" And they just cut it, and you use it as bread, dip in this lamb fat to eat.

2-00:34:09

Geraci: So you were learning a whole new aspect of Chinese cooking that you'd never really seen, you've heard of. Seen, but you'd never seen.

2-00:34:19

Chiang: Seen, you heard about it, you read about it. But you never see it. And of course, never taste it. You know, in the old days in China, they don't have documentary film or, nothing, you know. So this is really quite an experience for me.

2-00:34:34

Geraci: Did you like the food?

2-00:34:36

Chiang: I love it, because totally different, the taste. Totally different. And also, all of this pasta is so al dente—the Italian word. Very, very nice, and a lot of texture. And also, freshly made. And then of course you probably saw that ramen here. Also, over there have a lot of ramen. It's pretty amazing and they can pull something like threads. You cannot believe that. You know, in your own eyes you see, from this big, and getting smaller, smaller, smaller.

2-00:35:25

Geraci: Smaller. That's amazing. Well, so we have you now, there. What's-

2-00:35:32

Chiang: Then- so we got to Chongqing. We don't know, we know that we have an uncle, uncle there. And the uncle is also a general, and he is very well known and he- at that time was the head of the air force, kind of thing. But at that time he was retired because he's really old-

2-00:36:04

Geraci: What was his name?

2-00:36:05

Chiang: His name was Dingjing. Yeah, Dingjing. And so, but we don't know where he is, but he was well known, famous enough that we can always find him. So [telephone ringing] we had a little ad in the newspaper, so finally we found him.

2-00:36:24

Geraci: So you found him through an ad in the newspaper?

2-00:36:27

Chiang: Newspaper, so. His wife is my father's younger sister. So first-cousin. So they said, "Welcome, welcome", so we went down there. And- everybody had a big family in those days. They had 6 children. And also, the older sisters – they were all married, so they have their families, their children, and their husbands, all crowded in this little, little building. Downstairs is his office, upstairs is the living quarters, and, you know, everybody was just crowded. So we just- my sister and I, we just got a little space, just slept on the floor.

2-00:37:21

Geraci: Well at least you had a place to stay.

2-00:37:26

Chiang: To stay, yeah. And just a little Chinese tatami, just roll out. The weather there all year round is very hot, and humid. So we just did that for a few months. And then later I got a job, I worked teaching Mandarin to the American Embassy, OSS, Overseas Secret Service.

- 2-00:37:53
Geraci: Interesting. But teaching Mandarin then.
- 2-00:37:57
Chiang: Teaching Mandarin. And also, to read and write. Actually, they all have the basics, all these Americans, the officers there. The basics, they know some, but they don't know how to read, and how to write. So I teach them how to read and write. And so I had a few students, and also I got a chance – later I got another job teaching Mandarin in Russian embassy.
- 2-00:38:29
Geraci: [laughs] That's interesting.
- 2-00:38:35
Chiang: Very, very interesting. And, then later I ran into my future husband. I knew him, I met him, I knew him in China, in Beijing, but you know, we just met at party or something, we didn't know each other. One day we were walking on the street with my sister in Chongqing, ran into him. He saw us and said, "What are you doing here?" At that time, he was in business in Chongqing. He was that time between Hong Kong and Chongqing, at that time.
- 2-00:39:19
Geraci: What kind of business did he have?
- 2-00:39:20
Chiang: He was, very interesting, tobacco. Tobacco business, making cigarettes. And so they have a company there in Chongqing. And also I think he did some import-export business. At that time, it was just Hong Kong, because at that time Hong Kong was a colony under the British. Yeah, colony.
- 2-00:39:49
Geraci: Now when you say he did import-export, was he exporting to the United States?
- 2-00:39:54
Chiang: No.
- 2-00:39:54
Geraci: No, just within the Asian area.
- 2-00:39:57
Chiang: Asian, yeah. So then later, after a year, then we got married. So I quit a job.
- 2-00:40:10
Geraci: Now, was this a little bit different in that – this isn't arranged, this isn't done in a traditional?
- 2-00:40:17
Chiang: No, this is not arranged. All my older sisters are, but we just met in Chongqing, and when I got married, my family didn't even know it. Because there were no letters—all cut–

- 2-00:40:34
Geraci: Cut off.
- 2-00:40:34
Chiang: At that time, cut off, you cannot, of course, not telephone, nothing.
- 2-00:40:40
Geraci: Could that have been the start of Cecilia the independent woman? I mean, that's for the culture you were brought up in, this is a major shift.
- 2-00:40:49
Chiang: Exactly. And also, later after we got into Shanghai, so we wrote to my parents, "we got married", and also, my husband is a Cantonese. They were shocked. Because you are supposed to marry someone from the same province usually, the same city. See like my parents, all the same city. Same city—Wuxi. And all my number one, number two sisters, number three—all the three sisters, all married the men from Wuxi. So I'm the person that totally broke the tradition.
- 2-00:41:41
Geraci: It was breaking the mold here.
- 2-00:41:42
Chiang: Yeah.
- 2-00:41:42
Geraci: How did your parents take that? Or was your husband of the same social class? Obviously being Cantonese, he's looked down upon—
- 2-00:41:55
Chiang: No, because he is a very well-educated person, I told you before. He was a - he got his PhD in Berlin University, Berlin during Hitler's time.
- 2-00:42:08
Geraci: How interesting.
- 2-00:42:09
Chiang: He was very well-educated and he was major in economics. And he speaks German, English, Italian, and a little Spanish, and Japanese very well also, yeah. And very well educated and also from a very nice family. His father was a very high official, I don't know how to say that in English—in the Wei Zhen Bu Department—it's the head of agriculture department, something like that.
- 2-00:42:49
Geraci: Okay.
- 2-00:42:49
Chiang: In China. So, very nice family, but his father had many wives. [laughs] Quite different than my family. And also, but he is the son by the first wife. That's very important.

2-00:43:09

Geraci:

He had stature then. And what was your husband's name?

2-00:43:15

Chiang:

Name is Jiang Liang. Also one syllable. This is very unusual. My first name is also Yun, just, one-word syllable. And his name is Liang, L-I-A-N-G, also one syllable. In the old days, quite- this is very rare. Usually always have two words for the first name. But somehow, his and mine are just one word.

2-00:43:48

Geraci:

So it seems that your husband is Western-educated, would be very much in the modern or progressive Chinese –

2-00:43:57

Chiang:

Very much, very much. But sometimes I think it is a little bit too much. Because our two children were sent to an American school. He should send them to a Japanese school, or a Chinese school. But at that time we didn't have Chinese school in Japan. Right now they, my two children, they can speak some Chinese, but they cannot read, they cannot write. See, that's very sad. And that's because of him. Because of Jiang Liang, because he said, "Oh, when you speak English, you gets around anywhere." That's what he thinks. Look at now. I think Chinese is very important.

2-00:44:50

Geraci:

An up-and-coming language.

2-00:44:52

Chiang:

It's becoming a very important language, also culture, and everything. They cannot read it, see.

2-00:45:01

Geraci:

That's a shame. So what year did you get married?

2-00:45:04

Chiang:

I got married in the year 1946.

2-00:45:09

Geraci:

Okay, so then and where are you living when you first get married?

2-00:45:13

Chiang:

I was in Chongqing, we were living in Chongqing, and then just after a few months on VJ-day, we won the war, so we moved back to Shanghai, we took the first little passenger boat from Chongqing to Shanghai, and went through that gorges.

2-00:45:46

Geraci:

Now, so, and at this time – was your husband still in business, or what was your husband doing?

- 2-00:45:55
Chiang: Uh, after we moved back to Shanghai, he had another position. No, he has to give up his company for tobacco, you know.
- 2-00:46:11
Geraci: Right.
- 2-00:46:11
Chiang: Because during the war, you know how much the Chinese people love to smoke, so they cannot get the imported cigarettes. In those days, mostly imported from England, like Three Castles and you know, all those fancy 999's, 555's, these cigarettes. Nobody can afford it. So they made them locally, they made the local cigarettes. Then later after we moved to Shanghai he gave up his business. So we sold to his father. He has a new position in Shanghai working for the government. You know, after the war, the Chinese government confiscated so many of the Japanese properties, the homes and everything. So he was in charge of that.
- 2-00:47:13
Geraci: So they were actually taking back all the things the Japanese had taken from them during the invasion.
- 2-00:47:18
Chiang: That's right, so he had to arrange all that. And then, some they sold, some they gave to high officials, you know, to live in as the home. So he was in charge of that. But it didn't last too long. Then we had to move again, the communists came. We got- we moved to Shanghai in 1946, winter, and then 1949, spring, we have to move. Because at that time I had two children.
- 2-00:47:51
Geraci: Ah, so where were your children born?
- 2-00:47:55
Chiang: They were born in Shanghai.
- 2-00:47:56
Geraci: In Shanghai.
- 2-00:47:57
Chiang: One is born in 1947, one is born in 1948. So then we had to move again.
- 2-00:48:07
Geraci: So you had one boy, one girl, what are their names?
- 2-00:48:09
Chiang: Mm...?
- 2-00:48:10
Geraci: Their names. What are your son and daughter's names?

2-00:48:12

Chiang:

My son is Philip Chiang, and my daughter is May, because she was born in May. Very simple.

2-00:48:23

Geraci:

[laughs]. So the Communists are taking over. Obviously, that's changing all that's happening in China, and how does that affect you and your husband at this point?

2-00:48:39

Chiang:

So we took the last plane out from China- ah from Shanghai. It just so happened that during that time, when the Communists just got in, not quite, but when we left that day, it's already- they had started the street war. You know that the Communists already got in because you see they pile up all these sand bags, all over. You know, the Kuomintang, the Chang Kai-shek soldiers, they were still fighting. So at that time we left, that's another experience, when we left that time. In the airplane, they only had three seats. So we can only take one child. So I asked my husband, "Do you want to take your son or your daughter?" I thought he must say the son. But he didn't. So you know how liberal, he wanted to take his daughter. We left the son behind. We left Philip behind with my sister. So we flew out and later after few months, my son and my sister went to Taipei. We bought a property down there, so they moved down there. And later, after a year or so, Philip joined us later in Tokyo.

2-00:50:21

Geraci:

That must have been hard.

2-00:50:22

Chiang:

It was really hard. But then, I have an experience I want to tell you about. You know – you always share, I think Chinese and English the same thing. Life between death is really tough – between life and death, you always hear that. So I said, "Oh, what do you mean life and death?" So when I was in the Shanghai airport that day, you should see the people. They put all their belongings – they cannot take anything because properties, automobile. So what did they take? Jewelry. In China, all these wealthy families, they all love jewelry. They buy jewelry: diamonds, jade, emeralds, rubies. What they put them in, little scarves, they carry them. They see the pilot come by, this airplane company staff: "Please let us get on this plane. This is all yours, this is all yours." When I saw that, I know, "Oh this is really because they want to leave." They know if they stay there, how they are going to be treated by the Communists. So they want to leave. They just begged and they cried and, see when the pilot gets on the airplane, they are holding, they're pulling their legs, kneeled down: "Please, please get us on. Please get us on." And also, the last boat that left from Shanghai to Taiwan, the same thing. Happened to us all. My first cousin was on that. And you know – the whole boat, because of overload, because they bribed this captain, they bribed the staff to get on, it was overloaded—the whole boat sank. Everybody was killed.

2-00:52:45

Geraci: Oh...

2-00:52:44

Chiang: Then I said, "Oh this is—now I understand what that means."

2-00:52:53

Geraci: The desperation.

2-00:52:54

Chiang: Desperation. Yeah, they were so desperate.

2-00:52:57

Geraci: So in some ways, that was probably harder than your journey to Free China when you were a young girl. Well, I mean across all those months and a thousand miles or more-

2-00:53:08

Chiang: Yeah, but at that time, you know, you were just looking- what I was at that time, looking forward to, "Wow, if I can get into Free China, then I'm free." I just feel like, I'm free, I'm a free bird. I can say anything I want to say, because during the Japanese occupation you cannot say anything. And you cannot show your true feelings. You keep saying, "Japanese Bansai, Bansai," you know, "Long life for the Japanese," this is something you don't want to say, but they force you to say that. So I thought- so I just think about this, all this [is the] brighter side. The better side. I think that pretty much is me, I'm always thinking about something better. After looking forward to getting into Free China, and also another thing, because I've never been out of Beijing. So it was something I was really looking forward to, you know, seeing how the life is there, and everything. And you forget about this fear, about, you know - I think another thing, when you are young, you are much braver than when you are getting older.

2-00:54:33

Geraci: And also, I mean, you had two children at this point. And you were also being faced with the decision of having to leave one of your children behind.

2-00:54:41

Chiang: Yes, I got no choice. At that time we really had no choice. And, but you can just take only one child, so what are you going to do? So finally, Philip has to leave with my sister. That's the one, we run away together, number five.

2-00:55:02

Geraci: Oh, okay.

2-00:55:02

Chiang: She is still living. She lives in San Jose now. She's 94.

2-00:55:09

Geraci: Oh my goodness.

2-00:55:11

Chiang:

Yeah, she's still living. So, of course when you get into Japan, then your life totally changes. First thing, you have very contradicting feelings. First thing, they are your enemies, we were not certainly very friendly with the Japanese, and I don't think they like the Chinese either, you know. So that's a very funny feeling, but in a way we have no choice because my husband found a job working in a Chinese mission at that time. So, in a certain sense, you really have no choice. You just have to do it. You have to do whatever you can, just make life just keep going.

2-00:56:13

Geraci:

How was it to live in the land of an enemy? I mean, your image of the Japanese was—one tried to kill you.

2-00:56:25

Chiang:

That's right, that's right. That's why—

2-00:56:27

Geraci:

And you have to live in their land.

2-00:56:28

Chiang:

That's why you have very funny feelings, you know. But in a way, you just think about that. All this foreign policy is not the people's decision. It's the emperor's and in the high officials. Nothing to do with the people.

2-00:56:49

Geraci:

So did you find the Japanese people were much friendlier?

2-00:56:53

Chiang:

They are nice people, they are friendly. And also, some of the families—for instance, later I have a Japanese teacher, and also a floral arrangement teacher, they are all from very nice families. They are all the big victims when General MacArthur was bombing the whole city, they lost all their properties. And some of their kids got killed too. The people were also victims of the war. So in that way, in a way I feel sorry for them. I even feel sorry for them. When they teach me, I pay them in money. They say, "We don't want any money, if you can just give us some sugar, some rice," and – better than money, because money cannot buy anything. You have to buy from black market. In those days, Japan is so poor, you have no idea. When we got in there, the whole of Tokyo, the streets, no buildings, flat, bombed flat. All the shelves, all this, everything was still there, but—

2-00:58:13

Geraci:

Well, the fire bombings had pretty much leveled the city.

2-00:58:16

Chiang:

Yes, yes, yes. Only just a few buildings were left. That's what General MacArthur kept. Just one for the office, they call it Diichi Building. It's still there. And also, his office and his residence, they call "the White House" in Tokyo. There, most, a lot of it is all destroyed. Only a few Japanese homes in

the suburbs survived. All the rest- you can drive anywhere, no streets, you can drive anywhere you want to drive. And people, no clothes. They use newspapers, I saw. And also, these boxes, they paste together, to cover their bodies. It's so sad. And then the American soldiers throw a package of cigarettes in the air and sees all these Japanese people—

2-00:59:26

Geraci: Fighting over them.

2-00:59:27

Chiang: And also, chewing gum, chocolate. That part is really ugly, American. And –

2-00:59:34

Geraci: It was almost a game then, you're saying. They just wanted to watch people fight and suffer and struggle.

2-00:59:41

Chiang: Yeah, yeah. Suffering, and then they kick them. They kick them. And some soldiers still have their uniforms, they are all shredded. They just kick them, and it was pretty bad. And another thing, everywhere you go, they use the rope, block, "Off Limits to All Japanese". Off Limits to All Japanese, no matter where you go, you see that sign, everywhere. Parks, they cannot go to their own park. "Off Limits to All the Japanese Personnel." And of course, many, many places.

2-01:00:22

Geraci: So they were prisoners in their own land.

2-01:00:26

Chiang: Yeah, yeah. It is really very sad. Then later on – but in- later, I think, without General MacArthur, the Japanese would never recover so fast. It really helped the Japanese a lot. So they said, "General MacArthur is a living Buddha". They really love him, respect him and love him. When Truman found him, he left Tokyo, you should have seen - something you have never seen in your whole life, really. Like, four, three o' clock in the morning, they lined up on the street where he's going to leave from his home to the airport. They put all these little tatami, kneel down, with a little shrine, kneel down. They just want to say good-bye to him and say, "Thank you, General MacArthur." It's very impressive. He did so much actually for them, for the Japanese. And they cried. And they say-

2-01:01:48

Geraci: See, that's never the General MacArthur we hear about.

2-01:01:52

Chiang: Ah?

2-01:01:53

Geraci: For Americans that's not the General MacArthur that we hear about.

- 2-01:01:57
Chiang: I know, I know, I know, I know. But, so when he left, they all said, “Bansai. Long life. Long live General MacArthur.” They really love him. And another thing – in history, the emperor never left the palace to go out and visit a foreigner. He was the only one, do you know that?
- 2-01:02:20
Geraci: No.
- 2-01:02:21
Chiang: The old emperor went out to see him; he wanted to say thank you to MacArthur. That’s really rare.
- 2-01:02:30
Geraci: That’s quite an honor.
- 2-01:02:32
Chiang: Yeah’s it’s really a great honor. They love him, all the Japanese people really love him. Another thing, I think Filipinos also love him a lot, because what he did, uh—
- 2-01:02:44
Geraci: For the Philippines.
- 2-01:02:45
Chiang: For the Philippines, yes. But Americans don’t think too much about him.
- 2-01:02:49
Geraci: See, it’s amazing listening to your story right there because after the Japanese invasion, I mean, we hear of the atrocities that the Japanese really performed in China, the Rape of Nanking , there’s these things going on. And it’s interesting to hear your perspective that there were also people who suffered greatly because of all this.
- 2-01:03:16
Chiang: All this. But over there, people, the Japanese, just think he’s a real hero, think that he’s a real hero. And they always say, “Why did President Truman fire him?”, because he’s a great hero, you know, because he did so much. But the only thing was, because he wouldn’t obey Truman’s orders. Because he was going to bomb the Ya Lu River in Korea at that time. He made a decision, he said, “I’m going to do it.” And that really scared Truman. Truman said he must stop. Actually, if he did do it, there would be no more of these two Koreas. No more two Koreas.
- 2-01:04:11
Geraci: That’s amazing. So at this point, you’re living in Japan. Let’s stop there and change discs, why don’t we do that, because that’s a perfect point to stop.

Begin Audio File 3 -- Chiang, Cecilia 03 09-29-05.wav

03-00:00:00

Geraci:

This is interview number 2, with Cecilia Chiang. Today's date is Thursday, September 29th. This is minidisk number 3: a continuation. In finishing up where we have you in Japan now, and sticking kind of to the theme, we've gathered in these two interviews, all this knowledge, this experience, whether it be schooling, whether it be life experience that you've brought together. And in some ways, I think Japan represented for you an opportunity. And before I start, I'd like to read something, just a very short quote, that Ruth Reichl had in her book *Tender to the Bone*: "After I walked out of China, I could never have never gone back to the old life. It was like coming to another world. I feel sorry for the women I grew up with who did not have a chance to discover they could take care of themselves." Is Japan for you that time when you started learning you could take care for yourself?

3-00:01:13

Chiang:

I think it is kind of, uh, a starting point. Because at that time I was with my only child, I had just one child at that time. And, you know, I had grown up in a big family, with all the servants and everything. When we went to Japan I lost all that. You know, I had to learn, first thing, at least I had to learn how to take care of my own child, right? [laughs]

3-00:01:53

Geraci:

That's true.

3-00:01:55

Chiang:

That's the first step of independence. I had to learn that. Another thing is, I never cooked, I never did anything. But at least I had to do a little bit of some kinds of very simple things, making rice, or soup, or something, to feed the babies. And, you know, that is I think- is just when I was starting to do something on my own without domestic help. And other thing is, it is so hard when we got in Japan. We didn't speak any Japanese. Nobody spoke any Japanese. And we really had to learn how to, but you know, we really got lost when we first got there, I felt totally lost. My daughter cried, I cried, because we don't know, where shall I get started, you know? We don't know what to do.

3-00:03:01

Geraci:

And it's not as if you even knew where to go to get help.

3-00:03:04

Chiang:

Yeah, the thing is I just feel like – then I feel so ashamed that I cannot do anything, you know. Never work, even very simple things. And doing the little housework, and cooking. So I had to start somewhere. I think that Japan – that was a big turning point. So I have to learn how to take care of the baby, and do a very simple, little cooking, you know, for her. And also, because at that time we have no servants, nothing, I have to clean the house. And also, go to the market and get some food. At that time, the market is really empty. Just

take what you can get, just little basic vegetables, but you have to go certain markets only for what they called the Diplomatic Service. And also, we can go to Post Exchange, PX, that's about it. And so, we started a totally new life in Japan. Later we found a couple maids. So one maid spoke Mandarin. She was born in Manchuria, she's Japanese. And ever since she has been with us for, all these years. Even now when I go to Japan I still visit her. We have two maids. They still live in Japan. I still visit them, every time I go there. I bring a little gift, take them out for dinner. They're about my age.

3-00:04:55

Geraci: That's nice.

3-00:04:57

Chiang: So we started a really new life down there. And I find out the people there were all very nice and very friendly. And they're very loyal. Look at all these years they've been with us, and brought up these two kids, too. So, [chuckles] sometimes you think the Japanese are enemies, they always say that, but I don't think you should be including the people.

3-00:05:30

Geraci: That's amazing, but – so when you get there, I mean, the learning point for you is just learning simple tasks at first. Well, what – I know that in not too long a period after that you opened up a restaurant.

3-00:05:49

Chiang: That's right.

3-00:05:49

Geraci: Well, how did that come about?

3-00:05:50

Chiang: That is something, then later I have a cousin from Hong Kong who moved down there, my first cousin. And we had pretty much the same background. We can just do very basic things, cook a little rice or something. You know, nobody can cook in the old days in China, because you have servants. The labor is so cheap. Every household had a servant. Even very little income people, they have a servant. And so, we were really hungry for some really good, old very, you know, Shanghai food. We cannot get it in Tokyo. So finally we decided, let's open a restaurant, so then this way we don't have to worry about the food. So we can go to the restaurant and enjoy some really decent food. But at that time in Japan, it was really very, very poor, and very hard to get ingredients. Like fresh fish and you know, the chicken, and just about anything. The only thing you can get is vegetables, because mostly other things were very hard to get. So, anyway, we managed to open the restaurant and I could get a lot of stuff because my husband is with the Chinese mission, so I can get a lot of stuff.

3-00:07:27

Geraci:

How do you go about opening a restaurant? I mean, Tokyo has been destroyed by the war. It's just phenomenal to me. Can you describe the restaurant? From what I understand, this is a large restaurant. This isn't a small restaurant.

3-00:07:45

Chiang:

Yes, 300 seats. And also a great location. It's near the Meiji Shrine. You know Meiji Shrine is a very famous, big temple. Just near there, and near Shibuya, also a very famous area, just very great location. And they have an empty lot near the entrance, near the entrance of Meiji Shrine, the big gate there. So on the left-hand side, we found a spot. So we built this restaurant from scratch.

3-00:08:20

Geraci:

From scratch.

3-00:08:22

Chiang:

From scratch, yeah. Because the Chinese kitchen, also, is not easy to build. You have to have a special contractor design it. You know, the certain things—the wok, and the fish tank, you know.

3-00:08:38

Geraci:

Could you describe that a little bit, when you say a Chinese kitchen is not easy to build?

3-00:08:42

Chiang:

Chinese kitchen, because all this Chinese cooking, mostly is cooked on the burners. On the big fire. But in those days, no gas—remember that. In Japan, no gas, all destroyed, everything. So we use coal, we have to build specially this big long- this stove, and with all these holes on it to hold this wok because of stir-fry. Everything is stir-fry. When you describe this to Japanese contractor, they don't understand. It is totally foreign to them, you know. And so we have to describe it, and sometimes get a book and show them what this is, what it looks like, and get some interpreters tell them exactly what we need. So we built this long stove with all this mud inside, actually, and then got something to raise the edge higher so you could put this wok on top of it. Because in those days, all this cooking— The wok, is not like American the wok. This is very small, all very small with a long handle, really it is for a stir-fry. They don't use the wok, just a long handle.

3-00:10:25

Geraci:

So they're actually tossing.

3-00:10:27

Chiang:

They are tossing. It's very much like the Italian food.

3-00:10:30

Geraci:

Right, they're tossing it, with the pan, just the wrist motion.

3-00:10:34

Chiang:

Yeah, you just use one hand. And the tossing, so this- you have to line up. You line up 6 of the stove burners. And then you separate another stove making rice, another one making soup. All separate. Not like here. Everything, wall to wall standing still, and water runs through all the stoves, to clean up. In those days, you had to pile up a lot of woks, you know, after the cook cooked one dish, he would just finish, and here's another one. Labor is cheap in those days. Very cheap. So one young man was there, just doing nothing. Just like an apprentice.

3-00:11:28

Geraci:

Just like an apprentice.

3-00:11:29

Chiang:

Yeah, just wash the wok for you. So you can cook. And that chef I found in another little dump somewhere when we just went there for dinner. It was very hard in those days to find a chef. And also, what we knew in those days were only good chefs from our lives in China, where we had good food.

3-00:11:57

Geraci:

Good food.

3-00:11:58

Chiang:

Yeah, good food, even in Chongqing, in Shanghai, you know, we all had good food. So we taste the food, all really good. I still remember the chef named Wang. And so, we went there for dinner a couple of times, just a little dump, we just discovered it. And somehow, he mistook me, he thought I was a movie star. He thought I was a very famous movie star at that time in Japan, but I was not. I told him, "I'm Chinese," you know, and something. He says, "Are you really?" He thought I was really humble. I said, "I'm not!" I said, "I'm married, I've got kids." So finally, he complained about this restaurant, it was just too small for him because he was really very good, so I said, "Really, you like to move to a bigger place," or something like that. He said, "I'd love to, if there is a chance." He said, "Are you going to open a restaurant?" I said, "We're planning to", because at that time we were still negotiating with the landlord with the lot. He said, "If you open it, I am willing to working for you." And he kept saying, "You're a very beautiful, nice lady. [laughs] Nice lady." So I said, "Fine." And that's how we got him. And he was with us all those years.

3-00:13:43

Geraci:

So you have no problem as a Chinese – you're still Chinese citizens buying land in Japan, or-

3-00:13:51

Chiang:

Yes, yes, ever since he was with us, then not only that, later he hired some more, like associates. But most of them, in those days they didn't have status, so they also had problems. So later we had to change their status, and they were very happy. One of the associates later came to the USA, and opened the

“Panda” chain– you know, you’ve heard about Panda? That’s the father of the young owner now.

3-00:14:28

Geraci: My goodness.

3-00:14:32

Chiang: Yeah, that’s his father. He opened the first non-Cantonese restaurant at that time in Pasadena. Called Panda Garden. He used to be my associate. Small world. I didn’t know that. After we came here, and we had dinner at the restaurant, he came out, and he recognized me. Small world.

3-00:15:02

Geraci: So what kind of clientele did you have at the restaurant? Were there enough Chinese people or did the Japanese enjoy this also?

3-00:15:10

Chiang: Japanese cannot afford it.

3-00:15:12

Geraci: That’s what I was wondering.

3-00:15:15

Chiang: Yeah, it [was] mostly Americans. Because at that time they had a place called Washington Heights. It’s all these officers of GHQ at that time, during General MacArthur’s time. So the living quarters, the restaurant was just near where they lived. So a lot of Americans, a lot of Chinese business men.

3-00:15:41

Geraci: How active were you in the running of the restaurant?

3-00:15:44

Chiang: Actually, I never operated that place. Because my cousin was running the place and everything. Because I had kids, and also we were diplomats’ wives, we were not supposed to work.

3-00:16:01

Geraci: So you’re more of the silent partner that helps.

3-00:16:04

Chiang: Yeah, that’s right, behind the kind of – behind the scene.

3-00:16:09

Geraci: Do you think that you learned anything from that experience as far as running a restaurant?

3-00:16:13

Chiang: Uh, not – some, not much. But I did learn, I think, I did really learn a lot about food. Because this chef, even nowadays, he’s really one of the top. I think when I taste all these, the food from different regions of China, he’s still one of the top. Not too many. You know, I think I have one in Beverly Hills –

Yang, Y-A-N-G, Yang Shifu, he's one of the top, I think. Not only skillful, the taste – it's so creative. That's hard to get, really very hard to get. But the chef Wong died a couple years ago, died of cancer. And my chef in Beverly Hills, Yang Shifu—now he's retired, also. Recently my son came here, a couple of times, we were talking about former restaurants, talking about the old Mandarin and everything. So he said, "You know, Mama, I don't get along very well with Yang Shifu," because Yang Shifu always thinks my son is too young. "Young boss, you are too young. Your mother knows a lot about the food, about it, but you are too young." Always kind of, you know, looks down on Philip and thinks, "You are too young, you don't know that much." And Philip said, "Although we don't get along very well, but Mama I really miss Yang Shifu's food," he said. He's really one of the top. Another one I had here was called Tony Chen – he was at that time very famous – he was also one of the great chefs. Not only that, he knows how to manage the kitchen. That's really hard. Not too many. All these two chefs, they are good, but they don't know how to manage the kitchen staff. They don't know what a food costs. Tony knows the food cost. And ingredients. Every time he just looks at fish eyes, if they do not pop out, the cheeks he opens up, if it is not vivid red, "Send it back! Tell your boss, this is not fresh. Give us a couple new- the fresh ones." That's what we need. And also, all these chefs I talk about, they have so much pride for what they are doing. A lot of good chefs, they don't have the pride. See like, if I'm being a waiter, I want to be a good waiter. I'll have pride to do a good job, you know. But now these days in all fields, I must say, very few really, they have the pride to try to do really a good job.

3-00:19:59

Geraci:

With a passion.

3-00:20:00

Chiang:

Yeah, with a passion.

3-00:20:01

Geraci:

I just leave with a little quote right here. You're talking about chefs with this pride, with this passion. I don't know where I got this quote from, but just going through my notes, I found this where- it's saying that chopping is a metaphor for China, "A clumsy massive tool that wields to produce an artistic consumption of fine food." And I found that to be fascinating in that Chinese cuisine and these chefs, there's not that many tools.

3-00:20:37

Chiang:

Nothing, I just will tell you this. Because-

3-00:20:42

Geraci:

But it's artistic. As you were talking earlier, the pasta that looks that like fish-

3-00:20:45

Chiang:

This is something, you know, back when I had the Mandarin, our kitchen was really open for inspection. Anytime the customers, they like to see the kitchen,

we were willing to show the kitchen. Really with pride. Because our kitchen is really the cleanest one. All the equipment is really up-to-date, very modern, everything. Wall-to-wall stainless steel. Two big, huge fans on the wall just to blow the duck. Peking duck. 24 hours, because, you know, you just- it was not enough. Everyday I tried to serve, just limited, about 20, you know. Just not fast enough to – so I have to have this fan to dry them. But besides all this modern equipment, like a slicer, and the mixer – you know, for the dough, instead of you using your hands, because you have to make it faster to make enough to serve the people. Besides that, everything, we don't have a slicer or something. Everything is done by just using a few cleavers. But the cleaver is so sharp. All the chefs, they have their own name on the line for everything they do. See, they slice, they cut with the cleaver. They pound it with the cleaver. They use as a pounder, slicer, just everything. Smash the garlic, just only one cleaver. No other gadgets. And the funniest thing is, one day Danny Kaye was in our kitchen. And that time it was Tony cooking. Tony is our chef. He's been with us for 20 years. Then also he died of cancer. He shaved the skin off from the ginger, used the big cleaver, just like this. Then he pounded the ginger, then he minced the ginger. Danny Kaye looked] at that, and he say, "Amazing. Tony, you're such an amazing person." Tony said, "You want to try? Please," giving the knife, "You try." [laughs]. That's talented. That's talented.

3-00:23:37

Geraci:

But that's the artistic part of it.

3-00:23:40

Chiang:

And also the artistic. And not only that, in the old days, now I like to, when I go to China, I eat the food. It's not only just tasty food. You know what, it's really good looking. Everything is thinly sliced. If the meat is thinly sliced, vegetables, everything is matched. Same sized. That's real beauty. I just look at, and I know it tastes good.

3-00:24:10

Geraci:

[laughs]

Chiang:

You know, here rarely people do that.

3-00:24:16

Geraci:

Well, I think that kind of takes us where we need to go for today, and I know you're going off for a month now to China for a trip, and I want to hear about that trip on tape when you come back about what you've seen and done. And when you pick up next time we're actually have you coming to America and we're going to have you talking about The Mandarin.

3-00:24:38

Chiang:

The Mandarin. Okay.

3-00:24:40

Geraci:

Thank you very much.

3-00:24:40

Chiang:

Oh, thank you.

Interview 3: January 31, 2006

Begin Audio file 4: Chiang, Cecilia 04 01-31-06.wav

4-00:00:00

Geraci:

I am Vic Geraci, Food and Wine Historian from the University of California, Berkeley Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is Tuesday, January 31st, 2006, and seated with me is Cecilia Chiang, restaurateur. This interview is being conducted in Cecilia's home in Belvedere, California. Ok, Cecilia, we'll pick off from where we left off in our last interviews. We pretty much covered your life in China, we've got, as you've called it, the long walk or the great walk, – whatever you want – your life in Tokyo, and late fifties into the early sixties, you come to America. And let's pick up there now with the American experience and, in particular, getting into the restaurants. And I think that's a good place for us to start.

4-00:00:54

Chiang:

The first thing I want to tell you, you know how I got into the restaurant business is by mistake. I tried to help my friends to get a lease. So finally I got a lease and they backed off. So I got stuck in the restaurant business. At that time, I really didn't know what to do. I thought, well, if they back out, I can always go to the landlord, and say that my friends, they backed out, and please pay my deposit.

4-00:01:34

Geraci:

So, you had come here and friends had convinced you to open a restaurant?

4-00:01:40

Chiang:

No, I met a couple of ladies. I met them before in Tokyo.

4-00:01:46

Geraci:

Oh, okay.

4-00:01:48

Chiang:

And one day I was walking in Chinatown with my sister. I ran into her, or somebody called me. I said, "Oh, really small world." And I met her again in Chinatown, San Francisco. They said, "Well, we moved down here now." There are already residents, they'd like to open a restaurant, but they say that their English is not good enough to negotiating a lease. I said, "Mine is not any better than yours, but I will try my best." So I went to see the landlord, and I got the lease, so the landlord said, "if you are really interested in this piece of property, you have to show me the faith, you have to make a deposit." So, he said, "I'd like to know right away because I have had a couple of other offers." At that time, I was here just a couple of months.

4-00:02:56

Geraci:

What year was this?

4-00:02:58

Chiang:

That was 1957.

- 4-00:03:00
Geraci: Okay, 1957. So you were just barely –
- 4-00:03:02
Chiang: Barely, I was just here a couple of months, I was totally a stranger, what you can call a Stranger in Paradise, I don't know anything about business, I don't have any friends, the only person I knew at that time is my sister and her couple of friends, that's all. So I went to the, back to the landlord, I said, "Well, my friends, they backed out. And I have family in Tokyo, Japan. Can you just return the deposit? I want to go back to Japan." So he said, "Do you know there is a law? If I back out, I can not take your deposit, but if you back out, I have a right to keep the deposit by law. It's legal you know." I said, "What?!"
- 4-00:04:05
Geraci: How much money was this?
- 4-00:04:07
Chiang: Ten thousand.
- 4-00:04:07
Geraci: That's ten thousand—well, okay, at that time that's a lot of money.
- 4-00:04:11
Chiang: That's quite a bit of money. Yeah.
- 4-00:04:12
Geraci: Where was the location of this place?
- 4-00:04:15
Chiang: Location was, I still remember, 2209 Polk Street, across the street from the Alhambra movie theatre. Between Green and Vallejo.
- 4-00:04:29
Geraci: What had the building been used for prior to that?
- 4-00:04:33
Chiang: It was a restaurant, it was a Chinese restaurant called The Plum and Bamboo, something like that.
- 4-00:04:41
Geraci: Okay, so, I mean it did have the fixtures, it had the equipment.
- 4-00:04:45
Chiang: The equipment—so you bought that.
- 4-00:04:47
Geraci: Okay.
- 4-00:04:47
Chiang: And, he said uh, "No way. I already turned down the other people's offers, so I'll accept your offer," and so got a twenty-year lease. It's a good lease, you

know, everything. So what I did then, I got stuck. So I said, “Right now what I have to do is- then they started going to pay the rent, one thing or another, I better get the cook and start the restaurant.” Then I had in mind: no chop suey in my menu, and no egg fu yong. All this Chinatown stuff is a no-no.

4-00:05:40

Geraci:

So you decided from the beginning that you were going to have a different –

4-00:05:45

Chiang:

And so, I started to work. And also, I tried to find the chef. At that time, 1970s, compared to now, it was very hard to find the non-Cantonese cook. Mostly all were Cantonese.

4-00:06:06

Geraci:

Most of Chinatown was Cantonese.

4-00:06:10

Chiang:

Cantonese. In those days, the Chinese population in San Francisco was 90% Cantonese. Very few people from Beijing, from Shanghai, mostly all Cantonese. If you don't speak Cantonese when you go to Chinatown, they treat you like foreigner. I didn't know that until when I found the chef, there was a little ad in the newspaper, in Chinese newspaper. And so when I found a couple, they're from Shandong province, from mainland China. They know some cooking, but it really is not that special. But I didn't know how to cook, either. But I just use my flavor, my taste, everything-

4-00:07:06

Geraci:

Something you had gotten from your mother.

4-00:07:09

Chiang:

From my mother, that's right. So I just remembered all that, put in the recipes, wrote it down, read the menu, everything. When I first opened The Mandarin on Polk Street, I had three hundred items.

4-00:07:26

Geraci:

[chuckles] Oh my goodness.

4-00:07:29

Chiang:

On my menu, that was important, because I didn't have any experience, you know.

4-00:07:35

Geraci:

But you had had a restaurant in—

4-00:07:37

Chiang:

In Tokyo. But we had professional chefs. And that chef was really one of the best from Hong Kong. But here, it was totally different. So I just remembered what I had in that menu, transferred to here, but it didn't work. So we wasted a lot of food. A lot of food. Because if you put it in the menu, you have to carry it.

4-00:08:05

Geraci: Right.

4-00:08:05

Chiang: Anyway, so anything I don't get too many costs, and I just moved away, moved— changed the menu, the menu was getting smaller and smaller. And, that's how I started.

4-00:08:18

Geraci: What types of things were you putting on the menu?

4-00:08:21

Chiang: The menu- I put mostly all Shanghai and Mandarin food. And also Sichuan. At that time, I was the first restaurant, Mandarin, to carry Szechwan food. Not only that, Hunan, all spicy ones. And I also brought true Mandarin food, like the potsticker. You know, *zha jiang mian*, I was the first one that brought this over to America. And people cannot pronounce it. "What is the meaning of jiao zhi, what is the meaning of jao zhi, zha jiang mian?" They don't know, never heard of this name. So I have a menu, you know, and people come in, they look at this, they said, "Are you sure this is a Chinese restaurant?" I said, "Why you don't think is a Chinese restaurant?" "Because no Chop Suey, no Egg Foo Yung, no Chow Mein!" [laughs] Anyway, when I first opened, I thought everybody is very important. Even now, I still think everybody who comes into my restaurant, they are an important person. You know, if you treat them very well, and they will bring their friends over. Because it's a very small restaurant, only 65 seats.

4-00:09:54

Geraci: That is small.

4-00:09:57

Chiang: Very small. So I didn't have much money. I cannot write to my husband, and say, "I need money to open a business." I'm supposed to come here to visit my sister. All of a sudden, you start a business you know, and you need money. You just cannot do that.

4-00:10:17

Geraci: How were you here? You were visiting—

4-00:10:20

Chiang: I came here to visit my sister.

4-00:10:24

Geraci: Okay, but I mean, did you have a green card, a visa?

4-00:10:29

Chiang: No, I had a diplomatic passport. Because at that time, my husband was working with the Chinese mission in Tokyo, during General MacArthur occupation time. So I'm holding a diplomatic passport. So I was visiting my sister, she just lost her husband. And that's how I came, to try to comfort her,

to see what she needed. So I was doing a job, which you cannot believe. I was a receptionist, I was a janitor. Because in those days I was young, only 30's, I had to do odd work. But the only thing I didn't know was how to cut the food, but I tried to help. So there was just this couple and one dishwasher. The dishwasher helped to do some cutting and doing the dishes. And I tried to learn all the things that I could.

So I answered the phone – we have no busboy, of course. I hired 3 waiters, they were all from UC Berkeley, three college students, speak beautiful English. You know, in those days, when you go to Chinatown: “What You Want!? Your Order.” They said, “Oh, number 3, sweet sour pork.” Just like, they throw things on the table, no tablecloth in Chinatown, no carpet, nothing. You know, in those days, they're so rough, they cannot even read the English, all the waiters. So here they come to my restaurant, all of these 3 young college students, speak beautiful English, well-mannered, they're all from very well educated families from China. Well-mannered, it makes such a big difference. And here I am; I wear Chinese dress, all the time. Chinese dress, and greet people, show them their table, help them to order, everything. I do everything. And that's how I started. I had one manager. The manager was also doing the accounting, and helped with other things. That's how I started. But I just think, I want to do the right thing. And I had a very funny feeling. I have a faith, I thought, I am going to make it. Because I had confidence.

4-00:13:19

Geraci: You had confidence in yourself.

4-00:13:21

Chiang: Yes, yes. For the first six months, no business, and my manager was so worried. The accountant, you know, money runs short. He said, “You know, you better make a decision. It's either you're going to sell it or you're going to close it, or something.” You know, he really got scared. So I said, “Don't worry. I have confidence. I think we're going to make it. Not right away, but slowly. I think we're going to make it.” I kept saying to him, and also I sincerely believed it. Because I think I had a very good idea, unique, because all the food I served nobody else in United States at that time, served. I think if they want something, they have to come to The Mandarin.

4-00:14:16

Geraci: If they want something – what was your clientele?

4-00:14:20

Chiang: The clientele is all the neighborhoods. You have Pacific Heights people, and Russian Jews, in those days, and also Nob Hills.

4-00:14:35

Geraci: So it's basically a white clientele?

4-00:14:37

Chiang: We had a lot of Chinese and Japanese too.

4-00:14:42

Geraci: Okay.

4-00:14:43

Chiang: In those days, you have to give them, they call it “house account”. I think for you it’s J-A-L. The Japanese people, they love Chinese food. Bank of Tokyo. Once they discovered it, they came, and they just kept coming back, coming back. I helped them order, and everything. Always treated them very, very well. Everybody said, “You’re the most gracious host.”

4-00:15:15

Geraci: So service makes a big impression—

4-00:15:20

Chiang: Service, and the food is really good food, because nobody else- we have smoked tea duck, beggar’s chicken. Even now, people still talk about it. And Shark Fin. People still talk about it, now. And also, later I created minced squash in the lettuce cup. That’s after I moved to Ghirardelli Square, because the kitchen was much bigger. And then I hired a couple chefs.

4-00:15:52

Geraci: How about the restaurant itself? Did you change the interior?

4-00:15:59

Chiang: Totally different. This was- the original one, very small. I didn’t have much money, so it was just very simple. But it was still in good taste, like tropical things. A lot of- like Hawaii, very simple. And the ceiling—all this, because the restaurant before me they called “Bamboo”, so they used a lot of bamboo. I didn’t change it.

4-00:16:28

Geraci: Oh, okay.

4-00:16:29

Chiang: I didn’t change that. So I just kept it that way. I used a nice pink linen. At that time, usually pink made it very cozy and warm. It was very small. It didn’t even have a waiting room or anything. But I took care of every customer. But I think the first thing is, I really take care of my customers. Whenever they come to the restaurant, I make them feel comfortable; I make them feel like they’re really welcome. Then besides that, good food. The place was small, but it’s nice and cozy. And also, linen. In those days, everything was really cotton, nice and starched. In those days, you didn’t find Chinese restaurants like that. And the waiters also were very courteous, very polite. I think all that helps. And somehow I know I had something to offer that nobody had. I had unique food.

4-00:17:45

Geraci: Okay, so you had a niche, you had a place, you were offering something that wasn’t out there for the rest of the world.

4-00:17:53

Chiang:

That's the thing is- when I opened I talked to the manager. I already hired a manager at that time. I just said, "I want to do something nobody else is willing to do it." For instance, we changed plates, every time there was a new dish. It's a small restaurant, I can do it.

4-00:18:15

Geraci:

Right.

4-00:18:16

Chiang:

And also, in those days – who else would use hot plates? In those days I already started hot plates. Hot plates, and also for instance, I started sizzling rice soup. That's a show. You put a sizzling – soup poured into sizzling rice. Zsa! Dramatic! But at that time, that was an original Shanghai dish. But in those days, nobody ever had that. They think, not only eating, it's quite dramatic. And glazed banana. You see all these silk-screens. Even now, nobody serves it. It is too much work. You know, they want every – so I did something right. Another thing is, people, now they talked. They said- after I moved to Ghirardelli Square, I was there eight years in Polk Street, getting the line all the time, later. Who helped me a lot? Herb Caen. When they came to it- a very famous restaurant too, called "Alexis." You probably heard about that restaurant. He had a restaurant on Nob Hill, with a very famous name, called Alexis, probably the most elegant restaurant at that time. And the most expensive restaurant. But he was brought up in China, in Tianjin and Beijing. I met him at Tianjin. What a coincidence.

4-00:20:03

Geraci:

Small world.

4-00:20:04

Chiang:

Small world. So he came here, and he said, "Mandarin, Mandarin." He said, "Can you speak Mandarin?" Because in those days all they were all Cantonese. I said, "Of course," and I spoke Mandarin right away to him and started to talk. And then he said, "I know you, I met you when you were a student!"

4-00:20:28

Geraci:

At University?

4-00:20:30

Chiang:

Yeah, that's how we started to talk. Then he looked at me, then he knows my background and everything, he said, "You know, Cecilia, this is a tough job opening a restaurant. And you were just here a few months, you don't know anybody, anything. This is really tough, you have to work awfully hard." Another thing is, he was kidding, he said, "This is foreign devils! Americans." He used the Chinese word: Yang Gui Zi. They don't know anything about Mandarin food, Shanghai food! Chop Suey is good enough for them!"
[laughs]

4-00:21:14

Geraci: I like that. But that was true!

4-00:21:17

Chiang: Yeah, yeah. Then he said, “Why do you want to do all this work? Look at your menu, too many items!” That’s what he said to me. And, oh boy, he said, “You have to really educate them.” I said, “Right, I’m going to – that’s what I’m doing now. I have to educate them.” But at that time, I was really thinking about, if in the first year, year and a half, if I cannot make it, I will just close and go back to Japan, because this is my butter and –

4-00:21:51

Geraci: [chuckles] That’s right.

4-00:21:52

Chiang: And bread. Because I have restaurant in Tokyo, I have a nice family there.

4-00:21:57

Geraci: Oh, so you still had the restaurant in Tokyo.

4-00:22:00

Chiang: Yes. You know, it was still making money and everything. This is not – but I just wanted to educate American people and tell them, “Besides chop suey, here is something else! Tastes better!” This is my whole purpose. I really wanted to bring the real Chinese food to America. Let them know, even if I fail, that’s fine, I lost some money. At least I did – I think I did a good job. I feel this is my duty to introduce the Chinese culture, the food, to America. That’s the whole thing. But somehow, I had faith: I think I’ll make it.

4-00:22:48

Geraci: How did you convince them?

4-00:22:50

Chiang: I really educated them, I usually sometimes, when I first opened, I would send samples to them: You try. If you just try- you tell me if you like it or you don’t like it. My treat. I just want you to try. And: We really like it, you should put it in the menu. That’s how I started. And, of course, Herb Caen came with Alex. And Herb Caen just put in his column, he said, I gave this column for you: it’s a little hole in the wall on Polk Street. Red door, that time, I had a little red door. And he mentioned the food, mentioned me. And after that article, that day, I answered more than one hundred phone calls.

4-00:23:53

Geraci: Oh my goodness. That tells you then, that people do listen to food writers.

4-00:23:59

Chiang: Yes, yes, yes.

4-00:24:00

Geraci: Now, do you remember the year of that?

- 4-00:24:01
Chiang: That day- it was already 1959, the later part. At that time, my manager was really nervous about this. He said, "Let's do something else, I will advise you, you better go home and join your family."
- 4-00:24:22
Geraci: How was your chef doing at this point?
- 4-00:24:25
Chiang: The chefs, they got paid, they couldn't care less – they are illegal aliens, so they couldn't – I just paid them, I tell them what to do, they just do it. They don't know anything about PR.
- 4-00:24:42
Geraci: I mean, as far as the food –
- 4-00:24:45
Chiang: They listened to me. That's the good thing about them. I tell them what to do, the ingredients, everything. They listened to me. Then we tried, we tasted it.
- 4-00:24:57
Geraci: Sounds like your mom, doesn't it? In listening to your stories about your mom, she didn't cook, but she knew how to give the directions.
- 4-00:25:06
Chiang: Yes, yes, tell them what to do. Then a miracle happens. Then- Trader Vic is one of my old customers. Yeah, Victor Bergeron. But he loved our food. Not only that, every Sunday he comes in. That Sunday, he brought his private chef, who is Cantonese, and came to The Mandarin. Two of them. When sometimes with Chan Wang, his right hand man. Three of them eat, they discuss, ask me the ingredients, everything. So one day they were there, and Johnny Kan and Danny Kaye were there.
- 4-00:25:56
Geraci: Danny Kaye, also?
- 4-00:25:58
Chiang: Danny Kaye is a big follower, big follower of The Mandarin. You didn't know that?
- 4-00:26:06
Geraci: No, very good.
- 4-00:26:07
Chiang: And also, he was one of my cooking class students. So he was there, and they all know each other. And so, Victor said, "You know, every time I come here, you're working. You're working too hard. Do you make money?" I said, "Not yet. I'm still not making money." He said, "Ah, close this joint."
- 4-00:26:40
Geraci: [laughs]

4-00:26:43

Chiang:

That's Bergeron, the way he talks, so rough. He said, "Close this joint! Come work for me. I will pay you. I will pay you very good," he said. "Just come work for me. Bring some of your recipes." And so that day- so Danny Kaye was there, at the other table. He said, "What is he trying to say to you?" So he asked me, I told him what he said. I said, he said, "Close the joint and come work with me, I will pay you more than what you are doing here." So, [laughs], Danny Kaye went over to the table, said, "Hey, Mr. Bergeron, leave her alone! I know what you are trying to do. You are trying to hire her and steal her [laughs] recipes!"

4-00:27:54

Geraci:

[laughs] Oh my goodness.

4-00:27:57

Chiang:

That was so funny. That time when they were all there. And also, Johnny Kan said the same thing. You know, in those days Johnny was the number one Chinese restaurateur in Chinatown. He was the first one to use credit cards in Chinatown.

4-00:28:12

Geraci:

Ah.

4-00:28:13

Chiang:

He was the first one who put linen on the table in Chinatown. So he was very well-known, but his customers, probably were 80%, all American, mostly tourists. But he had a nice piece of business there. So he said, "Cecilia, don't listen to him. You just do it, I wish you luck," he said. Also he said, "I make good money, I have chop suey, and all these things. Your food is too complicated," that's what he said, "Too complicated, even for me. I'm Chinese, and I don't know how to order all that." I said, "Because you were born in America!" I said, "But this kind of food in China is very popular." I don't want to insult him, but I said, "Chop suey, if you move to China, nobody will eat it."

4-00:29:16

Geraci:

[laughs] They wouldn't know what it is.

4-00:29:19

Chiang:

They wouldn't know what it is. But anyway, the business each year was getting better and better, then a lot of major magazines, like *House and Garden*, *Gourmet Magazine*, in those days we have our own trade magazine, *Constitutional*, all kinds of magazines, put me on the cover of the magazine. Put me on the cover. So everything was just going very, very well. More than I can handle. Because I'm not a resident; I'm not an American citizen. I cannot in those days, get a liquor license. But everybody came in and they said, "You have to serve this cocktail. That's where the money is from." But I cannot. But I only can sell beer, wine, and champagne. Because I could only get a wine license. So anyway, then later I became a citizen, then things were

different. And so people have to wait and wait a long time. And next door has a bar, so when they wait, they have to go there, I have to go there to call them, “Your table is ready and come back”, all those things. So one day you have- a couple gentlemen, well-dressed, came in. And so, they said, “We love your food. You probably recognize us. We come here every week. But this is getting very ridiculous. We have to wait, next door you have to call, come get us. This is just too many problems. You should move. Get a bigger place, I guarantee you we will patronize you.” So I said, “I’d love to move. I know it is about time to move. But I don’t have the money to move. If I move to a bigger place, I need capital, but I don’t have any. Right now I just started making money, you know.” So this man said, “Come to see me.” And he gave me a card, Bank of America.

4-00:32:01
Geraci:

What was his name?

4-00:32:03
Chiang:

First he was in a foreign – what, some department. Foreign—

4-00:32:12
Geraci:

Foreign currency—

4-00:32:15
Chiang:

Foreign currency department. So he said, “You go there, you see the manager. The manager’s name is John Goy. That man is either Italian or Brazilian, the name. Yeah, I forgot. Parati, or something like that. So he said, “Go there.” I said, “How can I go there? I don’t know anybody.” He said, “Well, call him up and say that I recommend that you to see him.” So I went down there. But I said, you know, now I have nothing. I didn’t see the location, I cannot do anything, you know, move- at least you find a place or something. So I didn’t go to see him. Then later- one day in the afternoon, I was driving around in – I used to buy everything in Chinaware, sometime I went to Cost Plus, sometime go to Chinatown. So one day I was just driving around near Ghiradelli Square, the water. I saw a big sign that said, “Place for lease.” Edward Place. That was the plan- that was the Realtor. So I took the name and phone number down. I said, “I will just try.” So I called. He answered the phone. He said, “Mrs. Chiang, I don’t think there is a chance you’re going to get into Ghiradelli Square.” I said, “Why?” He said, “So many Chinese restaurants try to get in there. But they don’t want any Chinese restaurants.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Chinese restaurants are too greasy, too dirty, a lot of mice, a lot of cockroaches.” Chinatown, in the old days, yes, you know.

4-00:34:38
Geraci:

Right.

4-00:34:38
Chiang:

So I said, “My restaurant has no mice and no cockroaches. You can come to my restaurant and take a look at it. On Polk Street.” He said, “Where is your restaurant?” I told him. He said, “Never heard of it.” So I said, “That’s fine.”

So he said, "I think you're just wasting your time. Why don't you look somewhere else. Ghiradelli Square, just doesn't want any Chinese restaurants. In fact, they already have a Japanese restaurant that is going to sign out the lease," or something like that. So I said, "Fine, okay", but I wouldn't give up. [laughs] That's me. So I called again, I said, "well, if you don't like to take care of this for me, that's fine, but is there anybody else, you know, the manager or something, do you know their names? Can you give me their names? I will call and I will make an appointment." So he said, "I cannot do it because I'm listing exclusively." He said, "If I cannot get you in, I don't think you can." Something like that. Finally, I was just begging him. I said, "Please just give me their name. I will just try. If I fail," then I said, "I fail, so I'm not going to bother you again. If I do not fail, I will let you know." So finally, he said, "You're going to see Mr. and Mrs. Rose." -their last name, "they both are- they are a couple, they are managers." So I called. I called, and they said, "We don't want any Chinese restaurants." But he was telling the truth. They don't want any Chinese restaurant. Because most of the Chinese restaurants, they don't take care of the place, dirty, filthy, dirty, blah, blah, blah. I said, "Fine," so I said, "I have a little restaurant on Polk Street." I said, "If you don't mind, whenever you have the time, just come take a look at this place. And also, you like to taste the food, you'll be my guest." They didn't show up, nothing. So I called again. I wouldn't give up!

4-00:37:21

Geraci:

You were not going to give up.

4-00:37:26

Chiang:

Yeah, that's me. Because I know the place near The Mandarin is getting really jammed up. Every night we have to turn down the people. I don't watch the people; I give them plenty of time to eat, I never – But you know, when you have to turn down, also it is not very nice. Some of them drive long time- long way to The Mandarin. So finally I called Mr. Rose again, I said, "Can I just come in and talk to you, if you give me a few minutes, if you don't mind." He said, "Okay, if you insist. Okay, come." So I went. I remember one afternoon, 2:30, I was so nervous I tried to get the manager to come with me, because he speaks very good English. My English wasn't that great. So I was afraid I cannot explain myself, use the expressions, everything. So finally he said, "I'm not going. You go. I think the chance is very slim." So I said, "Okay, I'll go. I'll get a shut-off." So crazy!

4-00:38:55

Geraci:

[laughs] Get some courage.

4-00:38:57

Chiang:

Give me some courage. I remember, so I have a little scotch, then I drove down there, so I carried the menu, all the publicity, Herb Caen, a lot of publicity, the magazines, everything. So I have a whole bundle of things. So I went down there, and met him. I think another thing is, probably appearance. My appearance and everything. People, they look at me, and they know also,

I'm a very sincere person, very direct. So: "Young lady, you're very ambitious, aren't you? You have a small restaurant, now you want to move in here, we don't have small space, do you know that? All spaces are ba-ba-ba-ba-ba." So I said, "At least you can show me, I can take a look at it, can't I? Can I just take a look at? If I cannot do it, I will tell you, you know." So they said, "Well, wait a minute, we- I just want to review those things, I want to look at all these things. I have to talk to the President. Then I have to" – the President was named Mr. Lemon – "then I have to, if they all agree, then we have to talk to the owner, Mr. William Roth, from the Matson Steam Shipping Company, you know, the owner. I said, "That's fine. I will leave everything here." So I took off. So I said, "Whenever you have any questions, you can reach me." I gave them a name card, everything. After a few days they called me. And they said, "Well, we need some references. Now we looked at the menu, and everything, publicity. Do you know anybody we know, and also, who are in the same business?"

So I said, "Can I give you a couple names? "Victor Bergeron." They said, "You know him?" I said, "Yes, he's my old customer. I said, "Alexis Merab." I said, "You can talk to them about me, you can ask them about me, about my business, about my food, everything." So after a few days, the President and Mr. and Mrs. Ross, they came to the restaurant, to taste the food. They cannot get in, they saw that we were very busy. Of course I had to give them a table. And they were very happy. Very happy. Then later they brought Mr. Roth over, can you believe it? And Mr. Roth with his family, they came. They loved the food, and they loved – you know, so finally I got in the restaurant, but the spot they showed me – the smallest, 300 seats, that's in Woolen Mills, that's the building, on the top, not really top location. Now you heard, when you open all the retail shops, location so important. Another thing: Must be on the ground floor. But I got no choice. I'm on the fourth floor. And, so I said, "Can you chop the size in half? This is too big, hundred and fifty, double the size I have now." At that time I was a little scared.

4-00:43:19
Geraci:

This was four to five times bigger than what you had.

4-00:43:21
Chiang:

Bigger, yes, anyway, so anyway, they said, "Well there is no way you can chop it off." They explained everything to me. They said, "Actually, you need a big kitchen," and everything. So I said, "I really don't know." I didn't make a decision, anything. So finally I tried to get four architects to give me some ideas. And two were Chinese, one French, one American. But I talked to them about what I wanted, something. They have no ideas, this French man and American, and the two Chinese. So one Chinese did all the work for Trader Vic, Lu Chan, and he was an American-born Chinese. So I said, "Lun, if you can do this, you're going to get the job," I said, "under some conditions." He said, "What?" I said, "The first thing, no red, no gold, no dragons, and no lanterns." Every restaurant you walk in, you see the lantern, you see the

dragon, in those days. Red color, gold color. It's so gaudy. So I said, "This is all a no-no. I want this place to look like an old temple." It's already aged. Natural wood, everything. Like that. I said, "That's my ideas. Because I don't know anything about design, I don't know anything about that. But this is what I like, make it look old and very- just look like an old Chinese temple, something like that." So I showed him some pictures. So then later I got the lease, twenty-five years. The lease –

4-00:45:29

Geraci:

Did you go back to Bank of America for your capital?

4-00:45:34

Chiang:

So after, I didn't sign the lease before- I have to be sure I have the money – because at that time, I had some old customers, you know, some very wealthy people, like one came every week several times, Walter King, the artist – big eyes, remember that? He always said, "Oh, this little joint. You have to move. Terrible! No martini, no this—" "Always complaining. "Because, you know, before dinner we like to have a martini. Oh, you move." I said, "I don't have the money." "We will help you." Everybody said this. Some good customers, "Well, we will help you, we will help you." You know what? When I really needed some money, nobody. Nobody, nobody. The ones who promised to help me. So I went to the bank, and tried to borrow the money. But I just figured out how much I'm going to need to open, how much I need. So I went to Bank of America. I went to see Mr. Goy. He looked at me, he also said, "Young lady, you are very ambitious. How much do you want to borrow?" I said, "\$750,000". He said, "Do you know that is a lot of money?" I said, "Yes, it's a lot of money, but I need it. I need that much, you know." He said, "How much are you going to put it?" So I said, "I'm going to put in quarter of a million."

Then he said, "What is – you have to show me what you have, some properties, something, for collateral." So, he asked me a few questions: "First thing, do you owe people money?" I said, "No." "Do people owe you money?" "No." "Do you have credit cards?" "No." "Do you have any properties, house, home?" "No." So he said, "How do I know your credit is good." I think I just bought a house at that time, and in St, Francis Wood, or maybe not yet, not yet. I said, "I have a lot of jewelry. I have big diamonds, and jade, emerald, whatever." I said, "Also, I have quite a few mink coats." I was so naïve. He said, "What am I going to do? I cannot wear your mink coat? I cannot wear your jewelry." So he said, "I mean do you have stocks, do you have property." I said, "No, I don't have any." But then, finally, somehow – I think it was fate – he looked at me, and after thinking about it for a few days, he gave me the loan. That's a break in my whole life, I mean, just very lucky and surprised.

4-00:49:20

Geraci:

Could it have been that he saw you had faith in yourself?

4-00:49:24

Chiang:

He asked me about what type, and then he also went, before he made the loan, he went to the restaurant. He saw the business, everything. He went there a couple times. He saw the business, and everything. How I handled the people. He said, "Oh, I think you're just charming, you are beautiful." I think he believes I can make it, somehow. But anyway, he said- I think I finally paid the loan- after about six years I was supposed to return the money. But I did, before the dead end, I returned all the money, with all the interest. So he always said, "I hope all my customers are like you. You know, you keep your word and everything." That's really a big break. And also, by that time, the three young men, also customers, who come to eat a lot in the restaurant. I don't know who they are. They said, "Well, if you have any difficulties, we are going to help you. And co-sign this loan, and everything." So I found out these three young men, they were the founders of Air California. So this is just something you know, just strangers we met.

4-00:51:17

Geraci:

Right.

4-00:51:17

Chiang:

I don't know them, they don't know me. But somehow, they ate so many times in the restaurant and they know the business, it seems like they know me very well, they said, I'm always treating them so well and everything. Then we became very good friend.

4-00:51:43

Geraci:

That's amazing – So you were really beginning to really sell this new idea. People had faith in you.

4-00:51:54

Chiang:

The thing is, that's not easy, for people to trust you. To trust your taste, trust your food. And I think the most important thing- the first thing is that you have to really treat people well. Another thing, of course, the food. And the inside, the interior, the environment. And also, I think, now these days, I think it's very important, is the owner or the chef or the owner's personality.

4-00:52:29

Geraci:

Yes.

4-00:52:31

Chiang:

It has a lot to do with business. Personality, the food, the service, the atmosphere. And you have to work together. And another thing is, I think somehow I just – never in my life I like to – for instance, when I drive the car, I don't want to like, follow somebody. I always try to be- move ahead. Even now, for my age, I still don't like to follow 45 miles, 60 miles. That's no fun, boring, you know! I like to pass people, I like to move ahead of things. I think I did something – now I think, but that day I didn't think – now I think people still talk about it. About me, about the food. About the way, the style of the

food. People still talk about it. I think we just served a lot of things that were one of a kind- nobody else had it. I did something quite smart.

4-00:53:47

Geraci: Right, they had to come to you.

4-00:53:50

Chiang: Yeah, they have to come to me, to taste it. For instance, Chuck Williams, always said, "Cecelia, I miss your Tea Duck and the Beggar's Chicken. Why does nobody serve it in the whole Bay Area? Why?" I said, "Don't ask me." Actually, I had it, in the recipe, in my books, but people, they don't want to go through all that trouble. It's all, step by step, there is a lot of work involved. Somehow, I think people try to make money too fast. People are kind of money-hungry. They want to make money first, but I'm not that way.

4-00:54:39

Geraci: You had to build the reputation first.

4-00:54:41

Chiang: I want to build the reputations and everything, then, naturally, you will make money later.

4-00:54:49

Geraci: Now, let's talk a little bit about – I mean, as you're getting ready now to move to Ghiradelli Square, how had the menu changed over the years? We know that it really dwindled in size, from three hundred items down to something you could handle better, but did you – were there favorite dishes that you started really becoming known for?

4-00:55:08

Chiang: Uh, then after like my small restaurant, at that time, I cannot serve banquets. I could not serve banquets at all, I mean the fancy banquet. Because this couple, they're not trained for that, you know. That's a needed- really a skill.

4-00:55:26

Geraci: You mean your chefs?

4-00:55:27

Chiang: The chefs, yeah. You need the skills. And also, my kitchen is not- the kitchen on Polk Street, is small, old-fashioned, only four burners.

4-00:55:39

Geraci: Four burners?

4-00:55:41

Chiang: Just four burners. The Ghiradelli Square one, you should see, is impressive. I have sixteen cooks, they all cook at the same time.

4-00:55:53

Geraci: Sixteen?

4-00:55:54

Chiang:

I have one, who just cooked soup, nothing but soup, one cook. One cook cooked nothing but Tea Duck. One doing nothing but the Duck. That's why it's- every time you go in there, it always tastes the same. The consistency of the food. Like, I have one person doing nothing but Potstickers. We sell hundreds and hundreds of potstickers. That is a woman. Her hands just move so fast, like a little machine. She can make the Potstickers, 100 in one hour- she started with the dough, like a little machine. And also, potstickers, if you have my potstickers at Mandarin, now every time you eat the potsticker, you think, "How come they make it so bad?" You know, just like that feeling. That's why it's - everything is very well organized, we have a system going. And everything is in the kitchen. We don't buy Spring Rolls, we make our own dough. In those days, you cannot buy anything.

4-00:57:14

Geraci:

I was just going to ask you about- where are you getting your ingredients for all of these things?

4-00:57:18

Chiang:

All these things, you cook, everything you have is made in the restaurant. So later, when we moved to Ghiradelli Square, we had a big grill about this size, about the size of this table.

4-00:57:30

Geraci:

Oh that's big, that's four- five by five.

4-00:57:34

Chiang:

Very big, the grill. The potstickers, they just put it on. And they put the big lid on. From scratch, fresh. And also, they make spring rolls, the wrapper, just like that. Oh, just so fast, and also, the duck, the Peking duck, the wrap, we make everything our own.

4-00:57:56

Geraci:

Did you have somebody doing all your buying for you?

4-00:57:59

Chiang:

Buying? In those days, I bought myself. Then later, when we were getting too many things, too many, then they delivered. Then I had a very good chef, Tony.

4-00:58:11

Geraci:

So as you moved to the Mandarin you probably had more things delivered. But originally you did all your own buying?

4-00:58:16

Chiang:

Buying- because, I don't speak Cantonese. They don't deliver! Also, I'm not inside Chinatown. They treated me so bad, so bad, the Cantonese.

4-00:58:31

Geraci:

So there's a little bit of a struggle going on there?

4-00:58:34
Chiang:

Yes.

4-00:58:34
Geraci:

How did the Cantonese of the Chinatown restaurants and purveyors of food, how did they feel about you?

4-00:58:40
Chiang:

Later on, they changed the whole attitude. They were so nice to me. And even now, I see some of the old ones, they still call me, “Hi Boss Lady! How are you?” You know, something like that. Before, when I went there, everything was cash, based on cash. Give them check, they don’t accept. Of course, no credit cards—you have to pay cash, for everything. Then later I moved to Ghiradelli Square, they changed the whole attitude.

4-00:59:16
Geraci:

Why do you think that was at first, that they weren’t willing, or at least were reluctant to do business with you?

4-00:59:22
Chiang:

First thing, because I’m non-Cantonese, second, I’m a woman.

4-00:59:26
Geraci:

Okay.

4-00:59:28
Chiang:

You know the Chinese man, they don’t respect the women, especially when you open a restaurant, they are afraid you will compete with them, get the business from them. And they have no respect for women in China.

4-00:59:45
Geraci:

So it wasn’t easy then?

4-00:59:46
Chiang:

Not easy, not easy.

4-00:59:48
Geraci:

So did you have problems getting certain foods?

4-00:59:52
Chiang:

Ah, a lot of problems. And for instance, remember when I first opened on Polk Street, we had no sesame seeds paste. Occasionally, you get some sesame seed oil from Japantown. But that’s just little bottles. But we use a lot, you know, Northern Chinese cuisine, uses a lot. In salad, and a lot of things. And a lot of the wood- here we use a lot, but the Cantonese don’t use it. So I had to ship it over from Taiwan. Because in those days, there were no relations with Mainland China. And so, everything was from Taiwan, so I shipped it over from Taiwan. And when I moved to Ghiradelli Square, I had a big grill in the dining room, that I had custom made in Taiwan, I went down then, drew the pictures and everything, had it made, I brought it back. That was not easy, but I really made it. We have Mongolian, like lamb, and beef.

We cooked right on the grill. And under is- in China, you use coal, but here you cannot do that indoors—it is illegal, so we used the gas. It's great, I miss that. Now and then, I always think about that, how good it is. The bun, we make the bun, all made the buns with sesame seeds, and stuff the meat inside, just like in Beijing. Just like in Beijing

4-01:01:49

Geraci:

Now, as you're moving to the new restaurant – you talked about your old restaurant, and what the theme was, and what you did with the interior. What was the theme now as you move into the Mandarin in Ghiradelli Square? Now is this about 1968?

4-01:02:07

Chiang:

1967, right, right, right. It's very high ceilings. Because it was warehouse.

4-01:02:17

Geraci:

Because it was the old Woolen Mills building- right.

4-01:02:19

Chiang:

Woolen Mills, so it's all high ceilings. I have some pictures. Someday maybe—

4-01:02:25

Geraci:

It would be good to see those.

4-01:02:26

Chiang:

I can get it, I'll show you. The high ceilings, all natural wood. And then we break it into different rooms, but you- all see through, with some panels, it was very beautiful, Thai silk. And I had all the original masterpieces- paintings. At that time, the whole thing, I just felt so proud to go from a small restaurant to such a big restaurant, so I put all my home's treasures in the restaurant. This was in the restaurant, that coat, all these original paintings, this screen, they were all in the restaurant.

4-01:03:17

Geraci:

Those are beautiful.

4-01:03:19

Chiang:

And this was all in the restaurant. All these pieces, all in the restaurant, so it's a beautiful restaurant.

4-01:03:27

Geraci:

And these are all things that you've brought from China.

4-01:03:29

Chiang:

No, I bought it here.

4-01:03:32

Geraci:

You bought it here? [chuckles] But I take it that it is – yeah.

4-01:03:36

Chiang:

Later piece by piece. So this was all in the restaurant. Can you believe this? This restaurant, you walk in there, and you see all these old pieces, and all these masterpieces of Chang Da Chien, Qi Bai Chi , Yu Lo Yuen. All these painting were in The Mandarin. Can you believe it? So one day somebody recognized them. This is some Chinese man. He said, "Have you insured all this? In case of fire, what will happen?" I said, "That's true, I never thought about that." This was part of me.

4-01:04:12

Geraci:

So, that restaurant was you, then?

4-01:04:14

Chiang:

Yeah.

4-01:04:15

Geraci:

Can we stop here for a second so I can change the tape?

4-01:04:17

Chiang:

Sure, sure.

Begin Audio File 5: Chiang, Cecilia 05 01-31-06.wav

5-00:00:00

Geraci:

As we took a little break here, as we were leaving off, I think a good place to pick up is that, as I watch you describe it, this restaurant, it's like home to you. It's a piece of you, it's like, so that when people were coming to your restaurant, they were visiting your home, you.

5-00:00:32

Chiang:

Most of people came to the restaurant, even now they are talking, they- at Christmastime, so I had lunch with John Goy and his wife, the banker. He is the same age as me, same age, he's retired now, but he's in bad shape. He can hardly walk, his ear is off, and he can't, you know. They were talking about- they were still talking about that. They said, Cecilia, "We really miss that restaurant. You know, we miss," they said that, in those days, they always visited, with, "Let's go to Cecilia's." So they meant The Mandarin. Most of the people said, "Not only do we like their food so much, the restaurant is so beautiful, also Cecilia is so beautiful, she wears the beautiful Chinese dress." You know, in those days, I wore very formal Chinese dress, and I don't know how I managed, I wore 4 inches, high heels.

5-00:01:45

Geraci:

Oh my goodness.

5-00:01:47

Chiang:

I still have the shoes, you know. And I worked twelve hours a day, and another thing, in and out, in and out, in the kitchen with all these cheongsam

silk dresses, I don't know how I made it, I really don't know. But somehow, I managed all these years. That's why right now, all these clothes are in the closet. I can still wear them. I can still wear them. And people said that, "We go there, and we like to see you in beautiful clothes, with jewelry." Michael Bauer, even now, every time he sees me, "Cecilia, how come you don't wear the cheongsam anymore? We love you in the cheongsam, with all the jewelry."

5-00:02:37

Geraci:

So in some ways, you were educating Americans not only about food, but Chinese culture and custom.

5-00:02:48

Chiang:

It's kind of, yes.

5-00:02:49

Geraci:

And elegance. I mean, especially for the San Franciscans who are used to Cantonese, this is a very different part of China.

5-00:02:57

Chiang:

It's such a big change, you know, to give them totally different ideas and everything. And on New Year's Eve, Patricia Uterman was here. They came here for dinner, so I made a little Chinese New Years banquet thing. She said- she called me yesterday, she said, "I want to tell you something, Cecilia. Ever since I moved to San Francisco, I have spent many, many Chinese New Year's with friends, to celebrate your New Year. Most of the time, it's in a restaurant. Maybe sometimes in a friend's home. Never like this," she said. "This is really sensational." She said, "Not only that, all the dishes you serve, have a story behind them." Because, for instance, even the vegetables, I cook that day, the big mung beans, you know that bean sprout, but this is the big one, yellow one, with the big head. In China, we have to eat that because that means "Wu Yi" – "Wu Yi" means, "As you wish". All these are symbolic, right? Everything means something. And then I made [these] egg pancakes, with pork filling. And that is called "Yuan Bao". In the old days, we have no money currency, we have to use these gold pieces, or silver pieces, to buy things, to spend money. So all these are the symbols, and also you eat a lot of things that are round, round. Round shape. Like meatballs are round and eggs are round. This means togetherness, family.

5-00:05:07

Geraci:

Interesting.

5-00:05:07

Chiang:

With your friends, togetherness. This is- a lot of people don't know all these things. And then [it] ended with a fish. So, Patty said, "Why fish?" I said, "Fish in Chinese – "Yu" – the name- called "Yu" is fish. Fish means the sign of "Yu." It also says, "*Fu gui jiu you*"— that means, you always have something left for next generation.

5-00:05:54

Geraci: Interesting

5-00:05:52

Chiang: Tomorrow, for next year, you know, there is something left. Also, for good luck. Chinese people are superstitious.

5-00:06:02

Geraci: But this is food as a metaphor for life. So people come in- as part of being your restaurant, were you out amongst your guests, your clientele, telling these stories?

5-00:06:17

Chiang: Yeah, and that's – like for instance, like in- I had a restaurant, when I had Mandarin, we served, at New Years time, I put all these things in the menu, a special menu, for Chinese New Years celebration. We had a special menu to celebrate. And also, I had the lion dancers come in the restaurant, you know, doing all that. Which nobody was doing then. So I did a lot of things, I think that were really quite new – I mean, unique. Because nobody ever thinks about that. And every year, like this year is the Year of the Dog, so I made all these, like you have Christmas cards, so I made New Year's cards. Actually, in China we don't have Christmas, because mostly people are Buddhist. The biggest celebration is New Years. So I sent it out, and tell you this year what's the character of the dog, and – well designed. Designed, I think I have some, maybe. My son, Philip designed it. He's an artist, he designed it. And, make a little card and a little menu. Printed it. They know what we're going to serve, something special. And, then what's the character of the year. People just love it.

5-00:08:06

Geraci: It's like visiting China without having to leave your home.

5-00:08:08

Chiang: Yeah, nowadays, this is something you usually don't get. Like certain dishes, usually, we don't serve it because of the work. This is too nice, for instance. New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, we had a special menu. So people, they want to try something different, something special, so they come. They can enjoy it, you know. Like that. So, somehow all this is, somebody has to think about it. It just happened somehow, I'm pretty good at this.

5-00:08:49

Geraci: [laughs]

5-00:08:51

Chiang: Another thing is, I think I am very gifted, I have a good memory about people. People's names. When I first came, it was too hard for me to remember people's names. So I tried to train myself. You know, like your name, Victor Geraci, I have to repeat it, repeat. Someone like, Tchaikovsky, long, long name, you know. Japanese names are very, very long. Then I remember the name, and I try to remember your face. Then, I remember your drinks, and

then I remember what you're allergic to. That's all here. I trained myself. But in a way, I am still very gifted. I remember most of my old customers, what they are doing. Most of the time, when they got to the table, the cocktail were there. The one likes a Mai Tai, the one likes a Martini, very dry, two olives, instead of one, all in my mind. So this is really helps a lot in this business.

5-00:10:14

Geraci:

They feel like it's personal, they're pampered.

5-00:10:21

Chiang:

Yeah, they feel like they're so important—they feel very comfortable. This is what they call, the quality of service. I really give to them, you know, and make them happy. Every time they sit down there, I know—you know, like my banker, of course, especially my banker, always, Jack Daniels Black. Double shots. Shot of water. See, I still remember. Just like that, they walk in. All the cocktails they need are there. And his wife loved champagne, which brand, we all have. I remember all that. So that's quite gifted. And the menu, everything. What they especially like, what they allergic to. I have a lot of customers, some are allergic to garlic, some are allergic to ginger, some are allergic to peanuts.

5-00:11:32

Geraci:

Right

5-00:11:29

Chiang:

So, you just, every time you make a menu or something, you have to especially put it on. No this, no that. But garlic, you don't put garlic anyway. You just have to be special, mention that, to tell the chef. Another thing is, I set a rule for the kitchen. Regardless [of whether] people have reservations, no reservations. With reservations, two or four of chefs who supervise have to cook. You cannot just leave it, "Oh, this is not important, give it to second chef, second cook, sous chef." No. You have to do it. I'm very strict about that.

5-00:12:21

Geraci:

Let's talk a little bit about this now. I mean, as we're shifting now, you're running a very large restaurant compared to what you had done. What was your new role? I mean, what was Cecilia doing on a daily basis now in this new restaurant?

5-00:12:38

Chiang:

For instance, first thing when I walk into the restaurant—we are open for lunch and dinner, about 11:00, 11:30. I'm there. First thing, I walk in, I look at the reservation book, you know. Lunch, you know, is not too many reservations. Just a lot of walk ins. I look at that, then I go to the kitchen. The kitchen is very important. I go to the kitchen, go to the walk-in refrigerator, see what we have, check if everything is fresh. If it is not fresh, throw it away, throw it away. Just like that. I said, "This is more important." How much do you lose? Some vegetables, for instance. If you serve something that is not

fresh, if people get sick, we've lost more than that. Another thing I'm very proud of: I'm in the business forty years, the restaurant business. I never had one case food poisoning; people get sick, suing me, that's quite a record. That's quite a record.

5-00:13:53

Geraci:

That's quite a record.

5-00:13:57

Chiang:

Another thing, I didn't have anybody who fell down or something in the restaurant, and tried to sue me. That's very common, but we are very cautious. We always try to take care of the customers. Always, in case you see somebody. Another thing, somebody, if they drink a little too much, I just, either me or the manager, tell the bartender, "Don't serve any drinks. Don't try to make money." You know, you have to take care of the customers first. They can sue you for millions, millions of dollars. There were a couple of cases in Beverly Hills, one restaurant closed because somebody got drunk, and killed somebody in a car accident, you know. So we are very careful about that. And, I think that all the little things mean a lot.

5-00:14:58

Geraci:

So, now obviously you have people that are buying or delivering your food now. How do you control the goods that you're getting? I mean, do you have special people that you were doing business with as far as buying?

5-00:15:05

Chiang:

For instance, the chef. The chef, we are doing something, [which] I think is really quite good. The chef makes the list, sees what they need: meat, vegetables, fish, whatever. Dried goods. He makes the list. And my sister ordered. My sister can speak Cantonese and English, so let her order. You know why we were doing that. Because if you let the kitchen direct-order everything, they always get a kick back. When they get a kick back, and then, they don't give you something free. They don't give you anything for a discount, right? So this way you can control it, you are sure to get the good quality, because, my sister won't take any kick back. I order direct, I don't get any kickback, right? Then all the items, I asked the chef, you check. Anything, if it is not fresh, especially seafood, send it back. Just send it back. Then we don't have this item, I would rather not have the item today, rather than have it not fresh. Better than not fresh. So we sent it back.

And then sometimes I said, "Okay, I will go to Chinatown, I'll buy it. I can buy your meat, I'll go bargain." Just like that. That's why we control it very, very well, anything not fresh that you get—that's why, when they deliver the meat or something, you cannot wait everyday, because sometime you are too busy, the kitchen, you know, especially when they deliver at certain times, everybody is there. So, but occasionally you still have to weigh the meat, weigh the chicken, everything. If you don't weigh, they know you are not weighing, so they always try to short change you. So we found out, one day,

five pounds of pork short. Then I asked the one who delivered it, “Now you owe me five pounds of pork, okay? You sign it. You owe me five pounds of pork.” Or you deduct from him. You have to work out a system, that’s the only way. You know, everything is money in restaurants.

Everything is money. And in those days, there were a lot of cash deals. Cocktails, \$3, \$4. Nobody gives you credit cards, you know, all cash. And then the bartender can put the money in the pocket, how are you going to trace it?

5-00:18:24

Geraci: [chuckles] You don’t.

5-00:18:27

Chiang: Doing the inventory in the bar is not easy. And so occasionally, you can hire what they call them “spot checkers.” You probably heard about that.

5-00:18:37

Geraci: Yes.

5-00:18:37

Chiang: And they come in, just like customers, drinking things at the bar, see what’s on the check, if the bartender is honest or not.

5-00:18:50

Geraci: Now with your chefs, as you moved into the larger facility, did you get a new chef?

5-00:18:56

Chiang: Totally new, new staff. Totally new. They the old staff went out, and opened their own restaurant.

5-00:19:03

Geraci: Oh did they? Where did they open?

5-00:19:05

Chiang: They opened the one on Kearney Street. Didn’t last too long. Didn’t last too long. Because, you know, they cannot read English. It’s not easy.

5-00:19:21

Geraci: It’s not easy.

5-00:19:18

Chiang: They can cook, that’s all

5-00:19:21

Geraci: Now, how about getting a new staff, how did you get your chef this time?

5-00:19:27

Chiang: Oh, at that time, they know you’re moving from the old place, they know you’re doing well. They all, you know, Chinatown, what surrounds it is very

small, and also, very close to Polk Street. So they know you're doing well, and going to move to a bigger place. So they will reach you. They will reach you, you know. So I guess, one young man, when he was with me, I think he was only 26. He was Cantonese. Good looking young man. And it just so happened that he was trained in Hong Kong. He had a tutor, who was a Mandarin. North China. So he knew a lot of dishes besides Cantonese food. Mandarin. So he was a chef. He came first not as a chef. He first came as a, the Chinese call, "Zhuang Ma". They put all the combination in a big cup. But actually, that's actually, that's also quite a job. You have to know exactly the ingredients and the portions, you know. So he was really quite good, and very fast. So I watched him. I said, "This young man has a great future." So I promoted him. So of course, he was very happy. Later Tony, his name is Tony Ming Chen, he was- magazines and local newspapers were choosing one of the top ten chefs in the whole Bay Area. You know, he was very- quite talented, but he had a bad temper. Hot. Hot temper. I don't know about French or Italian chefs, but the Chinese, the chefs, most of them, have bad tempers.

5-00:21:33

Geraci:

Well, then they tend to – I take it that he ran his kitchen more like in a military style. It was very- everybody has jobs and follows orders, it just runs very smoothly.

5-00:21:45

Chiang:

But this young man is not only, Tony is not only a good chef, and he is a good manager in the kitchen. He really – actually, he saved me a lot of money, you know why? Because he watched everything so tightly. He will not let the kitchen, "You cannot eat this: abalone, you don't touch. Lobster, you don't touch." He watched all these things, especially the expensive ones. He locked it. He was afraid people would steal. Because it was very easy, you know. So he runs very, very tightly- the staff. And also, they are all afraid of him. Because they know he's very skilled. Another thing he knows, I really respect him, I give him the authority, "You can fire anybody, you can hire anybody." He's very proud, all of a sudden: I'm working as the head of a famous restaurant. He's very proud. So later he and Danny Kaye became very good friend. Very good friend. Danny invited him to his house in Beverly Hills as a guest. They cooked together. And you know, he feels very proud. But it's too bad, he died young. He died at the age of 52. He just died a few years ago. I went to the funeral. When he was sick, I went to see him. But anyway, this young man is really sad. He had a great future, but he had a terrible temper.

5-00:23:47

Geraci:

Not what other kitchen staff did you have then? You had your main chef-

5-00:23:50

Chiang:

I, actually, Mandarin – we have 18 staff working in the kitchen. We were open everyday, so that's hard. 365 days a year. So we have in the kitchen, the cooks, we have 18. Sometime, when you are really busy, you also have to get some extra, temporary chefs to work. And we have one person, actually, one

and a half people, doing nothing but the dough. Making all the dough. Like *jiao zi*, the wontons, and all these pancakes, the wrappers. All this is in the kitchen. And then making soup, also one person. Vegetables, one person. But they take turns, cover the load.

5-00:24:59

Geraci:

Right.

5-00:25:01

Chiang:

It's a big step, four dishwashers. Four dishwashers, we need it.

5-00:25:12

Geraci:

I know you have busboys.

5-00:25:16

Chiang:

Dining room, there were 9 busboys. Dining room, there were 9 busboys, and 14 waiters. Busy stations, one waiter takes care of only 3 tables. Because you want good service, you have to- the tables turn over. See, so you just have to hire more people working in the dining room, make this rolling, you know.

5-00:25:49

Geraci:

It seems that your job got more and more and more complicated, if you're having to keep track of all this now. I mean, on Polk Street, where you had just yourself, you know, the chef, you started with your three students.

5-00:26:05

Chiang:

Just that though- some of the students came working in the –

5-00:26:07

Geraci:

Oh did they? Okay.

5-00:26:08

Chiang:

-working with me in the dining room. Then later I hired more and more students from Berkeley. I had three ladies, hostesses, from UC Berkeley. Beautiful girls. Beautiful, all spoke good English, and also, all were Chinese, all spoke Chinese. On the front desk, I have six people, just show people to their seats, answer the phone. In those days, you had no computers, nothing. Everything you have to write down, and you know, like that. And one time, I think we have about seventy, seventy staff, in front of the bartenders and cocktail waitress. Bartenders, cocktail waitress, and hostesses, accountants, and then bookkeepers. So all together, seventy.

5-00:27:06

Geraci:

It became a very large business, then. What became your role? What were you doing?

5-00:27:07

Chiang:

What am I doing? I want to tell you what I was doing.

5-00:27:17

Geraci:

[laughs]

5-00:27:18

Chiang:

From the front desk, so I check all this, first thing I check the kitchen and the refrigerator, you know, everything. Check all this, the ingredients, everything you have to cook enough. If I see more reservations, so I have to tell the chef, “We need more of this stuff, we need more of that stuff. Do we have enough fish?” Then I have a meeting with the chef, talk about food, meeting with waiters, about service and food.

5-00:27:51

Geraci:

Right

5-00:27:50

Chiang:

And everything. And see that everything is all in order. That’s the most important thing. And what time is it really getting busy. Most reservations. Now, like Japanese restaurants, 2 sittings: 5:30, 8:30. But in those days, you cannot do that.

5-00:28:18

Geraci:

Right.

5-00:28:19

Chiang:

You cannot do that. And people said, “We want to eat at 6:00, we want to eat at 7:00. Sometimes, certain times you’re all jammed up with that. But my manager is very good with that. So he just, looks at this, you just tell the front desk, “You cannot take any more reservations between 7:00 to 8:00,” or something like that, 7:00 to 9:00. And only, you can take reservations during 6:00, you know.

5-00:28:52

Geraci:

Right.

5-00:28:49

Chiang:

So I check all these things. My duty is to check all these things, and then I look at the front desk, then you check the menu. Most of the banquet, anything, the menu is in the kitchen. already hung up there. So I go through that with the chef, the sequence what you serve, everything. Then I have a meeting with the waiters, “You’re supposed to serve this wine,” sometimes they order ahead of time, the wine, “Match this, don’t forget, you chill this wine, chill this wine.” And then, because we don’t have a cooler in our same- the wine storage is upstairs, because we have no room. So we have downstairs, a special room for controlled temperature, everything. Bring it out, put it upstairs in some smaller cooler, chill it, keep it cold and everything, the right temperature then bring it. All this, go through all this detail. Then I get chained, stay on the front desk. Stay on the front desk. People walk in, I know who is who, who is who. Sometimes, they have some walk ins, people they are your old customers, they don’t make reservations, but you have – I feel obliged, I have to give them a nice table. Then I seat them, usually they say, “Oh we just leave everything to you, Cecilia.” If there is something special today, put it on. Some days, they trust me, “You sign it.” A lot of

people, “You sign it. You leave the tips, 15%, 20 %,” and most of them are house accounts. Most of them are house accounts. Then I send the bill, the original bill, with the statement, invoice. In those days, no copy machines, you have to – because bills- we have two: one in the kitchen, and in the- so we send one, the original one, give it to the customers, and I sign it, and add tips everything is taken care of. That’s all my work. And then people sometime call me, say- want to know what’s going on, this and that.

5-00:31:33

Geraci:

So you work the front house just really being with the people

5-00:31:38

Chiang:

I’m mostly, when the dinner starts serving, I’m mostly, I’m in the main dining room. I spend most of the time in the dining room

5-00:31:48

Geraci:

How many days a week were you doing this?

5-00:31:52

Chiang:

Seven days, I work. Never take one day off. Only, like, September usually, because that’s my birthday month, usually I take two weeks, three weeks, either go to Europe, or go to China, go out of town, for three weeks. And then come back to work again. Same old thing. But I don’t feel tired. I never really get seriously sick or something like that. Fortunately, I’m in pretty good health. Even now, for my age, you know

5-00:32:35

Geraci:

Very good.

5-00:32:36

Chiang:

I’m still- keep going, you know. I don’t feel, the craziest thing is, I don’t feel tired. If I’m tired, then I won’t do it. But I don’t feel tired. I just get so much energy, I really don’t know.

5-00:32:55

Geraci:

Well, it’s all those years, you needed the energy, that’s— [laughs]

5-00:32:54

Chiang:

Yeah. And so I think I run a very good restaurant, and you can ask so many, the people there, they still talk about it, how beautiful the restaurant is, how good the food is, how gracious I am, and everything. Just like the other day, and Chuck Williams said something. Chuck said, “You know I never forgot: you and I started the businesses the same year, 2 months apart.”

5-00:33:28

Geraci:

Really?

5-00:33:29

Chiang:

He started the- 1957, April. I started in June.

5-00:33:37
Geraci: I'll be darned.

5-00:33:37
Chiang: And the third week, he came. Chuck came, with Jim Beard.

5-00:33:48
Geraci: Oh my goodness, with Jim Beard?

5-00:33:50
Chiang: With Jim Beard. They were very good friends. Another two gentlemen, one died, I know that, they came here. And, so Jim Beard said, "What is all this stuff? Tastes quite good. But I know is not Cantonese." [laughs]. That's what he said, first time, because he knew, right away.

5-00:34:17
Geraci: Right away, this is not the normal, ok.

5-00:34:21
Chiang: Yeah, he said, "But this is not Cantonese."

5-00:34:25
Geraci: That's funny.

5-00:34:25
Chiang: I said, "That's for sure."

5-00:34:28
Geraci: And that's good!

5-00:34:28
Chiang: Yeah, and so they still talk about- and, like Chuck said, you know, "Always certain occasions that are special, we always go to Mandarin, where I really miss it." They still talk about it. So, for instance I said, I'm retired 20 years. Nineteen-ninety – not twenty years. 1991 I retired.

5-00:34:53
Geraci: Fifteen years.

5-00:34:59
Chiang: Fifteen years, yeah. But people still remember me. And see like this article, all- something unexpected.

5-00:35:04
Geraci: Well, it's because you brought something that was very different.

5-00:35:06
Chiang: Very different.

5-00:35:10
Geraci: Well, I think we're at a point where we should stop for today.

5-00:35:12

Chiang: Yes.

5-00:35:13

Geraci: We've been at this long enough for today.

5-00:35:14

Chiang: Yes.

Interview 4: February 28, 2006

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6-6-00:00:00

Geraci:

I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California, Berkeley Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is Tuesday, February 28th, 2006. And seated with me is Cecilia Chiang, restaurateur. This interview is being conducted in Cecilia's home in Belvedere, California. Cecilia, last time we left off on our interview, we were talking about The Mandarin and we got through how you opened it, how you funded it, and you know, got it started and a little bit about the restaurant. I'd like to start off today with a little bit about – what are some of the clientele, what are some of the types of people that came to The Mandarin, that you got to meet through all your years of...?

6-00:01:06

Chiang:

When I first started The Mandarin on Polk Street – that was the first one I opened – is very small, little restaurant. I think the seating is about 60, 65 seatings, and Herb Caen used to call. Just a little hole-in-the-wall. And at that time, because I was a small restaurant, it's kind of very intimate. And most of the people that come in, the first I think, the first school, was quite a few Chinese people. Because Chinese people from Shanghai, from Beijing, and they really miss this kind of food, what I serve. They just love it, and I think it's them word of mouth, just get out. And told their friends. Then they started to come. And most the people come in is kind of a mixture: young and old. The young, when they are curious about the – they look at the menu, they see a lot of dishes which they never heard of, they're not very familiar, you know. So they are curious. And some of the older people – some they said they were in China. Many, many years ago, they say, "Well, we look at this menu, certain things look quite familiar, besides sweet and sour pork." So I have a mixed group. For instance, the youngest group I have, that's Jefferson Airplane.

6-00:02:54

Geraci:

Oh, my goodness.

6-00:02:56

Chiang:

And they became – I don't know who they are, I never heard of Jefferson Airplane. I'm just – everyday I just go to work, and you know, routine work just, every morning, get up, and get my – I have two children – get them the lunch, everything, packed, and go to work. And then you know, midnight, go home. So I don't know what's going on. And also, I was really a stranger in the United States, and so one day this group, I remember six of them, they wear the weirdest clothes.

6-00:03:45

Geraci:

[laughs]. About what year is this?

6-00:03:48

Chiang:

That's 1960. 1960's. When they just started getting quite famous. They started Jefferson Airplane. And shredded blue jeans, all shredded. You know, walk in. And then, the first time they walked in was very early. They came about- we just opened the door, not too long before. Before 6 'o clock, they came in. So the waiter just starting the- clean up everything, check all the plates and glasses. So they sit down. I was at the entrance, so I show them the seat. Then they sit down. And they said, "Do you carry wine and beer? Do you carry champagne?" I said, "Yes, we have." So they said, "How about you give us a bottle Dom Perignon to start with." And the waiter looked at them, this bunch of kids, you know. So they whispered to me, "Lady-boss," they called me Lady-boss [laughs]. They said, "You think they can afford it?" So I told the waiter, I said, "Don't ask questions. Just serve. If they cannot afford it, they cannot pay the bill, it's not your responsibility. It's mine. Just take good care of them, that's- everything fine." So I went to the table, they called me, they said, "This is the first time we are here. We don't know what to order." And they said, "Can you help us?" I said, "Yes." So I pick up a few dishes to serve them. They said, "This is so good. This is so different." I started with a little pot stickers, special things, a little spareribs, you know. "This is awfully good." And so we opened a bottle of champagne and they said, "Well, we need another bottle." So we did. I think those days champagne only costs about not even thirty dollars. So when they finished their dinner, they just came to me. One gave me a bundle of cash – a hundred dollar bill. Another guy give me a credit card. They said, "Take this, take this." I said, "What am I supposed to do?" They said, "Oh, you better take cash, because look at your place. It's empty. You need cash." [laughs] So finally I take the cash and they were very happy, so I didn't know who they are. So they just left. They left, a very nice tip to the boy. And the waiters [were] so surprised. They said, "they were so generous, they gave us more than 20% tip." Those days, usually, people tip about 10%, something like that.

And after a few days they came back again. Same group of people. So they came late, about 7 'o clock. So I have quite a few tables. So one of the tables came to me, they said, "Oh Mrs. Chiang, do you know who they are?" I said, "I really don't know. This is the second time they are here." Because I'm working everyday, I'm single-handed. I was the receptionist, I answer the phone, I seat people, I do everything. I help people order, so I remember everybody. I said, "I really don't know who they are." They said, "They are very famous." "Really? What kind of business are they in?" She said, "They're rock singers. Jefferson Airplane." Then they said, "This is Grace Slick, this is the drummer, Paul; this is Jack Cassidy, you know. All of them. So that's how I met them. And this is very funny. The third time they came again. So before they leave, they gave me an envelope. So I opened up, I thought, probably just a thank-you note. It is a thank-you note. And two hand-

wrapped cigarettes. I don't know what this is. So later I show my son. I said, "Phillip, this is what they call Jefferson Airplane. And they gave me this. What is this for? Why did they give me two hand-wrapped cigarettes? I don't smoke." So I put in the wastebasket. And Phillip said, "Who was here?" I said, "Here. This is a note. Jefferson Airplane." Phillip said, "Oh my God! They are so famous! I wish I were here to meet them!" You know, that's how – then later on, they are my regular customers.

6-00:09:46

Geraci:

Now I take it that those weren't just regular cigarettes.

6-00:09:46

Chiang:

They cigarettes, and who gave to me the cigarettes is Jack Cassidy. Yeah. So next time they asked me, "What, did you smoke that cigarette? That's very special, you know that." I said, "Really? What's so special?" I said, "I dumped it." They said, "*What?* This is the best marijuana we got from across the border." Mexico, somewhere. That's what they told me. Anyway, this is the young group. Then I had several, some young groups. Then I do have a lot of Japanese. Japanese customers, like JAL, Bank of Tokyo, and some big importers. They all have a house account. Because in those days, the Japanese, every thing is office expense, they can write it off, so you have to have house account. Open a house account. And also, the Japanese love Chinese food.

6-00:11:00

Geraci:

When you had that experience from when you were in Japan.

6-00:11:04

Chiang:

Yeah, when I was in Japan, that's right. So they love Chinese food. And they know Chinese food very well. And also, I have a lot of businessmen. Chinese-American businessman. And in fact, I have a very famous writer, his name is C. Y. Lee, he comes quite – that time he came quite often. You know *Flower Drum Song*?

6-00:11:33

Geraci:

Yes.

6-00:11:34

Chiang:

C.Y. Lee? C. Y. Lee, because he was from Beijing, when he first came, and had this dinner, he said, "I could cry. I didn't have these potstickers for years and years." And then he brought a lot of professors from U.C. Berkeley. Some American professors

6-00:12:04

Geraci:

So this was a word of mouth.

6-00:12:06

Chiang:

Mouth, mostly. And then Trader Vic's owner, Victor Bergeron, and he was our regular customer. Another famous person. Alex Mirob. He had this Tangier, remember that? And he was from China. He spoke Mandarin like

nobody's business. And he brought a lot of people over. And actually, the first time Herb Caen, he came with him. With Alex. Yeah, Alexis. So they were very good, close friends. So this is really a mixture, then I had a lot of restaurant owners, like Johnny Kan and also earliest the two brothers of Ernie's, also are Blue Fox. The owners, Fazio family, they're all my customers. This is really kind of mixed.

6-00:13:13

Geraci:

It seems like they're a wide dichotomy. You're bringing restaurant people, you're bringing Chinese, Japanese, you have these young people come in.

6-00:13:25

Chiang:

And the young people. And then, because of the Jefferson Airplane, Herb Caen mentioned that in his column. So this will draw some more young people, some of their fans came to the restaurant. So, you know, just kind of crowd is growing, mostly it's word of mouth. And I also have a couple famous Opera Singers. Joan Sutherland, and her husband Richard. They are my regular customers. Every time, when they are in down, they came. And later, of course, Pavarotti. Then after I moved to Ghiradelli Square, you know, like Rudolf Nureyev are regulars, and June Francis, Danny Kaye, and then Danny Kaye brought so many his friends. You know, from Hollywood.

6-00:14:32

Geraci:

So this became a stop for a lot of famous people who were coming to the Bay Area.

6-00:14:37

Chiang:

Yeah, and I think almost whenever some famous people come in, they said, "Mandarin is the must-stop." Do you remember Jack Shelton? Do you remember him? He has a little book. He said, if you spend only one day and one night in San Francisco, which restaurant you should go? He put the Mandarin. Just like that. Kennedy family. Kennedy family—they were all our regulars. And also, the Shah of Iran and his two sisters, they came. And the King of Denmark. Also, a lot of writers. I met Marilyn Monroe's ex-husband, Miller, Arthur Miller. I met him. I met Norman Mailer, and also Lillian Hellman.

I have quite a few of her notes she wrote to me. So many. Another one writes about the Kennedy family. So many writers. And Margaret Truman. Margaret, after her book, she had her book party here, she was in the restaurant. Just met so many. And a lot of opera singers, Pavarotti, and Placido Domingo.

6-00:16:45

Geraci:

So now as you have all these famous people coming into the restaurant, obviously, they were there for the food. But, was there special treatment, or was there something going on that makes them – ?

6-00:16:59

Chiang:

The one thing is Herb Caen mentioned something about me one time. He said, "Cecilia, you know why I come here so often?" He said something, he said "Of course, you've got the best Chinese food. One thing about you, you never bother anybody. You just leave us alone. That's why I like here so much. Come here so much." I just leave them alone. I don't give them special treatment. Because they think they are so famous they want privacy. The only thing is, they all have certain tables they like to sit at. At certain tables, you just have to remember that. Some people don't like to show their face, you just have to remember all that.

6-00:17:54

Geraci:

That seems to be a gift of yours. You remember.

6-00:17:58

Chiang:

I'm pretty – I remember. Not only that, I remember their drink, their food, everything. John Lennon come every – when he was in town, he comes about every week, two three times. I have the article. I got it, I will give it to you. I just leave them alone. Another thing, I never had one picture taken with any of these famous actors. Paul Newman, for instance, too many, too many-

6-00:18:37

Geraci:

It's typical in a lot of restaurants, they'll have a photograph of the owner with them.

6-00:18:43

Chiang:

I don't even have one. You can see that. Unless they give to me. I never asked for it. I never said, "Can I take a picture with you?" Never, never. Because I thought, they come out to eat, I should give them privacy. And also, let them just enjoy their dinner. I just go there say, "Everything all right? Is that enough to eat or not?" Just walk away.

6-00:19:15

Geraci:

Is part of that cultural on your part? I mean, this is something within you, within your training, your background?

6-00:19:23

Chiang:

I just thought about they think they're so important, so famous. I think, well, I should just let them have their privacy. But I don't want to act like try to overdo it, because, I have my pride too. [laughs]

6-00:19:42

Geraci:

Which is just as important.

6-00:19:43

Chiang:

Yeah, so I just think I, why should I just really beg them to come back? I'm not that kind of person. You probably know that. I just want to make people comfortable. For instance, even now, if I go somewhere, people like to meet me, come to say hello, that's fine, but I wouldn't say, "Oh, my name is so-

and-so, you know, I'm not that kind of person." Intrude on people's privacy, or something like that. I just think, I have my pride.

6-00:20:24

Geraci:

That's a very important thing I think, for people who are high-profile to know that they can go to dinner and not be interrupted or, they can just be regular people for a day.

6-00:20:35

Chiang:

Yeah, so for instance, one time Paul Newman and his wife, Joanne Woodward came to The Mandarin here. They've been in The Mandarin in Beverly Hills so many times. So when they were in town, they came here, and they said, "We just like to have a table and overlook the bay." So we gave them a really nice table by the bay. But the small room at that time was all full. So I figured, in the main dining room. So only one table looked out over the bay. So they are sitting there. And a couple of Japanese people saw him. They asked me, they said, "Is that Paul Newman?" I said, "Yes." But I didn't say anything. They went to try to ask Paul for a signature. He turned them down.

6-00:21:38

Geraci:

Can't blame you.

6-00:21:38

Chiang:

Yeah, he just turned down, he said, "You know, you're intruding on my privacy", you know, like that. That's fine. You know, and also, like for instance one day the famous tennis player—John McEnroe. He was in there, met somebody, a friend of his, and someone asked for his signature. He was mad. He was really mad.

6-00:22:08

Geraci:

Well he had a reputation for being an angry tennis player.

6-00:22:10

Chiang:

Then he called the manager, he called our manager. He said, "Did you give my name out to who-and-who." My manager didn't even know who he is! But that's what you know, happened. Victor Bergeron, every time he comes, he always said, "Sit down!" You know him, his reputation he will never say anything very kind, or say, "Would you like to join us, eat and sit down?" He just said, "Sit down, sit down! You're working too hard, sit down. I have question for you." Just like that. All the questions, and recipes.

6-00:22:58

Geraci:

[laughs]. Well, he's trying to get the trade secrets from you.

6-00:23:01

Chiang:

Just like that, you know. And so when I moved, before I moved, he said, "Oh, you're working too hard. You shouldn't move. This is just enough. This is about right size and everything." Even he try ask me to work for him. You know. But, and later he was really so convinced about our food, and he said, "I really didn't think about- the food you serve right now even better than at

the old restaurant.” Ask me why. I said, “I have more space in the kitchen. Second thing is, I got a new chef from Hong Kong. Also, we have all the new equipment which I never had on Polk Street. So, everything. And then I said, so I can do more, and bring a lot of – now also, we have more ingredients in United States now. When I first opened “The Mandarin”, a lot of ingredients I didn’t have it. We didn’t even have sesame seed paste, sesame seed-

6-00:24:15

Geraci: Where were you getting these?

6-00:24:20

Chiang: In those days, I have to order from Taiwan. Ship it over. A lot of things we didn’t have at that time.

6-00:24:29

Geraci: Why do you think they became easier to get later on?

6-00:24:32

Chiang: No, the thing is, before the Chinese population in United States was mostly, about 80% Cantonese.

6-00:24:41

Geraci: Okay

6-00:24:43

Chiang: Anything they don’t eat, they don’t grow a lot of vegetables, they don’t use, they don’t grow, anything they don’t use, they don’t import it. But now, so many new immigrants from Beijing, from Shanghai, even from Sichuan. And all over the place is Shandong.

6-00:25:06

Geraci: So, I would take it this would be after the 1965 Immigration Act. More people are coming from China—

6-00:25:13

Chiang: Yes.

6-00:25:14

Geraci: And that really helped you as far as being able to get your ingredients?

6-00:25:20

Chiang: Yes, yes, yes. Exactly. See, before nobody used peppercorn.

6-00:25:29

[Third Person]: Sichuan peppercorn.

6-00:25:28

Chiang: Yeah, Sichuan peppercorn. Nobody used that. And also, all this spicy – black bean sauce. Sichuan. Nobody used that. They probably never heard of it. Nowadays you can buy it from Taiwan, made in Taiwan, also made in Mainland China. Also made in Hong Kong. All kinds.

6-00:25:53

Geraci:

Do you think you had any role in this? I mean, you're popularizing a food that Americans aren't used to.

6-00:26:00

Chiang:

Yes, but I think I have some influence. I usually, whenever I go to Chinatown. This dry goods shop, they carry – I always said, “You should carry this, you should carry that.” Try to tell them, instead of I have to import myself. For instance, about this fresh bamboo shoots. We just had fresh bamboo shoots, I think this is the third year. Never had it before. Because Cantonese don't eat it. Even now, they still don't eat it. They don't know how to prepare it. It's pretty amazing. You know, China is such a big country. Different province. They have their own language, they have their own foods, they use their different ingredients, total. Totally.

6-00:26:55

Geraci:

But as you're popularizing a new cuisine for America, they hadn't had this before. And you are a leader, I mean, this is supposed to be on the West Coast, this is something new and different. I mean, normally when people go to restaurants, they taste something they never had before, they want to see if they can do that at home.

6-00:27:16

Chiang:

But I want say something about Americans. What I think American mostly – I talk of the average people – they are, they like to try new things, right? For instance, they try new games, new – you know, everything. You put on something new, they like to try. About food, I must say, they are quite conservative. You really have to kind of educate them and explain everything. For instance, we have Mou Shu Pork. You know, the real Mou Shu Pork, inside have this wood ear, black wood ear. And also, water lily. Dried water lily. And we have that, I just serve this really the original recipe. So they taste is, they say, “What is this?” But if you tell them ahead of time, this is going to have water lily, they have fungus, they wouldn't eat it, they wouldn't try, they really wouldn't try. But after they taste it, then I said, “You know what you are eating?” I explain to them. They say, “Oh this tastes very good. Then what is this fungus?” Then I said, “Well, this belongs to the same family as mushroom.” I explain things to them. Then they understand. Then next time they will eat it.

6-00:28:53

Geraci:

Now, with your position in the restaurant on Ghirardelli Square, it would seem to me that you had a lot of tourists.

6-00:29:01

Chiang:

Later part. [At first] we didn't have any.

6-00:29:04

Geraci:

Would these tourists be the ones – I mean, you have people coming from the Midwest – they're not just going to be very adventuresome when it comes to-

6-00:29:11
Chiang:

Not at all, not at all. When I first moved to Ghiradelli Square, I would say probably 90 percent of our customers are all local, also. And 10% probably is tourists, walk-in. But later, it increased to 30, 35 percent. Because then you get so well-known, very famous. And then we get reservations, in those days, you know, they have to write to you, one year ahead, then get – what you call, “convention”? Thirty people, twenty people, a group. And they keep coming every year. Those are tourists. And walk-ins, not that many. Not that many. Because mostly are by reservations. Walk-in, sometimes very hard. Another thing is, in those days, you don’t take anybody just walk in with jeans, or t-shirt, or something. You know, in those days there was a dress code, you have to have a little tie, or jacket. You know, it’s quite different. Yeah.

6-00:30:28
Geraci:

So I mean you were running a more high-end restaurant

6-00:30:36
Chiang:

It’s kind of, yeah. And also because I think why I did this is because I grew up in the big city, in Shanghai and Beijing, in a nice family. When we were growing up, we usually always dress up. And especially in the forties, fifties, in China, you know, before the war, we were growing up, all dress quite well. And very properly. Then all of a sudden, when you go to Chinatown, you eat, and you don’t see tablecloths. You know. And also, some places, they don’t have napkins to give to you. I just thought about that. This is not just quite right. I have to do something different. [laughs] And also, the price in Chinatown, when I first came. For three dollars and fifty cents, you get four dishes and one soup, including rice. Including tea. Just that much. And well, somehow I asked a few people. I asked Johnny Kan later, I said, “Why you charge so little in Chinatown and Chinese food so cheap?”

Johnny said, “You know, I’m so glad you asked me that question. Sometimes I often ask myself because most people’s impression is that, Chinese food: chop suey. Chop suey means in Chinese means “chop chop chop”. You cut it, you miss everything, some leftovers. But it’s not. But people don’t-misunderstand it. So I said, if I open one, I will be a real high-class one: beautiful, good service. We even use hot plate, those days, everything. And I’m going to use beautiful Chinaware. But those days, very hard to ship in good Chinaware because we have no relation with Mainland China. In Taiwan, that time, they just started doing some Chinaware, not very good. So I went to Hong Kong. Myself, I went down there. I ordered a few thousand pieces – you know the rice, the rice pattern, blue and white one, and with very nice ashtray and soy bottles, vinegar bottles. But anyway, quite elegant. I even got these ivory chopsticks with silver tips, for the banquet. But anyway, that certainly didn’t last very long. People take it, for souvenirs. Everything. And then, lost a lot of pieces. And also, soy sauce bottles, they are just so cute and so beautiful. But later, I still serve, the whole table, all silverwares. All silver, even the plate. All silver. I have some pictures for that. I think that was the only Chinese restaurant use-

6-00:34:30

Geraci:

But that helps explain why you also had, as we just finished talking about clientele, some very famous and important people. They wanted a nicer dining experience. And that was something that you were providing them.

6-00:34:45

Chiang:

Yeah, because I think that I did something quite different with the transitional Chinatown, you know the style. Totally different. Totally different. And I think that's quite an experience for American people.

6-00:35:07

Geraci:

Now, you know, we've spoken about the Chinatown experience, the Cantonese experience. Was there a tension there? How did the people in Chinatown receive your restaurant being, number one, being, number one, more of a Mandarin cuisine, but number two, also being more high-end?

6-00:35:24

Chiang:

For most people, most Chinatown people, including the suppliers I buy all the meat and you know, everything there. And also a lot of restaurant owners, later they came to the restaurant to eat. They don't think I will last very long. [laughs] Because they think is too expensive. They didn't think about that. So they refused to deliver food to me, and they think because I didn't speak any Cantonese language, and I'm outside Chinatown, so they didn't give me any service, anything, so I had to pick all the food up myself.

6-00:36:20

Geraci:

Did they ever come to your restaurant? To any of the, you know –

6-00:36:22

Chiang:

Later, some. Later, when I was doing real well, then they came. They came to see me, and they started to deliver. Before, for a few years, they didn't deliver, they refused. Not only that. Everything, cash only. They treated me just like a foreigner.

6-00:36:43

Geraci:

Could part of it been that you were a woman, also?

6-00:36:45

Chiang:

Partly because I am a woman. Second thing is, I'm non-Cantonese. The Cantonese people here, they are quite united. They treat me just like a foreigner. Especially because I am a woman, you compete with all the men. That's very tough.

6-00:37:10

Geraci:

One thing that's come up – speaking of famous clientele – it seems to me quite a few times you've mentioned Danny Kaye. There seems to have been a special relationship you had with Danny Kaye.

6-00:37:21
Chiang:

Danny Kaye is not only – he’s one of my students, cooking class – he’s started- my cooking class started in 1972. He’s a good friend of Johnny Kan—I mean, Danny Kaye was a good friend of Johnny Kan. So one day he told Johnny, he said, “You know. All these years I’ve been eating at your place. Same menu, never changed. You know, I’d like to have something different.” He said, “That’s Cantonese food, that’s the way it is, you know.” So after I opened, and Johnny came. Johnny said, “I’d like to see what you’re going to serve, I’d like to see your price.” He look at it, he said, “Oh, I think your price is a little too high.” He said, “Mine is the highest in Chinatown. But because I have to use linen at that time.” Because most of Chinatown, all the restaurants, they didn’t use any linen or napkins. Also they didn’t have a bar like he had. So he said, you’re going to have a hard time, tough time, getting the customers. So he came, and tried my food. He really liked it. And then, later he brought Danny Kaye over. I remember I served a couple of Sichuan dishes, because he said, “Do you have something a little bit spicier?” He said, “I just get sick and tired of eating the Cantonese food.” So I did. Remember, I served a Prawn a la Sichuan. And also I served dry-cook beef, the strip beef with a little spicy sauce. He just love it. He keeps saying, “Oh you have to start a cooking school. I will be the first student to sign up.”

6-00:39:50
Geraci:

So you did start?

6-00:39:53
Chiang:

So I did start it after I moved to Ghirardelli Square. I didn’t start it right away because when you move to from a small restaurant to a big restaurant, there is so much work to do. So we moved in 1968 to Ghirardelli Square. And the cooking school opened 1972, actually just right in there.

6-00:40:22
Geraci:

Let’s expand a little bit, let’s talk about the cooking school. I mean, what-

6-00:40:27
Chiang:

The cooking school is, because people really want to learn something completely different, besides sweet-sour pork and chop suey, you know. So I started the cooking school and usually there are two menus, two recipes. And then, following after the school, we started the piano club in the morning. I remember every week Tuesday. And after the cooking class, then we sit down and eat on a round table, limited to 10 students. And people ask questions, we discuss. Everything they want to know. That’s how I started. And you cannot believe it—when I started, mostly all men students.

6-00:41:27
Geraci:

Really?

6-00:41:27

Chiang: All the students are men. Yes. I have a couple of psychiatrists, doctors, stockbrokers. And Danny Kaye was there. And, do you remember Jack Lerio? He is in the class.

6-00:41:42

Geraci: No.

6-00:41:44

Chiang: He had a very old cooking school. [talking to the third person] You probably know Jack.

6-00:41:50

Third Person: Mmm-hmm. He was in the East Bay.

6-00:41:53

Chiang: They all came to my class. They all men. So many men. Then later on more and more ladies came in. I don't know why.

6-00:42:06

Geraci: I said, that's very interesting that it would be men.

6-00:42:10

Chiang: All men, all men, oh yeah. And Bluefox John Fazio—He was very interested, he was there. And quite a few, very interesting. But anyway later Schramsberg, Jamie Davis Schramsberg, you know the champagne lady. And Virginia Van Asprin and Herb Caen's wife, Maria Theresa, and Margarit Mondavi. They were all with me. Marion Cunningham was with me ten years, cooking. And James Beard. Julia Child. They all came to my cooking school.

6-00:43:07

Geraci: Interesting.

6-00:43:07

Chiang: Yeah, it's all different, then later before a lot of different professions. And also quite a few, they all have their own cooking school. They also came to my school.

6-00:43:22

Geraci: Do you realize how important this is – it's not just your restaurant establishing your cuisine. The cooking school and just the list of people you gave me, each of them now goes out with the knowledge you have given them. And it's like the stone in the water, the rippling waves go out, you can just see this expanding. I mean, some of the names that you named there are the greats of food—

6-00:43:53

Chiang: It's really quite, it's really quite- surprised me – when later on because I was very busy you know, develop new recipes, one thing and another, I said, I have to close, because it's just too much to do. Then I open the Beverly Hills one.

6-00:44:19

Geraci: Ah, okay.

6-00:44:20

Chiang: Yeah, so I have to close. And so Danny Kaye said, "I will come over. I think I can conduct this cooking class." [laughs] So when I was away, went to China to visit my dying father, and so, he took over, he did some cooking to. Actually he's a very good Chinese chef. And he learn how to de-bone the chicken, the squab, a lot of other things.

6-00:44:54

Third Person: He was famous for it.

6-00:44:55

Chiang: Yeah, he's really quite famous. And not only that, we even sent the kitchen contractor, you know, Bob Yick, Chinese kitchen contractor, to build the Chinese kitchen in his house.

6-00:45:09

Geraci: So you said the cooking school was for about ten years then?

6-00:45:12

Chiang: I think altogether is more than ten years. Twelve or thirteen years, at least. We have a lot of famous people who came to the cooking class. And another thing why I did that, I have another purpose, is not only just educating the people to eat and also showing them the technique. They don't believe, that this will only take a couple minutes, cooking, the prep work is a lot of work. But cooking is so fast. They don't believe it, you know. This is we show them exactly what we did. Another thing is, all these people think about Chinese restaurant, especially the kitchen as dirty. You probably heard that too. Because when I tried to rent the place in Ghirardelli Square, and they said, "We don't want a Chinese restaurant in Ghirardelli Square." I said, "Why?" They said, "We'll been frank with you, because they don't take good care of the restaurant. Dirty, cockroaches, rats, blah, blah, blah, all these kinds of reasons?" And also, it's greasy. It's true. Because when you stir-fry, the oil just flies everywhere. So I told the landlord, I said, "My kitchen will be very clean. I guarantee it. It's going to be very, very clean." I said, "I don't like dirty kitchens myself." I said, "You can come to take a look at the one I have on Polk Street. Such an old building, we keep it so clean."

Third Person: Didn't they come for dinner?

6-00:47:11

Chiang: Yes, so they came to the dinner, they look at- they said, "Oh that's really clean." That's how I got the lease. Not only that, also I showed a lot of customers who come to the restaurant so often, they said, "Can we come in to take a look at your kitchen?" Welcome, we are open. I'm very proud. I'm really – wall to wall stainless steel. At that time, that kitchen cost me \$200,000. To build that, just the kitchen.

6-00:47:45

Geraci: Just the kitchen.

6-00:47:45

Chiang: With the equipment. And wall-to-wall stainless steel. Walk-in refrigerator, with all the rest so clean. I'm very proud of it. And sometimes the staff, they left certain spots not very clean, I clean myself. Some nights, some days, sometimes I even worked at 2 'o clock in the morning I'm still there cleaning.

6-00:48:20

Geraci: Well, I think that leads us to a point, let's talk about now the opening of your second restaurant then, in Beverly Hills. What prompted you to—

6-00:48:29

Chiang: I have a few customers from Los Angeles come regularly. One is Danny Kaye. Another is Bob Six. He owns Continental Airplanes. Also, his wife is the famous actress Jayne Meadows.

6-00:49:04

Geraci: Jayne Meadows, ok.

1-00:49:01

Third Person: Oh, I thought she was married to Steve Allan.

1-00:49:04

Chiang: Jayne Meadow's sister, Audrey.

1-00:49:06

Third Person: Audrey-

Chiang:

Audrey Meadows. They used to fly their own plane, come to Mandarin to eat, usually Saturday. Either Friday or Saturday, they eat two nights, and then they fly back. And Jayne Meadows, Jayne and the two sisters, their late father was a missionary in China. So they all speak Mandarin.

6-00:49:31

Third Person: Really?

6-00:49:32

Chiang: Yes. So they came – one day they came, and they asked for this fermented tofu. You know, the stink, black-colored. I said, "Are you kidding? Do you know how it tastes?" They said, "We know, we get used to it when we were kids, in Beijing, we had that." So they said, they like. So I served it. And also, they ask for another thing: Zha Cai. The pickled vegetables. Zha Cai. Those days, nobody knows the Zha Cai and the- so I have it in the kitchen. And also the Chinese menu, I put in the Zha Cai with the shredded pork. So she said, "I'm just hungry for that. I go to the Chinatown, I ask for it, nobody understands me." Then she told her husband and friends, they fly over in their private place, I think six of them, six or eight of them. Then she told Bob, she said, "Bob, this is a real Chinese restaurant, real Chinese food." She just told

her husband. So, anyway, they said, “You know, this is ridiculous. We have to fly down here for good Mandarin food.” And they talk to me. “You should really open one in Beverly Hills.” Because in Los Angeles in those days, not very many good Chinese restaurants either. And also, in those days, they have no Monterey Park, that new immigrants live in.

6-00:51:19

Geraci: Right.

6-00:51:22

Chiang: So they told me. So finally I said, “Ok, I’ll try. If I can get the location and if I can get the money.” So finally some friends call me from Beverly Hills. They said, “Well, we got a spot on Camden Drive, next to Rodeo Drive. Seems like really nice space. So I flew down and looked at it, really quite big. Bigger than this one.

6-00:52:01

Geraci: Oh my goodness.

6-00:52:02

Chiang: -in Ghirardelli Square, it’s quite big. So anyway, I kept saying, “It’s too big for me”. But this piece of property owned by City Hall, owned by the city. They tried to lease it out for a few years, somehow because the space was too big, nobody dared take it. And I keep saying it’s too big. Then later on, so I talked to the people there, we think about that. Maybe if the business goes well, doing well, maybe I need the space because in Ghirardelli Square, we keep renting the space storage for wine, storage for the dry goods, storage for a lot – for the tables, extra tables, you know. Maybe we really need the space. Instead of up and downstairs, this is just the same level, you know, all these. Maybe we need it. So finally we talked. So anyway, told the Realtor, “Knock down the rent,” because just keep saying, “Too big. We don’t need the space. Too big,” you know. So finally we got negotiating for a 25 years lease. The rental wasn’t that bad, and not too bad, now I forgot exactly. Up to a percentage after so much money then you have to pay the extra, I think about \$15,000, not that bad at that time. So we took it over. But before I took over, so I went to see my banker again.

6-00:53:53

Geraci: The one that we talked about before. Yeah.

6-00:53:57

Chiang: Yeah, the one that I borrowed the money from. So this time, no problem. They said, “You have very good credit,” you know, and everything. So I borrowed the money again, and so I opened the- in 1975 I opened “The Mandarin.”

6-00:54:18

Geraci: Now, did this present any special problems? Because at the Mandarin in Ghirardelli, you were a hands-on owner. You were there. You were doing much of the work. How did it feel now having a second – ?

6-00:54:33

Chiang:

When I was – I was a little bit intimidated and also kind of, think about that, you know, you cannot make it and everything. But fortunately I had a very good manager. And also, a very good accountant, that time. And the manager had been with me since I opened on Polk Street. I know he will manage very, very well. So when I first opened that, it was a lot of work, so I don't know how I did it, but in those days, I think probably, I was young and full of energy and you know, everything is always, look at the brighter side, never think about failing. Always think: I can do it, I can do it. I mean, when they first opened, I think I was there a month, you know, constantly there. Then later, back and forth every week. Every week. Not easy. When people found out I wasn't there in Ghirardelli Square, business was going down.

6-00:55:57

Geraci:

That was what I was just going to ask. Because people are coming there because you're there.

6-00:56:04

Chiang:

Because they want to see me, talk to me, whatever. And so it was really going down. And so the accountant I told you about, and the manager they noticed right about- they saw the bigger drop. They got very scared. So then I keep coming back. I stayed at Ghirardelli Square, so later my son took over, Philip took over. Over there, because, I'm still, it's a new, and it's kind of strange. And also, the customers there and here are totally different. Here, it's really loyal, loyal customers. They keep coming. Over there, they just come and go. But we also did have a lot of old customers, like Barbara Streisand came. She used to come.

6-00:57:09

Geraci:

Could part of that have been back to your presence, your loyal customers in San Francisco were loyal to you because they knew the restaurant – you were the restaurant.

6-00:57:25

Chiang:

At that time, they all said that. They said, "Usually when we decide where to go, we always say, 'Let's go to Cecilia's.'" Just like that.

6-00:57:33

Geraci:

Right. And that you didn't have that kind of attachment in Beverly Hills. People were going to a restaurant, not to Cecilia's.

6-00:57:42

Chiang:

That's right. Yeah, they just- so that makes a lot of- big difference. At that time, most Chinese women, they don't wear Chinese clothes, do you know that? They're all Western. I was from my – but that time, I didn't have any American clothes, I mean Western clothes. I only have Chinese dress. Only Chinese dress. So that's, I think another thing, they think it's really quite-

6-00:58:16

Geraci:

It was authentic.

6-00:58:16

Chiang:

Yeah authentic, and quite different with all the rest of the Chinese ladies here.

6-00:58:22

Geraci:

Now one thing that came up is interesting is the role for Philip. You'd mentioned – he worked in The Mandarin in Ghirardelli. What age did he start working in the restaurant? How did he get in there?

6-00:58:36

Chiang:

He was a teenager. He was, he just, like in summertime. He was a graduate from Galileo High School in San Francisco. He and O.J. Simpson same class, same school. But that's just coincidence. So anyway, summer, when it was summer vacation, he wants to get some money, make some money, so he works there partially. He started really quite young. And then he worked in Ghirardelli work, in the summer he also worked there as a host. You know, the host, take reservations, help make the menus, and – did I tell you the story about Cyril Magnin.

6-00:59:31

Geraci:

No.

6-00:59:32

Chiang:

No? This is a true story. Cyril Magnin, for instance, was also a regular customers. And also Ben Swig from the Fairmont Hotel. They're all my regular customers. So one day, Cyril Magnin came with some friends, have dinner So I just walked to the front desk. So Philip was on desk. So Philip recognized him right away and said, "Oh Good Evening Mr. Magnin". So he said, "Young man, how in the world do you know my name?" He said, "Yeah, I know you're famous", you know, or something. Then I walked toward him. He said, "Tell me, Cecilia, who is this young man? He's quite good-looking." I said, "That's my son, by the way," I said, "Philip." So he said, "Wow! He's really quite good-looking. Can he drive?" I said, "Yes, he can drive." So he said, "Right now, I need a chauffer. I offer you a job young man. Philip," he said, "would you like to be my chauffer, drive me around?" And Philip said, "No." He said, "Why?" He said, "Right now, I'm working at Joseph Magnin as a stock boy. Your pay is too low. [laughs].

6-01:01:09

Geraci:

He had high aspirations.

6-01:01:14

Chiang:

Yeah, this is the true story. Another time Ben Swig came with his chauffer. He has a black chauffer. Two of them, they're eating at The Mandarin. So everything is fine, I just went down there, just to say hello a couple of times. And then the waiter said, "One of the gentleman," they don't know who he is, "says that, wants to talk to you." So I went down there. So I said, "I understand you want to talk to me." He said, "Yes. I forgot my wallet at home. I don't have credit card, nothing. Can I sign it or do something?" I said, "Don't worry about it, you just sign it." This, all these things happened, you

know. But, you know, they are, all these rich famous people, they don't carry their – they don't carry money, credit card, what are you going to do? [laughs]

6-01:02:31

Geraci: So, back to Philip: so Philip went then to help you in the Beverly Hills store?

6-01:02:35

Chiang: Yes, yes. He actually started it. Yeah, he was running Beverly Hills. He was the manager there.

6-01:02:47

Geraci: So that's good training for him, then.

6-01:02:44

Chiang: Yes, that's how he started from The Mandarin. Then he opened one called Mandarette. You probably heard about that. That was very popular. It's still there now.

6-01:03:03

Geraci: Okay.

6-01:03:01

Chiang: Yeah, it's still there now, but he sold it. He sold it. At one time, we have two Mandarettes, one in Newport Beach. Then he sold it. Too many are hard to take care of.

6-01:03:21

Geraci: How about your daughter?

6-01:03:23

Chiang: My daughter opened a restaurant in San Francisco, but it is not doing well at all.

6-01:03:33

Geraci: Now, did she work at The Mandarin?

6-01:03:33

Chiang: She worked. Actually, she's been with me. Constantly, actually my daughter worked for me for a long time. I think, twenty some years.

6-01:03:44

Geraci: Wow.

6-01:03:45

Chiang: And, twenty some years. But the thing is, somehow I think people learn fast. Some just didn't learn at all, you know. Just one of those things. I have only two children. But they are so different.

6-01:04:10

Geraci: I know that feeling. [laughs] I have three and each one is very different.

6-01:04:16

Chiang:

Yes, also different now. Just so different, yeah. So I sometimes, Lisa and I just talk about- we just don't understand. Yeah. But they –

6-01:04:31

Third Person:

Philip had a knack for the restaurant business and May didn't, right?

6-01:04:34

Chiang:

Yeah, because I thought my daughter learned a lot from me, from The Mandarin. Then later on, I find out she doesn't know the restaurant business at all. I must say that. Also, she doesn't know the food, somehow, at all. Actually, she didn't want to open the restaurant. The main thing is her husband. Her husband is very anxious, wants to open a restaurant. Her husband also was working at The Mandarin as a bookkeeper at that time. They saw every day, it was so busy, lots of customers. Actually, he didn't know too much about the restaurant business. I heard so many times, so for instance: a restaurant they opened a few years back, somebody came to see me, they said, "My son, their dream, he keeps telling me, he wants to open a restaurant". He asked me to help them to open. And so they opened. I didn't help, because after I talked to them, they don't know anything about the restaurant business. So I told them, how hard it is going to be. That time, I was doing a few restaurants. And I was very busy also. I was still opening Betelnut and also Shanghai 1930s and also Long Life, a few, a few restaurants. But sure enough, I said, this is a really tough business, you know. You have to be prepared for it, unless your son has a lot of money, very easy to lose a lot of money.

6-01:06:38

Geraci:

But there's one thing that's become very apparent to me. You have a gift, or a knack, an entrepreneurial spirit: you're a business woman. There's something ingrained in you. You're naturally good at it.

6-01:06:56

Chiang:

But I really didn't realize I would be successful in business, because I didn't have any experience, I never worked in my whole life.

6-01:07:06

Geraci:

It doesn't matter, you—

6-01:07:08

Chiang:

Yeah, I mean, yeah. But I didn't realize. Another thing is, I never thought about opening a restaurant. I mean in the United States, because it just never even occurred to me that I would open any business. Another thing is, I never cooked. I didn't have that kind of experience. What I remember is just a lot of things my mother used to say to my father. They always talk about the food. So a lot of things were just in my mind. And people said, "You never cooked. How do you know?" I said, "I remember the flavor. I remember the taste. And also, the ingredients at our house."

6-01:08:03

Geraci:

That's something we mentioned about your father, in one of our first interviews, that your mother really took charge of the food and the cooking within the family, but your father knew from taste. He remembered.

6-01:08:18

Chiang:

Yes, my father really, I think, knew the food. You know, the flavor and everything. And I think another thing because, every time he taste something so good, he told my mother, how good it is, encouraging my mother to cook more. [laughs] I think that's very –

6-01:08:43

Geraci:

That's a good encouragement, actually. I'd like to read a couple of quotes that writers have said about you. Just get your response to them. One is Peggy Knickerbocker, and you know, you know Peggy. In an article for *Savoy Magazine* she wrote, "Chiang accomplished nothing less than introducing regional Chinese cooking to America." How do you feel about that statement? That's quite a statement.

6-01:09:13

Chiang:

Yeah, I feel very honored, and in a way, very proud.

6-01:09:17

Geraci:

Do you think you did?

6-01:09:20

Chiang:

Yeah.

6-01:09:22

Geraci:

I, you know, I – it's not a matter of blowing your own horn periodically, but you did introduce something very different.

6-01:09:32

Chiang:

I think I really did something to the food, I mean the industry in America. For instance, when I brought the Sichuan food, and the Hunan food, that time, in my menu, so many people asked me, "How you pronounce this?" Those days, they don't know how to pronounce "Sichuan". They said, "What's all this about?" And I said, "Spicy is where Sichuan is. Sichuan during the war, you know Chongqing is the war capital, you know, I explained. "And what is this about Hunan?" "Hunan is Mao Zedong's hometown and also very spicy," and explained everything to them. I was the first one put in the menu, and really introduced, the spicy food to Americans.

6-01:10:30

Geraci:

And it sure caught on.

6-01:10:32

Chiang:

Yeah. But then later on, look at how popular Sichuan food is.

6-01:10:36

Geraci:

I mean, it's everywhere in America now. Another one I think is really for Cecilia the restaurateur, you need the ability you had to draw people to The Mandarin, especially in Ghirardelli Square. Ruth Reichl in the book *Tender at the Bone*, I love the way she describes you, as, a woman with a beautiful face, black hair, manicured nails, gold and diamonds: "This woman, I thought, has never been afraid of anything."

6-01:11:15

Chiang:

[laughs]

6-01:11:17

Geraci:

And I think you just mentioned that in talking about the Beverly Hills facility. I mean, you weren't afraid. Maybe that was just your ignoring affair, but "I will succeed". That seems to be you, your personality. Just absolute faith in who you are and what you can do.

6-01:11:37

Chiang:

I think somehow, somehow I have the faith and also, I have kind of confidence. Maybe I'm very naïve, I don't know something could happen worse but I'm not that kind of person. But somehow, I am just very, very confident. And the first year, first six months, the accountant and the manager, they were worried, because we didn't get many customers coming in, they worry, you know, like that. But I try to calm them down, I said, "Don't worry. I think we can make it." They said, "We heard that before!" [laughs] Another six months later, I said, "I think we can make it, we can really make it." I just have the confidence. Even now, for my age, a lot of things, are not very easy now for me. Like bending over, pulling up the waist, and you know – you get pretty stiff, the hand the knee, everything. But you know what? I'm still doing it. I just see what I can do. I just see – I try my best, to reach the goal, what I want. And I'm not afraid if I fail, because I don't lose faith. I tried at least, right? If I cannot make it, I cannot make it. But I don't feel I'm a failure, or something like that. But I always think about, "I try my best. See what I can do."

6-01:13:25

Geraci:

We're at a point where I need to stop at this—this minidisk is almost done. So let's stop here for a minute.

Begin Audio File 7: Chiang, Cecilia 07 02-28-06.wav

7-00: 00:00

Geraci:

This is minidisk number 2, Vic Geraci, interviewing Cecilia Chiang, February 28th, 2006. Just picking up from where we left off last time, what I'd like to take a shift to, we just talked about a couple of quotes, one from Peggy Knickerbocker, and one from Ruth Reichl. Let's talk a little bit about some of

the – well, I'd like to talk about your first book. Obviously you have a second book that's coming out now. Let's talk about the literary part of your whole career at this point. What about your first book? I loved just the preface to it, I love the way that it was organized, by season, by food, and it was so different at the time it was written, because it's going to fit into the "California cuisine", or Americans really grasping the idea that food is seasonal, should be fresh, and that it should be part of our everyday life. In fact, we glorify this part of our everyday life. And it was a book that really fit into the genre of the time.

7-00:01:25

Chiang:

I never thought about really writing a cookbook or something like that because I was really quite busy, I just moved from Polk Street to Ghirardelli Square. And anyway, Lillian Hellman and also this publisher of Little, Brown & Company, they are very good friends. I think his name is Mr. Abraham. They came to the restaurant quite regularly. Every time, I try to serve something that is a little bit different, because they come so often. So every time I give them a little bit different- the food. And they get very interested. So this publisher said, "Have you ever thought about writing a cookbook?" I said, "My English is very limited, I don't think I can write a cookbook." And also, I just moved to Ghirardelli Square, you know, just a lot of work to do. And they said, "Well, you don't have to write it!" [laughs] "You can always get somebody to write for you". I said, "Really?" So I didn't really think too much about it. And so they just came back. And so this Abraham said, "I'll get your one person to write for you. I have a good friend, he writes very well. His name is Allen Carr, he's from England." So he introduced him to me, asked me to write this cookbook. So, like this is the second book, and there are a lot of things you have to do. That time, I didn't have the agent, I didn't have the contract. I have just nothing, he just sent Allen Carr over there. "Here, you're going to write this book. Why don't you meet once or twice a week, right here in The Mandarin?" By the way, he told Allen Carr, he said, "You love Chinese food, so much. Now you get a chance really taste the Chinese food." That's how we met Allen Carr. That's how we just really started. He scheduled everything for me, he said, "We should start right away, next week." So we started right away. Over probably a year and a half, a year and a half, we wrote that book, because Allen Carr, did no shorthand, and no typing. He could not type. Everything is longhand. And then we go to the kitchen. Because he doesn't know anything about Chinese food, how to prepare that. So we go to the kitchen, so we cook, make the measurements. At that time, I have the chef so they can help me do all the cooking and everything. That's how we did it. So after the book was finished, Allen Carr put on twenty pounds.

7-00:05:11

Geraci:

[laughs]

- 7-00:05:14
Chiang: And so he said, "I really had such a good time. I don't have to tell you. Now I can show you!" He was such a wonderful person. Anyway, I told him something. I said, "My English is so limited. We just talk, you can write the way I talk, you know." And he said, "I'll try my best. I have to do something just like the way you said." But it's very easy to read that book.
- 7-00:06:00
Geraci: What amazes me about it is that it reads like the good old grand tradition in cookbooks.
- 7-00:06:09
Chiang: Is that right?
- 7-00:06:10
Geraci: It's a story. And as we learn about you, your family, your life, from it, emanates these recipes. When I read it, I could see Cecilia the person, and the food was part of that person. Unlike most cookbooks today that are just lists of ingredients with maybe a picture of the dish, this was a story, this was something to be read.
- 7-00:06:37
Chiang: So I think he did a great job, Alan Carr.
- 7-00:06:4
Geraci: Just for the record, just put it on the tape. About what year, and what was the title?
- 7-00:06:47
Chiang: Uh, the year – was also 1972, printed. The first edition was 1972. I will give you an original- the book I have. It's different, with beautiful pictures, all the paintings, everything. I'll give it to you.
- 7-00:07:15
Geraci: What's interesting there again about the year, 1972. This is just about the time—
- 7-00:07:22
Chiang: That I moved – that the school started.
- 7-00:07:27
Geraci: Right, the school is starting at that time. This is another part of that whole dissemination.
- 7-00:07:34
Chiang: Everything just happened.
- 7-00:07:35
Geraci: And it's also very much tied to the topic of what we were calling a West Coast cuisine, or California cuisine, is just really developing. Alice Waters at Chez Panisse.

7-00:07:44

Chiang: Chez Panisse.

7-00:07:46

Geraci: All of this is coming together at the same, it's the same time. What's the spirit? What's going on here in the Bay Area?

7-00:07:55

Chiang: And also, I want to tell you, this is really a coincidence. That's the year Kissinger and Nixon sneak into China, 1972, the spring time. Why I remember that: Because the Chairman Mao gave them a state dinner. A state dinner. Entertain Kissinger and Nixon. The menu was printed in all these newspapers in the United States and also the Chinese Newspaper. I wish I had that, maybe I can find it. People called in. Called in from New York, from Hawaii, called me. "Can you duplicate that dinner? That dinner for us. We would like to just fly in just for that dinner." Because they checked some other restaurants, they said they cannot do it, because they were all Cantonese. Because I was the only one who was non-Cantonese. They want the dinner. So finally I cut it out, I look at that menu in Chinese, I started to laugh. They said, "Why do you laugh?" They put bean sprouts on the menu, because China is so poor at that time. No food, no nothing. They put bean sprouts on that menu, they put tofu in that menu, so I started to laugh. I think the soup just some Egg Flower Drop. They said, "How much will you charge for this whole dinner?" I looked at it, I said, "Nothing. Very little. Not important ingredients" I said, "This is not a big banquet at all. This is usually, the people don't even eat this at home."

7-00:09:47

Geraci: Those were the starving times for China.

7-00:09:50

Chiang: Yes, yes. 1972. That time they had no food, everything is rationed. And because, actually that time, 1972 still in the Cultural Revolution.

7-00:10:05

Geraci: Right.

7-00:10:07

Chiang: They ended in 1976. Cultural Revolution, from 1966. So it's no food, no nothing. So I look at the menu, I laugh, I said, "Anytime, if you want to have that, we can do it." Then they ask me another question. "Do you have the fire water. Do you serve the fire water?" I cannot figure that out. What is fire water? Then later: Oh, that's what Kissinger said, "Wow, that wine turn my mouth sour, just like fire, water going down. So I found out in Chinese newspaper, *Mao Tai Chien*. You know the bottle I gave to you, that's the original. The Mao Tai. And that time, because they didn't have anything else. Only some of this Chinese wine, they call wine, actually it's not wine at all.

7-00:11:15

Geraci: It's not wine.

- 7-00:11:15
Chiang: Yeah. And *Mao Tai Chien* is made of millet and sorghum in Curacao. Another one in Northern China, they have one called *Shao Jiou*. It's very strong
- 7-00:11:27
Geraci: I can see why you would call it fire water. It does burn as it goes down.
- 7-00:11:31
Chiang: Yeah, going down. That's what Kissinger said. "Wow, that fire water certainly is hot! Burning." Yeah, everything happened in 1972.
- 7-00:11:43
Geraci: But it, this seems to be a huge time here in the Bay Area.
- 7-00:11:48
Third Person: There was culinary revolution
- 7-00:11:50
Geraci: Yeah, and Jeremiah Towers talks about it in his latest book. The revolution is going on, and you're part of it. What's your role in this?
- 7-00:11:59
Chiang: Those days I must say something, so for instance Alice Waters and Jeremiah Towers, they were still good friends in those days. Weekends, they always come here. We have a brunch at my Belvedere Home, eating sometimes on the deck. You know, whenever they come to Los Angeles, they always stay at my house. You know, Marion Cunningham and Alice Waters and Jeremiah Towers. Now they all go different ways.
- 7-00:12:33
Geraci: Yes, they don't exactly speak well of each other now.
- 7-00:12:37
Chiang: Yes, it's really kind of sad. But in those days James Beard always came here, every time he was in town, always come to my house also. Because, the restaurant, the way you serve the food, they get used to certain things. Come to the house, I always have a different kind of menu.
- 7-00:13:00
Geraci: So they're learning from you, are they?
- 7-00:13:00
Chiang: And uh, it's kind of, you know, we kind of learn from each other. For instance, I remember the first time when Alice Waters came to my restaurant. She asked me questions. She said, "You know, Cecilia, your food is quite different to me. What is it? Tell me, what is it? Is it the vegetables you serve. They are the same vegetables I've have in Chinatown, but yours is a different taste. What is it?" She always asks me about it. I said, "In the old days in China, we don't have anything that went through the refrigeration. We just buy it from the market and cook it right away. Vegetables, my mother always said, "We try to keep original flavor, original color, and also the original

texture.” The whole thing is just fresh. Nothing else. Just that simple. And also, [with] vegetables, the timing of cooking is very important. You just kind of stir-fry, you don’t put the lid on, you get nice and crispy. And also, very fast. We just did a vegetable dish, I think yesterday, the day before yesterday. The mushroom, you remember the fresh shitake and Bai-Cai. And Lisa said, “So delicious.” You know, just a couple minutes. We did a cucumber stuff, soup, just a few minutes, but it so simple. Tastes so good.

7-00:14:51

Geraci: But it’s fresh and it’s the right season.

7-00:14:53

Chiang: The whole thing is freshness and seasonal foods.

7-00:14:55

Geraci: But see now, Alice is experienced with fresh, with seasonal, is from France. And yet you’re bringing in now—

7-00:15:04

Chiang: Actually the first time we went to Europe we were together. Alice and I, we were together.

7-00:15:12

Geraci: How was that experience? That must have been, as far as food—

7-00:15:16

Chiang: We three, our first time was Alice, me, and Cunningham. The three of us, we went. We were there four weeks. You cannot believe this. We covered every single three star restaurant in Europe. Switzerland and Brussels, you know, we covered all of them. And France the most.

7-00:15:49

Geraci: Were you trying to get recipes, or techniques?

7-00:15:53

Chiang: No, we just wanted try all the different foods. That time, I think, who was in the kitchen at that time? Jeremiah Towers was in control in the kitchen. So Alice was free, so we went down, just try these different things, and Jim Beard said, you must go to Fred Girard and Richard Olley said to go to a certain place, he told us, and Jeremiah Towers had been there before, told us where to go. So we just covered all these restaurants. Some we cannot get in. And so they helped. Jim Beard and Richard Olley helped us to get in all these restaurants.

7-00:16:39

Third Person: What year was that?

- 7-00:16:40
Chiang: That was 1980 – I think was, 1982, we went to China together. We'd been – Alice and I have traveled to Europe, I think three times we were together, and we visited all these famous restaurants.
- 7-00:17:06
Geraci: Did you learn anything from that experience that helped you with your-?
- 7-00:17:11
Chiang: I think, one thing I really thought at that time, was the appearance of Chinese food, compared to European, and French especially, food cannot compare at that time. I thought, "We should do something about this appearance, about the food." The Chinese—
- 7-00:17:28
Third Person: You mean the presentation?
- 7-00:17:33
Chiang: Yeah, the presentation. Because the Chinese emphasize the taste, always just the flavor. They don't think too much about the appearance. So I think I learned a lot when I was in Europe. I think right now even the American, right now, all these new restaurants, all this new food, what you call California Cuisine, a lot of Japanese influence.
- 7-00:18:09
Geraci: Oh how?
- 7-00:18:11
Chiang: A lot of Japanese influence. Because I lived in Japan for so long, I noticed that Japanese food has a beautiful presentation.
- 7-00:18:17
Geraci: What is specifically that includes-?
- 7-00:18:19
Chiang: For instance, see right now, the Ame Restaurant in the Saint Regis Hotel, the food there is simple and beautiful.
- 7-00:18:29
Third Person: The owner of Ame is Hiro Sone.
- 7-00:18:30
Chiang: See, they have on the menu, they all have, they call it raw food. Scott Howard, raw food. Where is this raw food from? From Japan. Americans don't eat raw food. Only oysters. That's about it. Where is this raw food from? I think it's all from Japan. Like this tartar – they call it now fish tartar, beef tartar, all these tartars. This is all from Japan. But in Japan, the only raw meat they serve is Kobe beef. Because the other beef is too tough, you cannot eat it.
- 7-00:19:18
Geraci: Yeah, too stringy.

7-00:19:20

Chiang:

But here now, everywhere you go, they have all kinds of, they serve a lot of raw beef, they are not that good, really not that good and also, quite dangerous too.

7-00:19:32

Geraci:

Yes. I'm very interested in this relationship with you and Alice. I mean, you've traveled to Europe three times, you traveled to China together.

7-00:19:44

Chiang:

Yeah, I took them to China with me, and also Japan. The first trip also, I took Alice to Japan. One day we were in Kyoto, I still remember the restaurant called the Tao Tao. T-A-O T-A-O. Just a small restaurant, with a big counter. So at that time, I don't think Alice really had had sashimi or raw seafood, and Marion [Cunningham] with us also. So Alice said, "Cecilia, I don't want to travel and get sick." I said, "I understand that." I said, "When you travel, it's no fun to get sick." I said, "I guarantee you, you are not going to get sick." So we went to this restaurant in Kyoto. And I managed to still speak some Japanese. I said, "I want some really fresh fish." For instance, they call the shrimp ebi. I said, "From the box, with the sawdust." They keep all these live shrimp in a little wood box. They wetted the sawdust, they presented it to us. Alice said, "What is this?" She was looking at fish covered with all the sawdust. I said, "Here is the fresh shrimp, this sweet shrimp, it's moving." Because when you're moving so much, you lose the meat.

7-00:21:16

Geraci:

Right.

7-00:21:18

Chiang:

So they [are] still wet, but you stop their moving. So they said, "This is really interesting." So they rinsed the sawdust. The tail is still wiggling. And they said, "You want sashimi or you want sushi?" Sushi they put on the rice, sashimi just serve that. So Alice said, "I want both, I want to try both." So they cut the head off, it's still moving, and they remove the shell. I said, "Alice you wanted fresh, this is real fresh." So they put in their mouths, still wiggling, but the meat is just so sweet, so juicy, so good. And then we have the eels. The eels. They take little eels. They just put a little nail on the head. They use sharp knife, very, very narrow, really sharp. Of course, they're just experts, they just shhhhhh! Take the bone off, just like that. Take the bone off, right away. And they cut it, and then they grill. And I think that is the kind of food, where you really taste the original flavor and the texture. I think right now we get a lot of influence especially in New York. I was there last September. I went to New York. And tried different foods. I helped a friend open a restaurant in San Francisco. Scott Howard. Remember? We were there four days. Fifteen restaurants we tried. Fifteen restaurants. All these new restaurants. They have what they call a raw bar. All raw fish. Of course, they have crab and lobster, all kinds of things. I think this is a big influence by Japanese food. What you think?

7-00:23:39

Geraci:

Oh absolutely, absolutely. What about the influence – I mean did Alice and her Chez Panisse experience have any influence on you?

7-00:23:50

Chiang:

I think some – for instance, the use of Asian vegetables, before they never – Chez Panisse, you probably noticed that, they didn't serve any oriental vegetables. But now they serve bok choy, they serve snow peas, and they serve a lot of – like pea shoots, now they serve. They use a lot of oriental vegetables. Before, very limited. Before they- I remember in those days, they always had fresh, they call new potatoes or something like that, and broccoli. But all of a sudden, all the restaurants- broccoli seems to have like disappeared, don't you think?

7-00:24:39

Third Person:

It's not too common now.

7-00:24:44

Chiang:

Yeah, it's also—now they use broccolini.

7-00:24:46

Geraci:

Broccolini, right.

7-00:24:48

Chiang:

Yeah, that's something new which we never had before. You know, and they use the leeks for so many things, and the fennel, of course they always use. I think this is a lot of oriental influence. Some, well, I think the world getting smaller.

7-00:25:15

Geraci:

Absolutely. The world is getting smaller, but I'm just very fascinated on the issue of cuisine and food and the professional food industry. Most of the literature that deals with food, the books that are written, the things that going on, are very gender-specific. Women are the ones that are doing this. Yet some of the great chefs, not some, but a majority of the great chefs, are still men. But men don't write the same way about it. Even in a program that I run, in the last three years I've had 15 students that have volunteered to work with me who I work with in some point of their study. Thirteen of them are women. And they are much more fascinated with food as part of their lives, in a way that it becomes – and this idea that Marion Cunningham, Alice Waters, and you are doing all this traveling together, doing all this in food, I find that very fascinating. Would men do that?

7-00:26:23

Chiang:

Well, I don't know about that. I think somehow, this is a big difference between men and women probably. I think somehow I feel the women don't have as big egos as men have. [laughs]

7-00:26:44

Geraci:

That could very well be.

7-00:26:49

Chiang:

What you think? I don't think, I really don't think I have any ego. I just want to do my best, to try to do something, accomplish something. But I don't have a big ego. That's not me. And I don't think Alice – is pretty much the same way. A lot of things, and Alice is still such a good friend. And also, she's also still very humble. I think that's really wonderful about her, you know, she's still like that. For instance, my Seventieth birthday happened, the hosts were Marion Cunningham, Alice Waters, and Ruth Reichl. These three gave me this wonderful birthday party in you know the winery in Napa Valley at Joseph Phelps—you know that famous winery?

Third person:

Phelps?

Geraci:

Phelps?

Chiang:

Phelps. Yeah, they are good friends. And anyway, they had everybody stood up, said something. So Ruth Reichl said, “All these years I've know Cecilia, she always dresses up so pretty and she's tiny,” she said, “but you know, this woman, she can work, and she can eat, and she can drink!”

7-00:28:35

Geraci:

But, see the thing is, food to you is life.

7-00:28:39

Chiang:

It is. I think it is very important. I live here alone, I cook dinner for myself, you know. I try to have a little variety here and there. I cannot eat the same foods everyday.

7-00:28:57

Geraci:

But it's – I don't know how to explain it or even frame the question. As a group, as women, food is just more important to you, you use it as the metaphor for life.

7-00:29:13

Chiang:

I have a theory, if I could put this forth. Because I had a conversation with Nancy Oaks about this, and we were working on her book, about the difference between female chefs and male chefs. And for women, food is still about nurturing, there's something in our nature that nurtures. That, we want to feed people. For men, it's still a way of earning a living.

7-00:29:40

Geraci:

It's the Emeril “Bam!”—

7-00:29:41

Third Person:

It's a way of earning a living, and it's more of an intellectual kind of enterprise for them. You get a male chef, it's more about, “Let me show what I can do”. It's not really just about feeding people.

7-00:29:58

Geraci:

Well, there are the theories that the worst thing that happened to American women that happened in the 1950s and 1960 is that as we look to industrialized foods is that we took cooking away from women.

7-00:30:15

Third Person:

Well, the whole idea was to get women out of the kitchen.

7-00:30:17

Geraci:

But that was the proper place where women felt very comfortable and could express their femininity. I find it just very fascinating that you are part of that group of women, it just boggles my mind. I'm so envious of your ability to use food this way.

7-00:30:38

Chiang:

So when James Beard was in town, you know, he had a cooking class in Stanford Court Hotel, you know he stayed there. And in the evening, usually he's free, he always likes to go to different places, have dinners with friends, something. So we get together all the time. Get Alice Waters, so we talked. He said, "You know, this is something. We've been together, so many times. Had so many wonderful dinners together. You know, all this conversation." And he said to me, "Cecilia, what did we talk about?" I said, "Food." He said, "Why we always talk of food?" I said, "Food is just an endless, never out-of-fashion conversation." He said, "True." Yeah, we just talk about food. Then one day he said to me, "Tell me something: what kind of breakfast do you have? I never heard about anybody talk about Chinese breakfast. What do you eat for breakfast?" I said, "My Chinese breakfast, I never have a same pattern. Today I eat, whenever I feel like to eat, I just eat. Maybe today I like to have a little sweet, maybe today I like to have a little wonton. Cold weather, I like to have something warm my stomach first. I have a nice bowl of wontons with chicken soup inside, I feel good." He said, "That's my girl. I hate this American way of breakfast. Must have toast with butter, jam, and egg or bacon." He said, "I don't do that. I eat anything I like to eat. Maybe I like to have a little piece of steak for my breakfast, maybe I just like to have a little oatmeal or something." So food is really kind of really our passion. It's not just like open a restaurant to make money. That's wonderful, but if I fail, if I close The Mandarin, you know, I still think I did something. At least I tried to introduce the real Chinese food to American. Yeah, I tried. I did something. I don't feel bad.

7-00:33:27

Geraci:

Why, absolutely. And on that note, I'd like to ask one final question for today - kind of a fun question: if Cecilia had to describe herself as either one food or one dish that you want to prepare, what would it be?

7-00:33:46

Chiang:

Red cooked pork. [laughs]

7-00:33:47

Geraci: Why?

7-00:33:50

Chiang: Because that's a dish my mother used to cook, it's from my hometown—Wuxi, near Shanghai, famous for this seasonal dish. And my mother did it very, very well. Famous. And every time we had a special occasion, all the kids said, "Mama, we would like to have red-cooked pork." And now, somehow, all the friends, when they come here, they ask, "Can you do that dish?" Like James Beard every time he's in town? "How about the red-cooked pork?" To me, I got to know that dish so well, I know I will do well with that dish.

7-00:34:44

Geraci: It's also—

7-00:34:44

Chiang: And also very tasty and easy to cook.

7-00:34:49

Geraci: But it's so reminiscent of your entire life. In all that you are, what you've been. I like that as a representation of who you are.

7-00:35:01

Chiang: I think this is something kind of, you know, remember the family, remember your hometown, remember my mother.

7-00:35:11

Geraci: Yeah.

7-00:35:11

Third Person: And you're still making the red-cooked pork for everybody.

7-00:35:17

Chiang: I just did that that last week. Mary Risley, Jim Nassikas, and Chuck Williams were here. I have to do the Beggar's Chicken often. He said, "When are you going to cook that for me?"

7-00:35:26

Geraci: Um, and I guess the last final thing. Let's talk a little bit about your new book. And then we're done. What are you trying to accomplish in your new book? This new book – I think she can speak better. We have a deadline right? It's October 1st.

1-00:36:00

Third Person: This book is going to have some of the stories that weren't told in the first book. It's going to be a little more cookbook than the first book. Part memoir, more of a traditional cookbook, too. More recipes in there that each recipe will have a pretty good head note and a story with it. Before it was the story, and then the recipes.

7-00:36:25

Geraci: And the recipes just kind of accidentally got placed in.

7-00:36:28

Third Person: Right, right. A little more contemporary for now. I mean, 2006 rather than 1972. So there's—

7-00:36:42

Chiang: More details about the family, about my mother, the characters, and all my sisters. Individual. Yeah.

7-00:36:54

Third Person: There are a lot of the stories that were told. You know, similar but different.

7-00:36:57

Chiang: Different, but we mentioned certain things like-

7-00:37:00

Third Person: I mean, some of the stories are the same because they're her stories and they're important to Cecilia's life.

7-00:37:07

Chiang: And also we tell about matching, the marriage. That's quite interesting.

7-00:37:19

Geraci: And, and that's the part that since we're doing food interviews, we haven't really gotten into the idea of a match to marriage within your culture. I mean, it would have been very difficult to those of us in Western culture. I mean, you and your husband were separated for years. This is not something that would be a normal thing for the Westerners to address. It would be very, very different. I'm glad to see that will be advanced.

7-00:37:51

Third Person: Yeah, a little more personal stuff, and some more stories that weren't told. And some new recipes. More head notes.

7-00:38:03

Chiang: And some, like the wedding days, some special banquet. And also [we] talk about the New Year['s] Banquet.

7-00:38:18

Third Person: Right, the New Year's Banquets. I'm trying to get it in a more personal way. Allen Carr's way was a little more formal, just his personal style of writing. I want this to be a little more Cecilia's voice.

7-00:38:34

Geraci: Oh good, and good luck. So thank you very much for these interviews.

7-00:38:36

Chiang: So today is the final, right?

7-00:38:39

Geraci:

Today is our final interview. Then I'll be out of here. Thank you very much.